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Abstract

What happens when a policy with millions of beneficiaries is threatened? The Affordable Care Act (ACA) has been under attack since before it was signed into law, culminating in its only legislative challenge under the Trump administration in 2017. While we know that policies like the ACA produce policy feedbacks that affect policymaking and shape policy attitudes, less is known about behavioral feedback effects that serve to mobilize beneficiaries to protect and maintain their health insurance benefits in the face of ACA threat. This dissertation leverages a 3-paper design to evaluate under what conditions threat facilitates behavioral change, and how to identify beneficiaries for purposes of political mobilization. The first paper relies on survey data to examine perceptions of threat among self-reported ACA beneficiaries and how this affects political participation, while the third paper examines how threat produces behavioral change using an original survey experiment comparing threat messaging to opportunity messaging around a fictitious ACA amendment. While findings across these two studies are mixed, results generally suggests that ACA threat leads individuals, particularly those who benefit from the policy, to increase their political participation to protect against perceived policy threat. The second paper evaluates challenges with surveys that rely on self-reported policy benefits, and examines what factors affect misreporting of benefits – offering one solution to predict ACA beneficiaries using known demographic predictors of ACA benefit. Together, the findings of the three papers, while supportive of threat as a key motivator of protective political behaviors, draw attention to the limitations of survey data and our reliance of self-reports in studies of policy change and political behavior.

THE POLITICS OF REPEAL AND REPLACE: TESTING THE LIMITS OF THE
AFFORDABLE CARE ACT'S BEHAVIORAL POLICY FEEDBACKS

by

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Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science.

Syracuse University
July 2022

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Acknowledgements

Many people and organizations have made this dissertation possible. First and foremost, thank you to the Maxwell School of Syracuse University for funding my graduate study. Few are lucky enough to be able to fully commit to their studies without concerns about funding, and I am deeply grateful for the School's investment in me and my research. I was grateful to be awarded a Doctoral Fellowship from the Government of Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) which, together with Syracuse University's Research Excellence Doctoral Fellowship, jointly funded my fourth and final year of research. Finally, the Roscoe Martin Fund for Dissertation Research at Syracuse University is to thank for the funding necessary to complete the original experiment in the third and final paper comprising this dissertation. Without their support, I would not have been able to complete this project – I am deeply grateful to the Fund for its investment in my research.

Learning from faculty and colleagues within the Political Science department has been a gift. I am especially thankful for those faculty that comprise my committee. First, my advisor, Shana Gadarian, who taught me how to be a social scientist. She is an incredible scholar and mentor, and I am so grateful that I have been advised by her over the last 3 years. Everyone deserves an advisor like Shana. Emily Thorson was the first faculty member I told about wanting to pursue a non-academic path and taught me everything I know about political communication. Chris Faricy has seen this project through its earliest drafts as a seminar paper, providing critical feedback that has shaped it into what it is today. Jenn Jackson developed my understanding of resource disparities and political participation under threat. Maraam Dwidar first provided commentary and feedback during early presentations of my research, informing the direction of this project as it developed. Sarah Hamersma, my chair, provided much-needed direction in this

project's early stages in drawing connections between its implications for political scientists and public administration scholars, alike. Beyond my committee, I am grateful for the faculty that have helped shape this project through its various iterations, especially Seth Jolly, Simon Weschle, and Katherine Michelmore.

Many friends have provided support within and beyond the department. Alex Sehl and Megan Pickett, who have been my best friends for nearly 15 years, have helped me through the last four years via frequent FaceTime calls. Ivy Raines, a gifted scholar and dear friend, who I met during department orientation and who became an immediate friend and confidant. From 'Study Sundays' to hours long phone calls, I am grateful that I have had her on this journey with me. Nathan Carrington, who taught me everything I know about how to do a PhD and has had eyes on almost everything I have ever written. He has shown me what it means to be a mentor and has guided me through the hidden curriculum of graduate school. Finally, Maddison Nicholas, who has supported me and this project since the moment we met and became instant friends. Working on the dissertation remotely has been a challenge, and her constant encouragement and insistence on celebrating every milestone – no matter how small – has been integral to its completion.

The summer after I turned 5, my parents sent me to day camp at a university so I would feel like I belonged there. It worked. I was the first in my family to graduate university, the first to go to graduate school, and am now the first to complete a PhD. From the 'hard work table' in Hannah Nash's junior kindergarten class to writing this dissertation, my parents have been my source of constant inspiration to set ambitious goals and work hard to reach them. Thank you to Sharon Gilroy-Dreher and James Dreher for everything they have done to propel me to where I land today. Their hard work and sacrifices made it possible for me to accomplish all that I have. I

am so proud to be their daughter. My Nana and Papa, Josephine and John Gilroy, are much to thank, as well, for their sacrifices made in moving halfway around the world to give our family a better life. I only wish they were alive to enjoy this moment with us – this accomplishment is as much theirs as it is mine. My sisters, Abigail and Gabriella Dreher, are my first and oldest friends. I am thankful for their constant encouragement and vocal support – as well as their sisterly reminders that I only look good on paper. Everyone should be so lucky to have a grounding force in their life like they are in mine. I am thankful also to my in-laws, Carol and Jay Sampson, as well as my grandmother-in-law Jo Ann Maxon, who have shown genuine interest in my work and have supported me through the final years of this project. Finally, the person most to thank is my husband, Blake Sampson. I read once that women end up marrying their own glass ceilings. I am lucky that I married Blake, instead. He is my partner in everything, my most trusted critic, fiercest supporter, and my best friend. I am grateful to him for making sure I did not lose the most important parts of myself on this journey.

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The Politics of Repeal and Replace: Project Overview

Health care reform is a policy issue that has long dominated the American political landscape – consistently emerging as a top policy priority among voters as an issue they want the government to address (Jones 2020; Newport 2018). Despite the initial failure at reform in the early 1990s, the Obama administration marked a turning point with the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) in March 2010. Though heavily opposed by Republicans – and ultimately contributing to the formation of the Tea Party faction of the Republican Party – the ACA is responsible for over 20 million Americans gaining insurance through the Marketplace and via Medicaid expansion in certain states (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2019). Insurance gains were largely concentrated among non-white citizens, women, those within 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and those living in Medicaid expansion states (Garfield, Orgera, and Damico 2019). Despite tens of millions of ACA beneficiaries, the policy has been under threat since before it was signed into law – with Republican leaders vowing to repeal it on the eve of its signing ceremony (Hulse 2017).

What happens when a policy with millions of beneficiaries is threatened? We know that policies produce institutional feedbacks that affect the processes through – and venues in – which policymaking and policy change take place (Pierson 1993, 2005; Schattschneider 1960), but what about behavioral feedbacks mobilizing beneficiaries to protect against benefit threat? Previous work on senior citizens mobilizing to protect their social security benefits provides some insight into this phenomenon, outlining how self-interest drives political mobilization in the face of policy threat (Campbell 2003). However, this work draws on a policy that is much less partisan compared to the ACA – leaving space to explore the ways in which self-interest interacts with partisanship in the face of policy threat. Recent work highlights how public

opinion in favor of the ACA increases among beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, alike, as a function of their benefit from – or pro-sociality towards – the policy itself (Jacobs and Mettler 2018). These attitudinal changes remain statistically significant even when controlling for partisanship. However, a key question remains: under what conditions does threat facilitate behavioral change?

This dissertation project employs a 3-paper design to address this question through a series of interconnected studies which rely on survey data, multiple imputation, and an original survey experiment to evaluate when and how threat affects political participation. Each of these papers draws on the ACA and the threat of prospective benefit loss as a unifying frame through which to evaluate behavioral feedback effects – highlighting under what conditions policy threat serves as a mobilizing political force in the frame of sharpening polarization.

The first paper leverages survey data from the 2018 ANES Pilot Study and the 2018 Wesleyan Media Project to evaluate how perceptions of threat among self-described ACA beneficiaries facilitates political participation, and to what degree that threat perception is shaped by media exposure. Paper two is a direct compliment to the first paper, which evaluates the usefulness of survey self-reports – such as those used to identify ACA beneficiaries in paper one – and explores how social identity and social desirability bias intersect to predict benefit (mis)reporting, especially with policies that are deeply partisan in nature such as the ACA. This paper leverages a multi-method approach to identify who misreports benefits and predict which of those individuals is likely to benefit based on demographic predictors. Finally, the third paper is built around an original survey experiment that examines how policy messaging affects political behavior. Motivated by the repeal and replace mantra that dominated the 2017 repeal attempt of the ACA, the experiment compares threat and opportunity messaging around a

fictional ACA amendment to uncover patterns in participation compared to neutral policy messaging. This third paper is particularly notable given that experimental methods have until now remained under-utilized in the study of behavioral policy feedback effects, and isolating these causal mechanisms provides additional support of survey-based findings in paper one – with a design that avoids some of the pitfalls associated with benefit misreporting as explored in paper two.

Policy More Than Partisanship: Evaluating the Determinative Power of Policy Benefit in Enhancing Political Participation Under Threat

Abstract

When people benefit from a policy, evaluations of that policy improve – in particular, the literature highlights how favorability increases among beneficiaries regardless of partisan identity. Less is known, however, about how policy benefit affects political participation – specifically when those benefits are under threat. Building on existing work around the ACA and the political behaviors of its beneficiaries, this study explicitly focuses on what happens when policies are threatened. Leveraging the ACA as a case study, I explore how threat perception leads to behavioral change to protect against benefit threat using data from the 2018 ANES Pilot Study and the Wesleyan Media Project’s 2018 dataset. Results indicate mixed evidence related to media exposure’s role in sharpening threat perception, however findings do generally indicate that benefit threat leads to protective behaviors both in terms of voting and non-voting behaviors.

1. The Cost of Repeal and Replace

The day before the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) was signed into law in 2010, Republican strategists developed their opposition strategy: “repeal and replace” (Hulse 2017). Though operationalized as a savvy electoral tool by leading Republican operatives, follow through with a reasonable plan to repeal and replace the landmark health care legislation was much more limited – even after gaining unified control of the legislative and executive branches following the 2016 election. Indeed, when it came time to repeal and replace just months into the Trump administration, undermining or altering the ACA in any meaningful way became politically untenable, with the public fearful of losing their access to health insurance afforded to them by protections included in the ACA. Self-described ACA beneficiaries had reason to be defensive of their benefits under threat: prior to the introduction of the ACA, the national uninsured rate was 17.8% – more than a decade later, this rate has fallen to 10.9% (Hrynowski 2020; Newport 2018; Tolbert and Orgera 2020).

How did this threat of prospective benefit loss spur action on the part of ACA beneficiaries to protect themselves against loss? Where is the tipping point from the maintenance of a consistent partisan identity to mobilizing to protect one’s own benefits – and how do people even know their benefits are threatened in the first place? This paper investigates what happens when a policy is threatened. Specifically, I examine how beneficiaries of that policy learn about the threat and the conditions under which the threat shapes their action. I leverage the ACA as a case study to evaluate behavioral change among self-identified beneficiaries, tracing how threat perception is refined by media exposure, and how that threat perception leads beneficiaries to change their political behaviors to protect against threat. I use data from the American National Election Study’s (ANES) 2018 Pilot Survey combined with data from the Wesleyan Media

Project's (WMP) 2018 data release to evaluate these phenomena. I find that media exposure has limited impact on threat perception, but that those self-identifying beneficiaries with the most heightened sense of threat engage in politics more than those with a lower sense of threat. Additionally, in terms of voting, people who believe their benefits are under threat are more likely to vote against their partisan identities compared to their counterparts who feel less threatened. These findings have implications for the literature on when self-interest can overcome partisanship among at-risk populations and the electoral implications associated with these behavioral changes.

2. Beneficiaries and Their Partisan Networks

Existing studies of behavioral policy feedbacks highlight the determinative role of self interest in driving behavioral changes among the mass public when faced with prospective threat. These feedbacks mobilize and facilitate participatory changes among beneficiaries, making clear the linkage between personal connection to policies, and the administration and active protection of benefits against threat of compromise or outright repeal (Campbell 2003; Erikson and Stoker 2011; Jacobs and Mettler 2018; Mettler and Mettler 2005, 2005). Recent study of the ACA's feedback effects among target populations demonstrates how those with the most to gain – much like senior citizens benefiting from Social Security – become more supportive of the policy, while those who do not benefit become less supportive (Hobbs and Hopkins 2020). Other evidence highlights how personal benefit threat and partisanship are similarly determinative in motivating Americans to purchase health insurance under the ACA (Reny and Sears 2020) – further evidence that, at least in terms of health behaviors – beneficiary status holds its own as a facilitatory means through which people choose to engage with the ACA, irrespective of

partisanship. The narrative of threat response among beneficiaries, particularly in terms of changes in political behavior to protect against prospective loss of benefits, is less complete.

2.1 Perception is Reality

What does it mean to benefit from a policy? Some populations are more sensitive to policy changes and choose to opt into or out of politics as a result (Michener 2018, 2019). However, most people understand very little about politics (Campbell et al. 1980; Converse 2006a; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), and it stands to reason that very few people fully understand which policies they may benefit from and in what capacity. Thus, the important thing to consider here is something more universal than political knowledge and, indeed, not dependent on it: personal belief. Beliefs, though not always rooted in fact, are a powerful psychological tool (Bartels 2002; Rutjens and Brandt 2018). An individual's beliefs about and perceptions of a given policy or political event shape their reality. Whether right or wrong, this idea of believing that you benefit from, or were harmed by, a policy is what shapes behaviors – regardless of what the reality of the situation might be.

From this, the concept of a believed beneficiary begins to take shape. If you believe you benefit from a policy, you will behave like you benefited from that policy. If you believe that you were harmed by a policy, you will behave in ways that reflect that. All this regardless of one's actual status as a beneficiary.

2.2 Partisan, but to what extent?

At what point does individualism supersede beneficiaries' innate desire for shared group identity in instances of benefit threat? Self-interest can moderate habitual partisan behaviors; however this can come at a cost that limits participatory changes among in-group partisans who

are fundamentally at odds with the social and political identity of the in-group network.

Homogenous in-group networks rely on strong interpersonal bonds facilitating strong partisan attachments (Parsons 2015). Once these bonds are formed, group members resist the breakdown of these attachments even when it may be expedient to do so (Baumeister and Leary 1995). This is a key characteristic of group identity relevant specifically to the evolutionary perspective of identity formation – in which there is a common fate shared by a collective of similar people who remain tied to one another to survive against threats, reliant on shared norms and symbolism to further entrench their shared identity characteristics and values (Huddy 2003).

Despite the general lack of political knowledge endemic to American democracy, people still vote in elections, form preferences, take cues from political elites to engage in policy debates and make sense of the political world (Zaller 1992). Typically, when we think about parties, we discuss them as an organizing tool (Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 1993) and as a means of forming and maintaining a shared group identity that facilitates political mobilization (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004). So often, the decisions we make – and the beliefs we hold – are a reflection of this identity: who we vote for (Campbell et al. 1980), who we socialize with (Mutz 2006), who we prefer our children to marry (S. Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2018). Political identity is paramount – not only as an informational tool, but as a psychological mechanism that facilitates social connections and belongingness within groups. It is within parties that the social capital necessary to fully participate in political life is built and exercised among likeminded co-partisans (Huddy 2003).

While a useful tool for the development of social capital facilitating political engagement, this framework poses several problems for group members whose own views or interests directly contradict the shared social and political bond of their partisan network. First, they may avoid

politically motivated discussion with people that they know to not share their views in an effort to maintain network cohesion and avoid in-group conflict (Ulbig and Funk 1999). Second, this can lead people to withdraw from their same-party social networks (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004) – resulting in increased ambivalence and decreased political engagement and participation (Parsons 2010).

Political parties serve as a key type of network which organize belief structures and motivate members via increased social capital and the facilitation of political learning and mobilization within the political process (Putnam 2001). The resources afforded by a party – in terms of voter resources, issue framing, and mobilization around election time (Gelman and King 1993; Johnston 1992; Shaw 1999) – are minimized in such instances where a campaign cues issues that a voter fundamentally disagrees with their own party on. While engaging contrasting beliefs can improve deliberative democracy, being confronted with ideas – or, in the context of this study, personal experiences – that contradict in-group thinking, this exposure has a depressive effect on participation (Mutz 2006). Given that different expressions of political engagement and participation are more and less visible and/or network-dependent than others, variation in these depressive effects is possible as a function of how visible the political activity an individual undertakes is.

3. How Policy Learning is Facilitated by the Media

Referred to as the “Fourth Estate” of power, the media frames discourse and cues important issues to a generally unpolitical populace (Iyengar and Kinder 2010; Prior 2007). In the case of policy benefits, media exposure sharpens understandings of where parties stand on a policy issue and increases awareness of the full extent of citizens’ own perceived benefit from the policy (Helbling and Tresch 2011). Do I benefit from this policy? Are my benefits at risk? Is

my party protecting my benefits? What is in my own best interest? These are all questions that media exposure helps people answer, amplifying relevant informational sources to supplement the identity sources that stem from parties and the group identities that they construct and maintain.

Given exposure to media that indicates benefits under threat, loss aversion motivates citizens to seek out alternative information in a manner that they would not otherwise. This response is cued as a function of threat perception. Media exposure, political knowledge, and personal experience interact in the capacity that individuals must have exposure to political media in addition to the capacity to understand it – complimented by their own experiences to supplement media learning (Ridout, Grosse, and Appleton 2008). If people are politically knowledgeable, then media exposure linked to threat helps to refine their sense of threat (Ridout, Grosse, and Appleton 2008). Meanwhile, if the individual is less politically knowledgeable, they leverage personal experience to supplement those parts of the political world that they are less conscious/understanding of (Ridout, Grosse, and Appleton 2008).

Geographic variation in media exposure drives differences in behaviors and policy perceptions (Gollust et al. 2014, 2018), with individuals that are exposed to more media coverage reporting feeling more informed about legislation and its impacts (Fowler et al. 2017). Tone of coverage also incites different emotional reactions and variation in preference formation, especially in instances of threat – wherein citizens adopt policy preferences perceived to combat threat when exposed to emotionally powerful media coverage linked to that threat (Gadarian 2010). In the frame of this project, such evidence underscores how exposure to different types of political information facilitates differences in policy perceptions and learning linked to benefit threat and adoption of behaviors to protect against that threat.

4. Applying Prospect Theory to Policy Benefits

Behavioral economics provides a lens through which we can understand the role of benefit threat and threat response: prospect theory. This theory outlines how losses are much more powerful psychological mechanisms compared to prospective gains (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). Humans are naturally loss averse, and threat of loss facilitates learning that can lead to behavioral changes to protect against that loss. At its most basic level, loss aversion can motivate shifts in the political environment (Alesina and Passarelli 2015). Of course, these shifts must be large enough to overcome “status quo bias” (Alesina and Passarelli 2015). Recent evidence demonstrates that those individuals with the most to lose are more likely to take risks they perceive as helping them to avoid imminent threat of loss (Osmundsen and Petersen 2019). Within the policy space, prospect theory has most often been applied to foreign policy rather than American domestic policy (Vis and Kuijpers 2018). However, theory-building has taken place at the domestic level in relation to American political behavior and the role of loss aversion rooted in prospect theory – specifically, the tracing of economic conditions to predict voter behavior and electoral outcomes (Alesina and Rosenthal 1989; Erikson 1990; Levy 2003).

Taken together, prospective loss competes with partisanship to affect political behavior when the media leads individuals to believe that they are beneficiaries and that their benefits are under threat. This is a function of citizens’ propensity to protect themselves against threat. When a threat punctuates the relative equilibrium of the policy space, concern about one’s own benefits is cued against the backdrop of that policy space. If threat of loss drives behavioral change that overcomes partisanship, the effect of that threat should be evident among those whose own interests put them at odds with intra-party belief structures around their perceived benefits.

5. The Tipping Point: Self Interest Over Partisanship

In the frame of existing studies of partisanship, political participation, and self-interest, I build a theoretical framework that traces threat recognition and response among policy beneficiaries. Believed policy benefit facilitates a new frame through which we process media exposure, because our self-interest motivates protective behaviors – ones that can challenge our partisan networks and their typical behaviors. Benefit perception is sharpened by the media, which facilitates political learning and alerts us to threats to benefits. Without the media, our understanding of benefit threat is severely limited – if we do not know that there is a threat before the worst-case scenario, benefit loss will precede our realization of benefits in the first place.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Increased media attention to the ACA will increase sense of threat among beneficiaries.

This threat, sharpened by media exposure, mediates participation changes among those who believe their benefits are under threat. According to prospect theory, this should motivate people to participate politically in a manner that protects against prospective threats to perceived benefits. In the frame of benefit loss, political behaviors will be undertaken in a manner that helps to manage benefit loss – leading to increased participation and influencing vote choice for candidates that aim to protect their benefits.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Individuals who identify as ACA beneficiaries, compared to those who don't, will participate more in political activities.

In the frame of conspicuous versus inconspicuous participation, prospect theory's conceptualization of 'risky behavior' can be applied to the political realm in the capacity that partisans whose self-interests are not reflected or validated in the collective interests of their

parties may participate differently than their co-partisans. The visibility of these participatory changes, however, may be subdued – voting for the other party is a personal and largely private behavior, whereas canvassing for a member of the opposing party out of self-interest puts beneficiaries in a socially vulnerable position as a function of how public that behavior is, relative to voting. Thus, I expect that behavioral change will be moderated on the basis of visibility among perceived beneficiaries when their self-interest is at odds with their own party’s political position. Visibility is most relevant when considering voter registration and vote choice – which are personal and less visible – as compared to attending rallies or posting political materials publicly. For example, a Republican beneficiary might support a Democratic candidate at the ballot box, but still refuse to post campaign materials that signal that vote choice for fear of being ostracized by their partisan network.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Compared to Democrats, Republican ACA beneficiaries will be less likely to register and vote.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Republican ACA beneficiaries are more likely than Republican non-beneficiaries to vote for Democratic candidates.

Together, this theoretical framework traces threat recognition and response among policy beneficiaries, accounting for the various conditions under which threat facilitates participatory change.

6. Data and Methods

I merge variables from the American National Election Study’s (ANES) 2018 Pilot Study ($n=2,000$) with variables from the Wesleyan Media Project’s (WMP) 2018 Dataset ($n=>1M$). The key WMP variable is a generated variable that averages the volume of campaign media about the 2017 ACA repeal attempt, by state. Upon merging the WMP and the ANES data, a

media index is generated, which combines average ACA media by state and individual-level political awareness. I also generate an insurance concern index as a proxy for threat, combining two variables that measure (i) concern about insurance loss, and (ii) concern about not being able to afford insurance. These two index variables are instrumental to my analysis, allowing for the evaluation of the mediating power of media linked to the topic of ACA repeal, and its effect on perceptions of insurance concern.

I employ a multi-step methodological approach to trace the narrative developed in my theoretical framework. First, I measure the effect of political media in sharpening beneficiaries' sense of insurance threat. Using an ordered probit regression, I model the effect of the media index on the concern index among those who report having benefited from the ACA. I include covariates for partisan strength, income, education, race, and gender, and repeat this regression for the entire beneficiary population, as well as for the beneficiary populations within each partisan group: Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Isolating my analysis to only self-reported beneficiaries allows me to establish the role of the media in facilitating threat perception among the beneficiary population, providing a hard test for how threat perception is heightened in instances of prospective loss.

Second, I trace the effect of benefit threat on non-electoral behaviors. Using individual probit models for attending a political meeting, attending a protest, displaying campaign materials, and contributing to non-campaign political organizations, I measure the likelihood for each among self-identifying beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.

Finally, I trace the effect of benefit threat on voter registration, vote choice, and turnout. Using individual probit models for voter registration, Democratic house candidate preference, and turnout, I measure the likelihood for each among self-identifying beneficiaries and non-

beneficiaries. Focusing specifically on Democratic house candidate preference, given that 2018 is a midterm election year, this tests my hypothesis that beneficiaries will engage in counter-partisan voting behaviors in instances where their own party's interests are at odds with their self-interest. Voter registration and voter turnout metrics sharpen this analysis, providing evidence of intent to vote on those candidate preferences. Together, this 3-step approach tests the hypotheses set forth within this study sequentially, inclusive of standard demographic and partisan covariates to evaluate the effect of individual-level characteristics on each models' respective dependent variables.

7. Results

7.1 Establishing the Role of the Media

Modeling the effect of political media exposure – including that which is specifically related to the 2017 ACA repeal attempt – on insurance concern among beneficiaries, uneven patterns of media influence emerge. When all beneficiaries are included in the model (*see Figure 1*)¹, media exposure is not predictive of increased perceptions about insurance concern. There are a few exceptions to this rule, but the pattern is very clear: considering all beneficiaries together, media exposure yields no meaningful effect among self-identifying beneficiaries of the ACA.

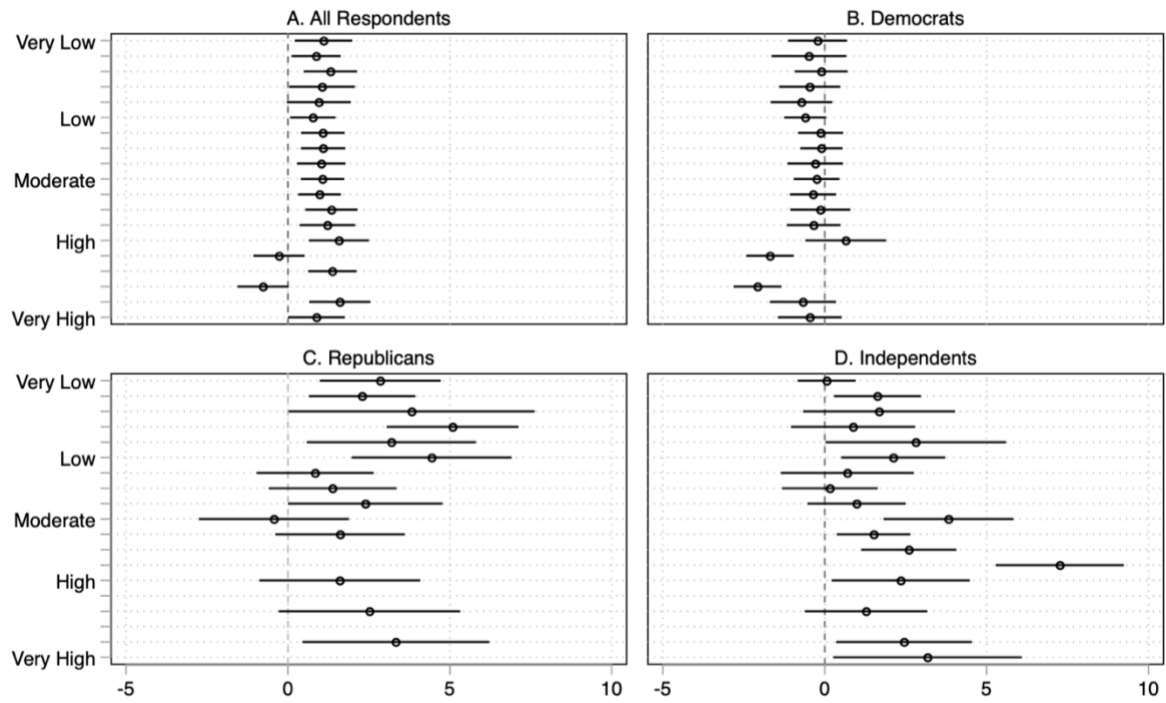
This pattern is less clear, however, among partisan beneficiaries when they are modeled independently from other parties. For instance, self-identifying Democrat beneficiaries generally do not experience any increase in perceptions of insurance concern. Some Democrat beneficiaries experienced a *decrease* in such concern at some of the highest levels of political media exposure, however these are also citizens who – by virtue of their intense engagement in

¹ Covariates for strength of partisanship, income, education, race, and gender are similarly included in all ordered probit models, though not displayed alongside media effects in Figure 1.

politics – are already conscious of their insurance status and threats to such benefits, thus making it appear as though they are unphased by the threat of benefit loss. More research on this inverted effect is necessary and should be pursued to explore how Democrats – as the party of the ACA – may experience different behavioral feedback effects relative to other partisan beneficiary groups.

Self-identifying Republican and Independent beneficiaries experience similar, although inconsistent, patterns in the relationship between political media exposure and insurance concern. Unlike their Democratic counterparts, there is no level of media exposure at which either Republicans or Independents become less insurance insecure. Among Republicans, insurance concern is strongly associated with media exposure of all levels, though is most consistent among the highest exposure and lower exposure levels. This is similar among independents, but less consistent in terms of trends by exposure level. One explanation for these broader trends punctuated by relative instability is the fact that fewer Republicans and Independents self-identify as ACA beneficiaries compared to Democrats. Whether this is a function of being healthier than Democrats, or a critical misunderstanding of one’s government benefits and status as an ACA beneficiary remains unclear. Nevertheless, these patterns warrant further investigation to uncover whether – if respondents were actually representative of the ACA beneficiary breakdown at the national level – Republicans and Independents truly do observe increased perceptions of insurance concern while Democrats do not.

Figure 1. Effect of Political Media on Insurance Concern Among Beneficiary Populations



Source: 2018 ANES, 2018 WMP.

Within the larger frame of this study, this provides mixed evidence in support of H1 – media coverage does not universally increase feelings of insurance concern across partisan groups. The strongest, positive media effects are observed among self-identifying Republican beneficiaries of the ACA, though these effects are unequally observed across the political media exposure index. This could be due to differences in the nature of the media coverage rather than media exposure by itself, and further study should be pursued in this vein to investigate further. A possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that Democrats might not rely as heavily on media cues as compared to Republicans or Independents because their party exerts issue ownership over the ACA – thus, they are already keenly aware of their threat perception given exposure to intra-partisan cues about the ACA and their benefits. Conversely, Republicans and Independents are not exposed to intra-party cues about ACA threat in the same manner – meaning that the media could have a stronger effect in cueing that threat than their own parties,

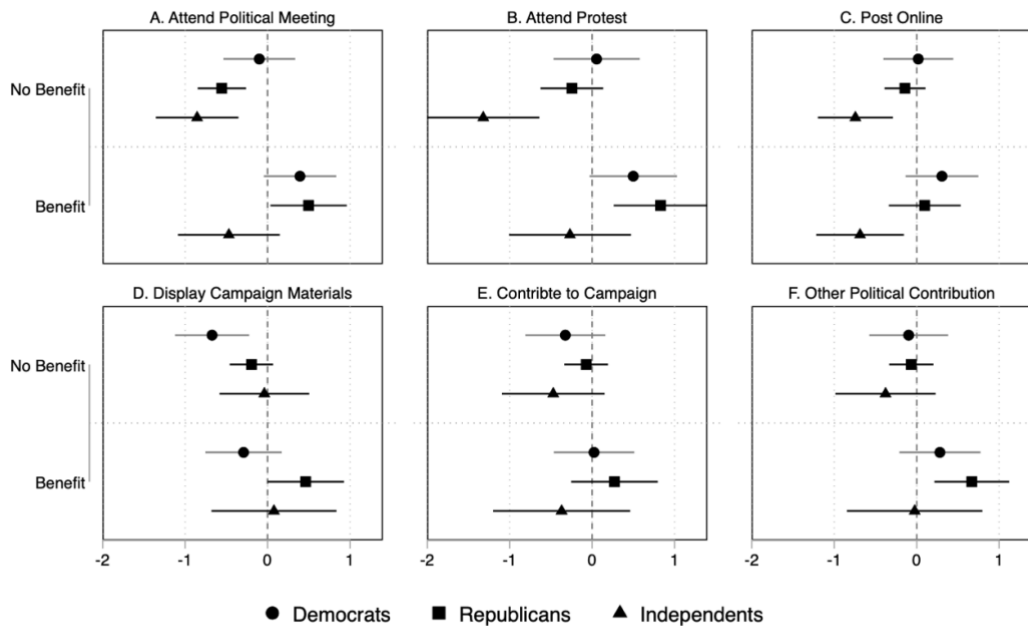
standing in for that party network when beneficiaries' interests are at odds with the interests of their party.

7.2 Testing the Effect of ACA Benefit on Non-Voting Measures of Political Participation

Modeling the effect of ACA benefit on non-voting participation metrics (*See Figure 2*)², inconsistent patterns of benefit effects emerge both within and across parties. Self-identifying Democratic beneficiaries (those who claimed that the ACA made it easier for them to get health insurance) do not display any participatory differences from those who reported the ACA as having no effect on their ability to secure health insurance. One exception is in terms of displaying campaign materials, where non-beneficiary Democrats are less likely to display campaign materials than co-partisan beneficiaries. Self-identifying Independent beneficiaries are largely indistinguishable from their non-beneficiary co-partisans in terms of political participation, with null effects on most measures. Exceptions include posting online, where Independents – regardless of beneficiary status – are less likely to engage in politics online. Additionally, non-beneficiary Independents are less likely to attend political meetings and protests – with their co-partisan beneficiaries observing null effects on those same measures.

Figure 2. Effect of ACA Benefit on Non-Voting Participation Metrics, by Party

² Covariates for political media exposure, strength of partisanship, income, education, race, and gender are similarly included in all probit models plotted here, though not displayed alongside the effect of ACA benefit in Figure 2.



Source: 2018 ANES, 2018 WMP.

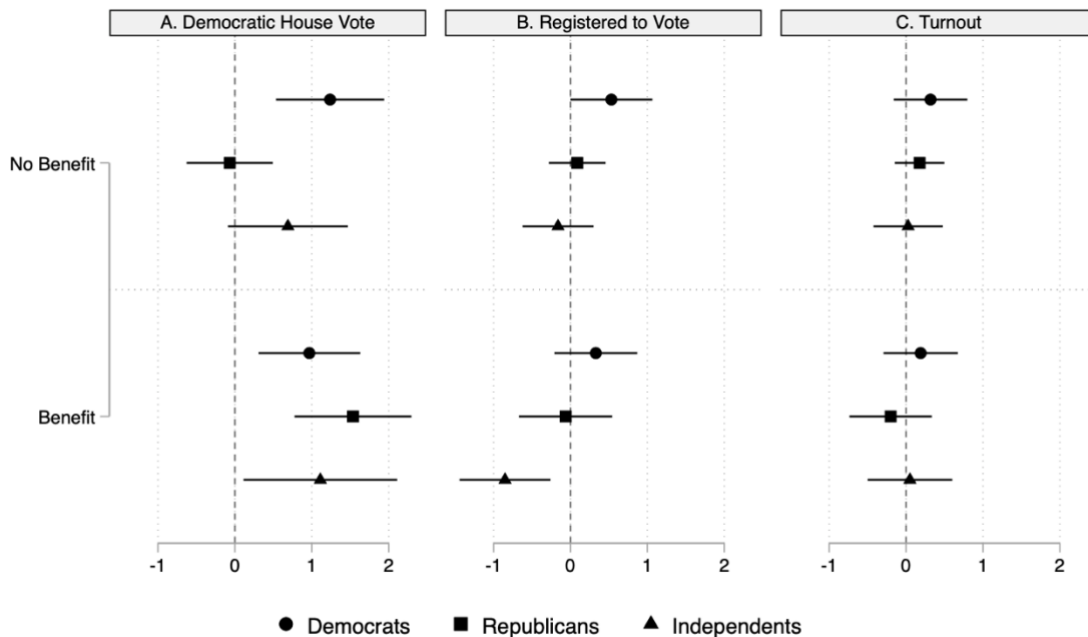
Evidence from Figure 2 suggests that Republican beneficiaries generally observe larger participatory changes than those who do not experience the same increase in threat perception. Self-identifying Republican beneficiaries are more likely to attend a political meeting, attend a protest, display campaign materials, and contribute to non-campaign political organizations – evidence of a moderate, positive relationship. This demonstrates that, at least among self-identifying Republican beneficiaries, their beneficiary status in the aftermath of the 2017 ACA repeal attempt had a significant, positive effect on most measures of non-voting political participation. This provides support for H2 but suggests that H3 may overstate the determinative effect of partisanship on Republican beneficiary behavior. Beneficiaries, at odds with their party’s position against the ACA, do tend to participate more. A similar depressive effect is not observed as expected among Republicans for participation measures that are more visible or more network dependent – instead, null effects are observed for posting online and contributing

to a campaign. Indeed, the only depressive effect among Republicans is observed among non-beneficiaries who are less likely to attend political meetings than beneficiary co-partisans.

Taken together, benefit threat has a positive effect on political participation among self-identifying beneficiaries – specifically among those whose self-interest is at odds with their party. This extends to most measures of participation regardless of visibility, indicative that policy benefit is a statistically significant predictor of political participation even when controlling for typical predictors of political participation including partisanship strength, media attention, education, race, and gender.

7.3 Testing the Effect of ACA Benefit on Non-Voting Measures of Political Participation

Figure 3. Effect of ACA Benefit on Voter Behaviors, by Party



Source: 2018 ANES, 2018 WMP.

Republican beneficiaries are more likely to participate politically, providing evidence in support of the larger theory this study explores. However, it remains less clear whether participation changes are in support of the opposing party – for Republicans, this equates to voting for Democratic candidates. Evidence of Republican beneficiaries voting for Democratic candidates will bolster the argument that these participatory changes are being undertaken to protect against benefit loss – with Republicans behaving in counter-partisan (risky) behaviors, as expected under the prospect theory framework.

As outlined in Figure 3³, ACA beneficiaries express preference to vote for a Democratic House candidate when compared to co-partisans who do not identify as benefitting from the ACA with the notable exception of Democrats. These findings are striking evidence that threat does translate not only to non-voting participatory increases, but also to voting behaviors to protect against threat of future benefit loss among Republicans specifically. Beneficiaries are also no less likely to register to vote or turnout than their non-beneficiary co-partisans – with the noted exception of Independents – indicating that voting preferences, even when they run counter to one’s own party’s interests, are acted upon. The lack of evidence here to suggest depressive effects on political behavior as a result of benefit loss is compelling evidence in support of the existence of a self-interested tipping point among beneficiaries at odds with their parties: at the end of the day, they will choose to look out for themselves – not their co-partisans. In the frame of prospect theory and engaging in risky behavior to protect against prospective loss, evidence supports my third hypothesis: that partisans at odds with their parties will engage in “risky” behavior – in this case, out-partisan vote choice – to protect against the threat, even at the electoral expense of their own party.

³ Covariates for political media exposure, strength of partisanship, income, education, race, and gender are similarly included in all probit models plotted here, though not displayed alongside the effect of ACA benefit in Figure 3.

8. Discussion

Policy benefit undoubtedly affects political behavior insofar as benefiting from the ACA leads to increased political participation – even among Republican partisans, who we might expect to care less about ACA benefit as a function of their partisan identities. These results provide some evidence to suggest that there is indeed a tipping point beyond which policy benefit determines political behavior above and beyond the effect of partisanship. Notably, beneficiaries engage in risky (ie. counter-partisan) behaviors when their benefits are threatened – contributing to the existing literature on behavioral policy feedbacks and extending existing literature which has until now focused primarily on attitudinal changes at the expense of participation changes.

While the role of the media warrants further study to understand patterns of media exposure, coverage type, and the impacts of these on threat perception, the results of this study nevertheless provide support for the argument that policy threat leads beneficiaries to participate more politically. Beyond the scholarly implications of this study, such findings provide useful direction to policymakers: electoral and non-electoral outcomes, alike, are affected by threat among beneficiary populations. Future scholarship should continue to test this finding in the frame of other social policies to explore its portability to non-ACA policy threat.

Social Identity, Impression Management, and Benefit Under-Reporting: Applying Multiple Imputation to Combat Social Desirability Bias

Abstract

Concerns with self-reports are a critical issue widely addressed within survey methods research. However, these studies frequently focus on risky behaviors like drug use and other sensitive topics. Rarely, if ever, is the topic of misreporting linked to policy benefit. When do people report – and, more specifically, choose not to report – benefiting from a policy? I use the ACA as a case study to examine the intersecting themes of social identity and social desirability bias to evaluate predictors of benefit reporting. Applying a multiple imputation approach to an existing dataset, this study not only predicts likelihood of social desirability bias as a function of partisan identity, but also predicts likely benefit from the ACA based on demographic indicators among those most susceptible to that bias in their self-reports. Findings suggest that Republican partisans are most affected by social desirability bias, and that this bias increases their likelihood of reporting no benefit from the ACA. When imputing existing data to predict Republican benefit based on demographic indicators rather than self-reports, significantly more beneficiaries are identified as compared to self-reports, with predicted estimates more closely reflecting national estimates of benefit.

1. Challenging Evidence from Self-Reported Beneficiary Data

Self-identified beneficiaries of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) generally participate more in politics when faced with the threat of prospective benefit loss (Dreher 2021). This is true even among Republicans, whose benefit from the ACA increases the likelihood that they engage in vote-switching in support of Democratic candidates (Dreher 2021). Reliance on self-reports, however, ignores the potential of systematic misreporting of benefit status. For example, the 2018 ANES Pilot Study data used in that previous study shows that, despite national estimates of similar rates of ACA benefit across partisan groups, Republican respondents report being far less likely to benefit from the ACA relative to their Democratic counterparts.

This puzzle motivates the key methodological question underpinning my second study of behavioral policy feedbacks linked to the ACA: When do people report – or choose not to report – policy benefit? Several explanations exist for why this is, including differences stemming from political socialization and knowledge, and partisan social desirability bias. This study focuses specifically on social desirability bias among Republican ACA beneficiaries, and examines these phenomena in sequence, exploring (i) what factors predict partisans’ self-reported benefit from the ACA, (ii) how these factors map onto what we know of beneficiary demographics at the national level, and (iii) the viability of predictive interventions to identify likely beneficiaries who do not self-report ACA benefit using known beneficiary demographic mapping. I employ predictive analysis to address these motivating themes, finding that self-censoring is associated with a lower likelihood of reporting ACA benefit – a phenomenon which largely exists only among Republican voters. When applying a predictive imputation approach to the data, Republican beneficiary estimates more closely resemble their Democratic counterparts. Not only do these findings add to the growing discussion surrounding the validity of self-reports and

conclusions drawn from such data, the newly imputed data identifies one solution for balancing out the effect of social desirability bias in an effort to produce more accurate model estimates in instances of bias in self-reported data.

2. Who Benefits from the ACA?

ACA beneficiaries are identifiable by many shared demographic characteristics. In terms of income, those who fall below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) see a decrease in their uninsured rate of nearly 10% with the implementation of the ACA; while those who fall within 100% and 199%, and over 200%, see decreases of approximately 11% and 5%, respectively (Garfield, Orgera, and Damico 2019a). These decreases in uninsured rates manifest differently among Hispanic Americans (-11%), Asian Americans (-9%), Black Americans (-8%), and White Americans (-5%) – all with varied effect (Garfield, Orgera, and Damico 2019a). The ACA makes it easier for women in particular to afford insurance, with substantial gains in their insurance rates between 2010, when the ACA was introduced, and 2016 (Gunja et al. 2017).

The largest decreases in uninsured rates are attributable to Medicaid expansions under the Affordable Care Act, with states that choose to expand Medicaid seeing an over 7% drop in uninsured rates compared to states that do not expand Medicaid (Garfield, Orgera, and Damico 2019a). Along partisan lines, evidence suggests that Democrats benefit from larger gains in insurance than Republicans in terms of private marketplace plans, however there remains no difference among partisans on the basis of insurance gains through Medicaid expansions specifically (Sances and Clinton 2019). Thus, among those adults living in states that expand Medicaid, there should be minimal to no partisan differences among Democrats and Republicans in terms of insurance gains afforded by the ACA. Notably, Republicans more likely to self-report excellent health (self-reported health status, or SR.HS) compared to Democrats (Pacheco and

Fletcher 2015). These differences, however, are reflected in national-level beneficiary statistics which account for variation in health status as a function of social determinants of health. This is broadly indicative of the relationship between health inequalities and partisan identification and underscores that, among self-identifying Republican voters, there are likely to be less ACA beneficiaries relative to Democratic voters. Metrics of SR.HS are also vulnerable to social desirability bias, and thus other demographic indicators are likely a more reliable estimation tool for identifying beneficiaries.

How does this compare to who self-reports benefit from the ACA? Given that Republican partisans are more likely to engage in self-censoring behaviors, and that self-censoring affects self-reported ACA benefit, a larger narrative emerges that Republican partisans – as a function of social desirability bias – will report benefiting from the ACA less than Democrats with the same social identity characteristics. This is summarized in Table 1, where I categorize the percentage of partisans that claim to benefit from the ACA by known demographic indicators of benefit within the 2018 ANES Pilot Study data.

Table 1. Differences in Partisan Self-Reports of ACA Benefit

	Democrats	Republicans	Difference
<i>Less than college degree</i>	40%	9%	-127%
<i>College degree or more</i>	40%	7%	-140%
<i>Men</i>	44%	6%	-152%
<i>Women</i>	37%	10%	-115%
<i>Non-Hispanic white</i>	39%	7%	-139%
<i>Hispanic</i>	39%	17%	-79%
<i>Black</i>	44%	38%	-15%
<i>Other</i>	46%	5%	-161%
<i>Medicaid Expansion State</i>	44%	9%	-132%
<i>Non-Medicaid Expansion State</i>	32%	6%	-137%

Most notable to this study are the major differences in self-reported benefit by party within expansion states (*see Table 1*). We know that Medicaid Expansion status is an equal predictor of ACA benefit among Democrats and Republicans, alike (Sances and Clinton 2019). Thus, the significant difference in self-reporting in the ANES data indicates that something is potentially amiss among Republicans, in particular. I center Republicans as a focus in this study because Medicaid Expansion has been found to increase insurance gains by approximately 9.7 percentage points – which is reflected among Democrats in Table 1, but not among Republicans who observed a 40% smaller difference than is reported nationally at just 3 percentage points (Park et al. 2019). This provides evidence that there is a potential issue with self-reported data, underscoring the motivation for this study: to uncover why systematic underreporting exists in these data.

3. Factors That Affect Accurate Self-Reporting

3.1 Political Knowledge

Lack of political knowledge provides an overarching explanation for why some individuals misreport policy benefit. We know that most people are not traditionally knowledgeable or consistent insofar as they can make sense of the political world, relying on cues and shortcuts from various sources to interpret their place in politics (Converse 2006b; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017; Lupia 1994). Campaigns strengthen pre-existing views (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1968), increasing cue salience and making salient certain frames depending on the partisan audience (Gelman and King 1993; Johnston 1992; Shaw 1999). Thus, if you do not know what policies do beyond what is cued by self-confirming sources, you might not know that you benefit from any policy at all (Bartels 2002). This can lead to inaccurate self-reports, where respondents do not possess the political awareness necessary to correctly interpret

survey questions (Achen 1975). For example, if a question is worded in a way that is convoluted or confusing or cues an underlying bias, the response that question garners might not be accurate – intentionally or not. Moreover, if a respondent does understand the question and know how to answer it correctly, they might still opt out of answering a question or willfully misreport as a function of pre-existing biases (Berinsky 1999; S. M. Klar, Weber, and Krupnikov 2016a).

3.2 Partisan Social Desirability Bias

In the ANES 2018 Pilot Study data, approximately 40% of Democrats report that the ACA made it easier for them to gain health insurance, while just 8% of Republicans and 19% of Independents report the same level of benefit. What explains this disparity? Existing literature provides several explanations that help us understand why inaccurate self-reporting occurs. Most notably: social desirability bias. Studying behavioral feedbacks is made more difficult given the risk of social desirability bias in surveys related to policies that are inherently partisan, like the ACA. In particular, social desirability bias linked to voters' partisanship and self-monitoring – that is, being conscious of norms linked to their partisanship and expressing themselves in ways that remain consistent with expected norms within these environments – can be a concern in surveys that rely on self-reports (S. M. Klar, Weber, and Krupnikov 2016b; Shepherd n.d.). In the context of the ACA, social desirability bias could lead Republican voters who did, in fact, gain insurance or otherwise benefit because of the ACA to claim that the ACA did not make it easier for them to gain insurance as a function of their partisanship – thus appearing in survey data as though they do not benefit from the ACA when indeed they do.

Though many factors can compound social desirability bias, religiosity is one that is unique to Republican partisans specifically. Social desirability bias and the ultra-religious right are two, interwoven phenomena (Shepherd n.d.). Religious and political extremism are closely

linked (Mez 2020), strengthening the confounding effect of partisanship among the most religious evangelicals in particular. This is most likely to be observed among the Republican religious right due to asymmetric polarization (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). Those with politically extreme views are more likely to engage in impression management, closely linked to social desirability bias, to present a more socially acceptable persona to others (Moss and O'Connor 2020) – which can additionally spur inaccurate reporting behaviors. Related evidence does show this to be true in practice, with Republican partisans more susceptible to social desirability bias than Democrats (Shin 2020).

Given the deeply partisan nature of the ACA, social desirability – regardless of its source – is of particular concern. Even as Republicans defect in support of Democratic protectors of their ACA benefits (Dreher 2021), they may still register as Republicans and vote Republican in other types of races – thus increasing the likelihood that they might inaccurately respond to this question in order to present a version of themselves to the public that is most consistent with what is expected of a Republican. For example, one who votes Republican, and views Democrats/Democratic policies as bad – even if they benefit from those very policies.

3.3 Credit and Blame

When considering the ACA, campaigns – like the ones that dominated the 2018 Midterm elections - provide an opportunity to emphasize policy problems and assign blame/take credit that cue those who are less politically aware to who owns what side of a policy issue (Petrocik 1996). Understanding one's own benefit is further complicated by the existence of Medicaid expansion versus non-expansion states – when a Republican state expands health coverage, who receives credit? Is it the Republican governor? The Democrats who pass the legislation federally that paved the way for that Republican governor? Credit-taking, partisanship, and a baseline lack

of political knowledge interact to produce unfavorable conditions insofar as a voter knows what policy they benefit from, and who facilitated that benefit – if one is to exist at all in the minds of voters.

How do voters learn about who is to credit or blame for policy changes? As policy discourse becomes more nationalized, even in instances where voters are very knowledgeable, it has become difficult to draw correct distinctions between national, state-level, and local policymaking and responsibilities. This matters in terms of blame and in terms of credit. One example of this emerges in the case of rural hospital closures, wherein voters misplace blame on Democrats – even when Republican Governors are to blame – backing candidates like Donald Trump (Shepherd n.d.). Indeed, closure of rural hospitals signaled to voters that the economy was not doing well – leading to the election of candidates they believed to do better on matters of the economy. In terms of credit-taking, it is difficult for voters to assign credit for policy successes when they are not fully aware of the scope of their own benefit from a given policy. Similar to Shepherd’s conclusions related to economic performance and voter behavior, other evidence suggests that the intentional diminishing of policies’ visibility to the public leads to instances in which beneficiaries do not know that they are beneficiaries (Mettler 2011). Thus, traditional measures of political knowledge exist as imperfect proxies for the full scope of understanding the complexity of policymaking, benefit distribution, and personal benefit.

4. How to Account for Inaccurate Self-Reports of Policy Benefit

4.1 Account for Survey Error

Many well-studied strategies exist for the purposes of correcting errors in survey responses – specifically in the capacity that they identify respondents with an increased likelihood of misreporting or inaccurately responding to survey questions. One such strategy is

the inclusion of knowledge questions that require specific answers that many people are unable to recall without seeking out the answer (Clifford and Jerit 2016). These specific knowledge questions have the dual benefit of identifying respondents concerned with impression management and self-deceptive enhancement – two key features of social desirability bias among survey respondents (Booth-Kewley, Larson, and Miyoshi 2007; Clifford and Jerit 2016; Paulhus 1984, 1991). Other more direct strategies leverage direct question wording to combat social desirability bias. For example, vote reporting accuracy is improved by including question wording that indicates self-reports will be compared to public records to confirm truthfulness – lessening the effect of social desirability bias (Hanmer, Banks, and White 2014). Other direct strategies involve continued assurances of answer anonymity to increase honest self-reporting (Murdoch et al. 2014). Self- and computer-assisted interviewing is also a strategy leveraged to eliminate fears around judgement of answers by interviewers, leading to more honest self-reporting (Tourangeau and Smith 1996).

Indirect measures of social desirability similarly exist and can be used to correct for potential bias. For instance, some surveys include questions about individual appearance – serving as a proxy for social desirability bias as a function of respondents’ motivation to present a certain way (Krumpal 2013). Social desirability bias is of particular concern for surveys that rely on self-reported answers to sensitive questions – largely as a function of the respondents’ embarrassment or fear of repercussions for their actions, like illicit drug use (Tourangeau and Yan 2007). Some studies on empathetic responses have found that performative empathy can be an indicator of increased propensity for impression management (Sassenrath 2020), while others indicate that performing political correctness is a function of impression management – specifically among those with politically extreme views (Moss and O’Connor 2020). Beyond

specific measures for managing social desirability bias, question formatting and delivery can also help to mitigate under-reporting. In particular, evidence suggests that the crosswise model – wherein sensitive questions/behaviors are posed alongside neutral questions/behaviors – is effective in eliciting more honest responses (Jann, Jerke, and Krumpal 2012; Sagoe et al. 2021). When using a crosswise model, respondents are asked if either of these types of behaviors is one that they have engaged in – eliminating the embarrassment and discomfort associated with answering affirmatively to the behavior or action most likely to be viewed as sensitive (Sagoe et al. 2021). Taken together, controlling for bias is possible using questions that map social characteristics which increase a respondents’ likelihood of self-monitoring such as how they present themselves to others on metrics of appearance and agreeableness. These help to account for individual-level factors among respondents that affect their ability to correctly respond to survey questions – as a function of demographic characteristics, as well as survey-specific features that increase the likelihood of misreporting. However, these strategies must be employed at the outset of survey design before it is fielded – leaving room for other strategies that can be implemented in the analysis stage after data has been collected.

4.2 Multiple Imputation

Multiple imputation works by generating a predicted value as a function of existing data and multiple imputation models. Multiple predicted values are generated, then pooled to produce a final best estimate of a given value (Grund, Lüdtke, and Robitzsch 2018). Bias in missing data is largely a function of its underlying mechanisms (Jakobsen et al. 2017). Thus, systematic evaluation of responses and the underpinning predictors of such responses allows for a better specified imputation approach. In the case of suspected bias among ACA beneficiaries, preliminary evidence that suggests Republican respondents are less reliable in their benefit

reporting allows for the use of Democrat beneficiary characteristics as a useful guide in predicting Republican beneficiaries who have not otherwise self-reported.

Applying multiple imputation approaches in generating values for systematic missingness, results from studies within the political science discipline during the preceding five-year time period disappear at a rate of nearly 50% (Lall 2017). This provides promising evidence in support of applying multiple imputation in evaluating the effect of systematic misreporting of beneficiary status. Though multiple imputation is traditionally leveraged to account for missing data, the potential negative effects of social desirability bias on data completeness are such that this approach could be a viable tool in estimating misreported data that can be compared to existing benefit self-reports – specifically as a tool in analysis after data collection is complete.

5. Theory

Social identity characteristics that underpin political identity along with partisanship and political knowledge interact to moderate social desirability bias and motivated reasoning. These biases manifest in the willful misinterpretation of survey questions and/or subsequent misreporting of policy benefit to project a certain image or maintain internal consistency based on individual beliefs and intersecting identity characteristics. These strong social identity characteristics interact to strengthen individuals' propensity to undertake impression management efforts.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Ideological extremity increases likelihood of impression management.

Republicans are more likely to engage in impression management – leading to a greater likelihood of systematic under-reporting among Republican respondents. This is caused by a multitude of factors such as political socialization and strengthened partisanship. Mapping self-

reported benefit onto national demographic indicators of ACA benefit, Republicans will report benefit less than Democratic counterparts with the same demographic indicators.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Strong Republican partisanship increases impression management.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Strong Democratic partisanship has no effect on impression management.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Impression management decreases likelihood of self-reporting benefit from the ACA.

When these systematic factors are used to estimate likely ACA benefit via backward mapping of social identity and demographic characteristics, estimates of benefit will differ from self-reported benefit specifically among those with higher impression management scores. With a higher propensity for impression management, this will largely affect Republican respondents rather than Democrats.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Proportion of Republican ACA beneficiaries increases when demographic indicators of ACA benefit are used to predict beneficiaries.

6. Data and Methods

I leverage the same dataset as used in Dreher (2021), which merges variables from the American National Election Study's (ANES) 2018 Pilot Study ($n=2,000$) with variables from the Wesleyan Media Project's (WMP) 2018 Dataset ($n=>1M$). The key WMP variable is a generated variable that averages the volume of campaign media about the 2017 ACA repeal attempt, by state. Once merged with the ANES data, this variable is used to generate a media index, which combines average ACA media by state and individual-level political engagement. I similarly leverage the existing ACA benefit self-report variable used in Dreher (2021).

For political extremity, I center my analysis on variables measuring both partisan strength and ideology. To proxy likelihood of social desirability bias via impression management, I leverage a variable on self-censoring that asks respondents whether they find the need to manage how they present their views to others. Finally, standard demographic covariates and known predictors of ACA benefit are included in the analysis: income, race, gender, and state Medicaid expansion status – recoded as a binary indicator based on Medicaid expansion implemented prior to the 2018 Midterm Elections.

I employ a multi-step methodological approach to trace the narrative developed in my theoretical framework. First, I measure the effect of partisanship and ideology on impression management – establishing whether a relationship exists between political extremity and impression management. Using an ordered probit regression, I model the effect of partisanship and ideology on self-censoring behaviors – which serves as a proxy for social desirability bias. Covariates for standard demographic predictors of ACA benefit are included. This identifies the subset of survey respondents most susceptible to social desirability bias when asked to self-report policy benefit. Second, I examine Republican and Democratic partisans to measure the degree to which political extremity differs in its impact on impression management behaviors. This allows me to isolate partisans most susceptible to social desirability bias and misreporting benefits. Third, I use the self-censoring variable to predict self-reported ACA benefit.

Finally, I predict likely beneficiaries using known beneficiary demographic indicators, comparing these estimates against self-reported beneficiary status within the original dataset. I duplicate the existing ACA benefit variable that relies on self-reports, replacing existing responses from Republican respondents as missing values within that new variable. I then use this new variable to regress known predictors of ACA benefit on Democratic self-reports to

produce multiple imputation datasets. I use these datasets to predict the “missing” values – in this case, beneficiary status for all Republican respondents. I compare these results with the original self-report variable to evaluate differences in benefit estimates relative to self-reported benefit. Together, this 3-step approach tests the hypotheses set forth within this study sequentially, inclusive of standard demographic covariates to evaluate the effect of individual-level characteristics on each models’ respective dependent variables.

7. Results

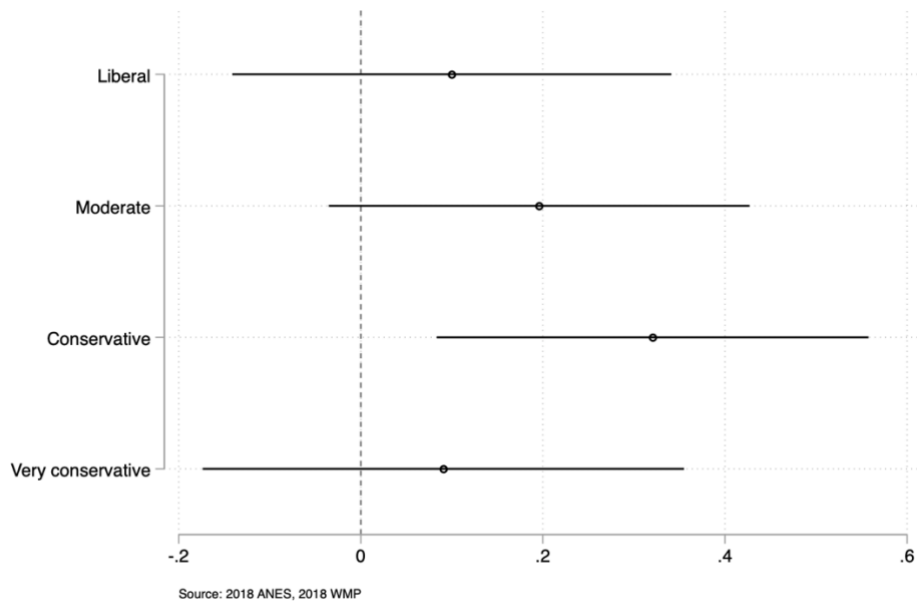
7.1 Establishing the Link Between Political Extremity, Impression Management, and Benefit Reporting

Assessing the predicted likelihood of self-censoring behavior among ideologues, a clear finding emerges: Conservative ideologues are the only group whose ideology predicts self-censoring behaviors (*see Figure 1*). Interestingly, this is not true among those who identify as ‘Very conservative’ – or, the most conservative ideologues. In the frame of H1, this provides mixed evidence in support of my theory. While ideological belief does matter, belief extremity seems to matter less than anticipated. However, given that conservatives are more likely to engage in self-censoring behaviors, it is possible that they are mis-reporting their ideological extremity as a function of that propensity for impression management.

Comparing these findings to predictions of self-censoring behaviors among partisan groups (*see Figure 2*), Republican-leaning independents and strong Republicans are the only groups whose partisanship predicts self-censoring behaviors, supporting the theory outlined in H2. Meanwhile, Democrats see no predictive effect of their partisanship on likelihood of self-censoring, which provides evidence supportive of H3. This indicates that partisanship functions as a stronger predictor of impression management in the form of self-censoring behaviors than

does ideological extremity among conservative Republicans. Given what we know of ideological innocence among American voters, these findings track well with existing literature which establishes a stronger connection to partisan identity than to ideological identity. Thus, an argument can be made that the results in *Figure 2* provide a clearer picture of the patterns that exist with self-censorship and political extremity. Nevertheless, further research related to this phenomenon is necessary to fully articulate the nuances present among extreme ideologues and their relationship with corresponding partisan identities.

Figure 1. Predicting Self-Censoring Behavior as a Function of Ideology



Self-censoring does, however, lead to a decrease in self-reporting ACA benefit (*See Figure 3*). This effect is visualized alongside the effect of living in a state that expanded Medicaid, where benefit is most widespread and thus more normalized – wielding a positive, statistically and substantively significant effect on self-reporting behaviors. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis outlined in H4, that those with a propensity for self-censorship are less likely to report benefiting from the ACA.

Figure 2. Predicting Self-Censoring Behavior as a Function of Partisanship

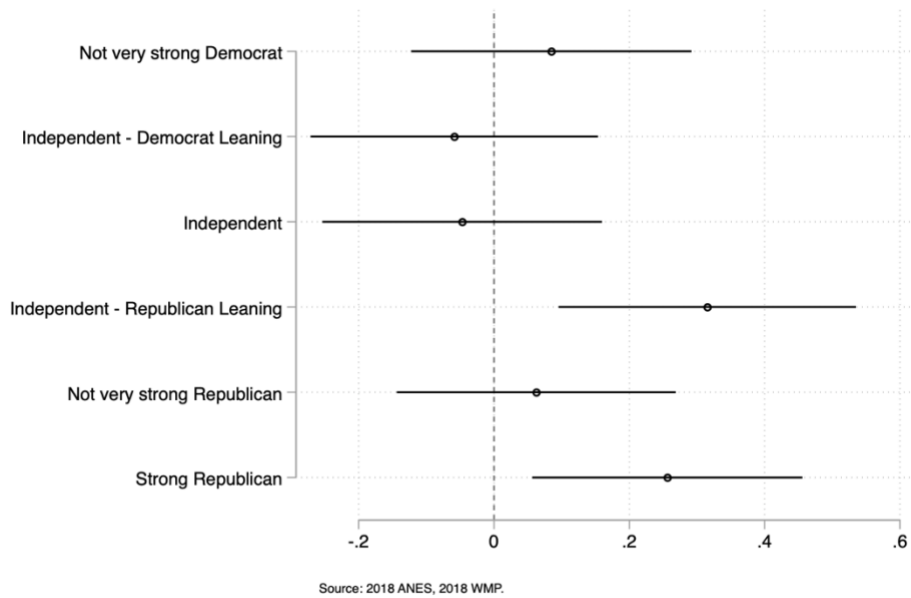
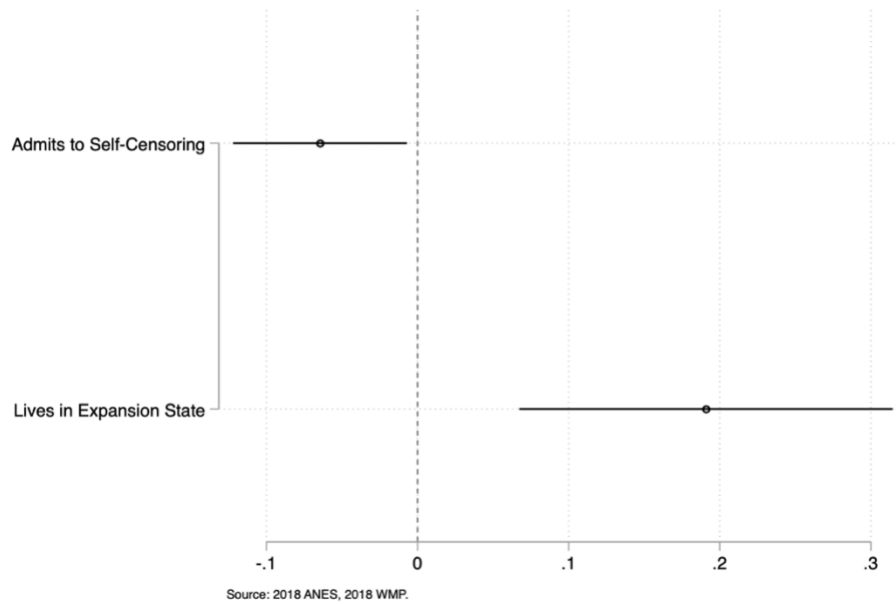


Figure 3. Effect of Self-Censoring on Self-Reporting ACA Benefit



Considering the findings articulated in Figures 1 through 3, support for my broader theoretical framework begins to take shape. Not only does political extremity predict self-censoring behaviors, but these self-censoring behaviors produce differences in benefit reporting

among the very group suspected of under-reporting. Republicans are more likely to censor their beliefs, and those most likely to self-censor are also least likely to report ACA benefit. While not all strong Republicans necessarily benefit from the ACA, inclusion of covariates that equally predict ACA benefit such as gender, income, and race do not lessen that substantive nor statistical significance of self-censorship on reporting of ACA benefits.

7.2 Predicting “Missing” Self-Reports and Comparing Model Estimates

To predict ACA benefit, I treat Republican responses as “missing” in order to most effectively leverage a multiple imputation approach with the data. I generate a duplicate benefit variable; whereby Republican responses are coded as non-responses. In total, this results in 849 newly designated “missing” responses within that duplicate variable – all Republicans in the sample. I then register this duplicate benefit variable as an imputed variable and register as regular variables all demographic predictors being considered in this analysis: income, education, race, gender, and living in a Medicaid expansion state. Regressing these predictors on the duplicate benefit variable, I generate 34 imputations to predict the “missing” values. The set number of imputations reflects the missingness of the data following a linear approach, wherein missing responses in the duplicate benefit variable total 34% of the sample population. Comparison of summary statistics between the original data, the first imputation, and the final imputation are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Imputation Summary Statistics

	<u>Observations</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Original (m=0)	1,651	.337977	.473164
First Imputation (m=1)	2,375	.3326316	.471255
Final Imputation (m=34)	2,375	.3427368	.474724

The similarity in means and standard deviation across the original, initial, and final imputations indicates that the imputation process was completed as intended and produced reliable estimations that follow a normal distribution. I use these imputation sets to fit the logistic regression, which detects significant effects of each education, race, and gender within the “missing” data. I then compare the percentage of Republican self-reports from Table 1 with a similar breakdown of percentage of predicted Republican beneficiaries within the data (see Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of Republican Self-Reports with Imputed Benefit Estimation

	Democratic Self-Reports	Republican Self-Reports	Predicted Republican Benefit
<i>Less than college degree</i>	40%	9%	30%
<i>College degree or more</i>	40%	7%	37%
<i>Men</i>	44%	6%	34%
<i>Women</i>	37%	10%	32%
<i>Non-Hispanic white</i>	39%	7%	32%
<i>Hispanic</i>	39%	17%	38%
<i>Black</i>	44%	38%	35%
<i>Other</i>	46%	5%	41%
<i>Medicaid Expansion State</i>	44%	9%	37%
<i>Non-Medicaid Expansion State</i>	32%	6%	26%

Source: Original Imputation Data. Source data compiled from 2018 ANES, 2018 WMP.

The descriptive results in Table 3 highlight how estimated benefit among Republican respondents tracks much more closely with Democratic self-reports than do Republican self-reports. While 44% of Democrats self-report benefit in Medicaid expansion states, the predicted benefit among Republicans is 37% - much closer than the self-reported benefit percentage of 9%. We know that Medicaid expansion states see generally equal gains across Democrats and

Republicans alike, so the imputed results track onto what we know of beneficiaries and where they live. This underscores how imputation provides what we can reasonably believe to be a generally accurate reflection of benefit among a population that is affected by ideological extremity and self-censorship that make self-reports like those contained in the 2018 ANES Pilot Study unreliable at best. We also know that among other characteristics, such as education, gender, and race, Republican beneficiaries are less prevalent compared to Democratic beneficiaries as a function of income differences. This tracks well given the predicted Republican beneficiaries outlined by demographic indicator in Table 3. These results additionally indicate support for H5, whereby Republican self-reports reflect how Republican partisans do not self-report ACA benefit at the same rate as Democrats who share the same demographic characteristics. However, when evaluating imputed benefit estimates, more Republicans are identified as ACA beneficiaries on the basis of their demographic characteristics than self-report benefit in the original ANES data.

9. Discussion

While results suggest that concerns about self-reported ACA benefit are indeed not unfounded, and Republican partisans are of particular concern insofar as they are less likely to report benefits compared to Democrats with the same demographic characteristics, multiple imputation is not a catch-all solution to solving the problem of social desirability bias. The imputed results do more closely map onto what we might expect among the national population in terms of likely ACA benefit, however these estimates rely on the assumption that Democrats themselves are not over or under-reporting their own benefits from the ACA. This study provides analysis that suggests this is not a significant concern, nevertheless further study into benefit

reporting and those factors that compound to produce biased responses should be pursued – specifically as it relates to the ACA.

Future study should similarly focus on the multitude of social identity characteristics that interact to increase impression management and subsequent social desirability bias. In particular, religiosity is of particular interest among Republican partisans, who are more likely to be both religiously and politically extreme relative to their Democratic counterparts. Moreover, new solutions to mitigate the effect of social desirability bias should be considered, including how to more specifically predict likely beneficiaries – and how to compare these predictions to benefit estimates by state, county, zip code for increased specificity in these predictive methods as a measure of robustness.

Policy Messaging and Political Participation: Lessons from the Affordable Care Act (ACA)

Abstract

For the first time since its passage, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) faced a serious threat of repeal in 2017. This repeal threat was strongly opposed by beneficiaries, yet many still pointed to the opportunity for a new replacement policy as a worthy alternative. How do threat and opportunity differently affect political behaviors? Does one matter more than the other? Threat and opportunity each wield effects on political behaviors, yet the significance of these effects is uneven and differs across policy types. I use an original survey experiment to evaluate the effect of threat and opportunity messaging on political participation and attitude formation around the ACA. Findings add to the current state of the literature, with results indicating mixed effects linked to threat rather than opportunity as a primary motivator of political behavior to protect against that threat, even among low-resourced groups.

1. Repeal Threats and Policy Promises

Despite the fact that not a single Republican legislator voted in support of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Republican partisans nationwide are among some of the largest beneficiary groups of ACA-backed coverage – especially in Medicaid expansion states (Garfield, Orgera, and Damico 2019b). One of these states is Kentucky, which expanded Medicaid under the ACA in 2014 and saw more than a 50% decrease in its uninsured rate following its implementation (Pugel 2020). The 2016 election offered two distinct behavioral pathways: mobilize against the imminent repeal threat all but guaranteed under a potential Trump administration, or enthusiastically support the alternative legislation that would replace the ACA post-repeal. Enthusiasm for new legislation quickly died when it became clear that the ACA was under threat with no real path forward to replace it. Many Trump supporters did not believe that he could actually repeal the law that they benefited from (Kliff 2016), sharing just months later in 2017 the depth of their disappointment with the repeal attempt and their deep concern over the threat posed to their insurance benefits (Kliff 2017). Despite this, and with acknowledgement for the Trump administration’s failed attempt to pass new health care legislation before gutting the protections afforded by the ACA, Kentuckians did not report any real change to their public-facing political participation or any vocal dissent against the man they supported in the general election. A puzzling picture, but one that offers a case study of the various ways we participate in politics and what motivates that participation: be it reliance on the opportunity of prospective gains under new policies, or the threat of benefit loss.

When weighing the threat of benefit loss against the opportunity for prospective benefit gain, which is more motivating in terms of political participation? We know that threat can work as a mobilizing force (Alesina and Passarelli 2015; Campbell 2005; Dreher 2021; Kahneman and

Tversky 1979; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Osmundsen and Petersen 2019). However, not all threats are equal as far as their audiences are concerned (Miller and Krosnick 2004; Phoenix 2019). Indeed, opportunity messaging can lead to behavioral changes in instances where threat produces none – though evidence to this effect is similarly mixed (Miller and Krosnick 2004; Nichols 2017; Phoenix 2019). Beyond the type of messaging used to describe policy change, behaviors do not change if voters do not have sufficient information to inform their actions. Kentuckians believed that Trump would not threaten the ACA, and instead pointed to his proposed alternative as proof of something better to come – admitting that they did not fully understand the implications associated with the threat of repeal.

How does policy change messaging around the ACA affect political behavior? I use an original survey experiment ($n=1,413$) fielded via Lucid in April 2022 to evaluate the effect of threat and opportunity messaging on political participation and attitude formation, adapting treatments from Miller and Krosnick's (2004) original experimental work. In separating out policy messages tied to the ACA as competing and not complimentary – for example: repeal vs. replace as two distinct treatment groups, as opposed to a collective message of repeal *and* replace – the relative substantive impact of each threat and opportunity is more specifically measured against the other in the controlled environment offered by this study's experimental design. Findings provide mixed support for the hypotheses laid out in this study, but generally indicate that – at least in the case of the ACA – threat serves as a greater motivator than opportunity, even among low-resourced groups who we might expect to be less able to participate as a function of resource constraints. These results contribute to a burgeoning literature on policy change messaging and what types of messaging incite behavioral change among varied populations.

2. Policy Change Messaging

2.1 Threat

Policy change is categorized in the literature along two primary themes. First is in the frame of policy threat, which focuses on threat as a mechanism that facilitates behavioral change. Threat is closely related to the loss aversion literatures typical to discussion of prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). Threat, as a function of cueing individuals to the prospect of individual loss, produces behavioral changes to protect against that threat to oneself (Alesina and Passarelli 2015; Osmundsen and Petersen 2019). Evidence from (Dreher 2021a) leverages survey data to highlight how threat does produce behavioral change among threatened populations – with increased political participation among those who are most concerned about losing their insurance when faced with ACA repeal.

This finding reinforces evidence from previous studies, which find that policy threat can work as a mobilizing force (Campbell 2003, 2005; Towler and Parker 2018). Threat is similarly found to improve evaluations of policies viewed as counterbalancing that threat (Adira and Halida 2021; Schmuck and Matthes 2017), underscoring the range of behaviors altered by threat exposure and subsequent protective actions. Such findings add to a conflicted literature, whereby threat is found to both increase and decrease participation depending on the policy issue being studied and the behavioral change being measured (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Miller et al. 2016; Miller and Krosnick 2004).

2.1 Opportunity

Policy opportunity messaging provides a second frame through which policy change can be conceptualized and subsequently leveraged as a mobilizing tool. While the literature on threat is robust, the literature on policy opportunity is less substantial. Nevertheless, similar to threat,

enthusiasm for new policy opportunities can facilitate behavioral changes – sometimes in instances when threat yields no behavioral effect at all. Policy opportunity messaging ties into a larger dynamic within social impact theory, whereby individuals’ appetite for collective action is diminished by the perception that they can reap benefits of others without needing to act themselves (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Miller and Krosnick 2004; Nichols 2017; Olson 1971). Miller and Krosnick (2004) find that individuals exposed to materials insinuating policy threat are more likely to financially contribute, but that exposure to policy opportunity increases non-fiscal participation such as signing post-cards in support for the policy (Miller and Krosnick 2004). That study highlights how policy threat and opportunity can work simultaneously, producing varied effects depending on exposure to different policy change cues.

It is evident that policy opportunity is itself a powerful motivating tool beyond threat, particularly for different groups of people where the same types of policy appeals, and messaging strategies, do not uniformly affect people across groups. Within the Black community, for instance, opportunity messages encourage political participation where threat-based appeals may not (Phoenix 2019). Threat and opportunity frames can also be combined in policy change messaging to incite behavioral change among other populations, where opportunity cues serve as a key factor in motivating political participation above and beyond threat cues alone (Nichols 2017). Anecdotally, when a replacement for the ACA was discussed as a new and exciting policy opportunity, this same discussion was used to minimize the imminent threat posed to the ACA itself – leading to wide-ranging discussion of how the ACA had failed and how its post-repeal replacement would be better (Diamond 2015; Donovan and Kelsey 2017; Knight 2020). In instances where threat is fully counterbalanced by enthusiasm, we

might expect attitudes in support of the new policies to become more favorable while attitudes of the policies under threat to become less favorable. This tracks with prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), wherein losses and gains measure against one another differently for different individuals, sparking a wide range of potential behavioral responses.

3. Resource Inequality and Experimental Manipulations

Individual interests related to policies, however – be they framed as opportunities or as threats – only incite engagement among motivated individuals. Evidence from Jacobs and Mettler (2018) highlights how, in the case of the ACA, partisanship is not the most determinative factor mediating preference formation and policy attitudes. However, that study relies on survey data and does not trace how attitudinal change compares to participatory changes – and does not leverage an experimental design, as this study does. Indeed, reporting changes in preferences as a function of ACA benefit is one thing – taking the time to participate to protect against perceived threat to those benefits is another. This is because political participation comes at a cost to the participant. Whether this cost is time or money, the resources necessary to participate in politics are not equally distributed. While some individual-level factors such as strong partisanship facilitate political mobilization (Gelman and King 1993; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004; Huddy 2003; Johnston 1992; Shaw 1999), this mobilizing effect is confounded by ability to mobilize in the first place.

On the whole, evidence suggests that those who are older, married, and educated consistently vote more than members of other groups as a function of the resources typically afforded to them (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Education is a good proxy for political knowledge and income, which jointly underpin the resources necessary to participate politically (Putnam 2001). When we consider who benefits from the ACA and the fact that they are more

likely to lack resources necessary for political participation, they may be less able to mobilize in support of their benefits in instances of benefit threat. This can produce a self-reinforcing feedback loop that advantages those with resources to continue engaging lawmakers and advocating for their benefits, leaving the preferences and needs of low-resourced citizens behind and reproducing further inequalities in the future (Bartels 2012).

Those who most often mobilize share underlying characteristics that facilitate their political participation such as time, awareness, and money (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). These are some of the most prominent costs incurred in order to participate politically – if an individual lacks access to one of these primary tools, their ability to participate politically diminishes. Consider the example of Kentucky Republicans who benefit from the ACA: they did not fully understand the scope of threat to their benefits or the feasibility of the opportunity being presented to them. Policy messages hinge on their full understanding, something we know many voters simply do not possess (Converse 2006a).

4. Theory

The state of the literature on policy messaging and its behavioral impacts indicates that opportunities and threats are important in their own ways, as each facilitates behavioral and attitudinal change, though these effects range in substantive and statistical significance across policies with no clear pattern. Since little is known of the impact that threat and opportunity messaging have on behaviors linked to the ACA specifically, I propose competing hypotheses to better evaluate which messaging is most effective at increasing political participation:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): Exposure to policy opportunity messaging will increase participation in support of policy opportunities.

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): Exposure to policy threat messaging will increase participation in support of policies under threat.

I expect that policy evaluations and voter behavior will be affected similarly to other metrics of political mobilization examined in this study, presenting a second set of competing hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): Exposure to policy opportunity messaging will increase perceptions of policy approval, perceptions of effectiveness, voter registration, and vote intention.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): Exposure to policy threat messaging will increase perceptions of policy approval, perceptions of effectiveness, voter registration, and vote intention.

Considering protective behaviors in instances of threat, I expect that voters cued to the threat treatment will back candidates in upcoming elections that they view as supporters of the ACA: Democratic policymakers. Thus, exposure to policy threat will increase vote intention for Democratic candidates:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Exposure to policy threat messaging will increase preference for Democratic candidates.

Resource disparities among the electorate will impact respondent's participation even within the scope of the survey experiment. To this end, those who are less able to participate as a function of their income, race, and gender identity will be less likely to express likelihood of participation – specifically when exposed to threat messaging. Threat can wield a demobilizing effect on already under-represented and under-resourced groups. Meanwhile, opportunity messaging is likely to appeal more strongly to these same groups as compared to the effect of

threat. These contrasting effects will be observable both in terms of participation, policy attitudes, and voter behaviors:

Hypothesis 4a (H4a): Exposure to policy threat messaging among low-resourced voters will decrease participation in support of policies under threat.

Hypothesis 4b (H4b): Exposure to policy threat messaging among low-resourced voters will decrease policy approval, perceptions of effectiveness, and intention to vote.

Hypothesis 5a (H5a): Exposure to policy opportunity messaging among low-resourced voters will increase participation in support of policy opportunities.

Hypothesis 5b (H5b): Exposure to policy opportunity messaging among low-resourced voters will increase policy approval, perceptions of effectiveness, and intention to vote.

5. Methods

I test this theory using a survey experiment⁴ to incite threat and opportunity amongst different subsets of respondents to compare the effects of exposure to different types of ACA policy change on the same participatory metrics. Pre-exposure questions capture demographic characteristics, insurance status and source, partisanship, and attention paid to politics. Two attention checks are included to ensure active participation and more accurate measurement of treatment effects. The survey is built in Qualtrics and fielded via Lucid to ~1,400 respondents.

I adapt treatments used in (Miller and Krosnick 2004), who use threat versus opportunity to compare the effects of prospective loss and prospective gains on political participation. Treatments focus on threat and impact of loss and opportunity for potential gains and benefit. The threat treatment describes a potential threat to the ACA which focuses on increasing participants' sense of threat surrounding insurance and the wide-ranging impacts of insurance

⁴ See Appendix A for treatments. IRB approval: Understanding Political Behavior (IRB#22-048).

loss. The opportunity treatment describes the potential for expansion of ACA protections, increasing participants' sense of hope and opportunity at the potential positive impacts that extend from insurance improvement to other aspects of their lives. These treatments were chosen because they most closely reflect the political climate surrounding the 'Repeal and Replace' mantra that dominated discussion of health policy in the early Trump administration. As such, discussion of threat to ACA benefits closely mirrors the content of coverage at the time related to ACA repeal. Meanwhile, discussion of benefit expansion mirrors content of coverage related to the benefits of replacing the ACA with a policy that is better for the American people. The neutral control describes the ACA undergoing routine policy maintenance to maintain the policy in its current form – indicating no threat or opportunity but outlining how such action is a normal part of policymaking.

Given that this study utilizes a survey experiment rather than a field experiment, post-treatment questions measure likelihood of engaging in different political activities in light of the article the participant is asked to read. Following in the tradition of Miller and Krosnick (2004) who find differential effects on type and extent of participation as a function of exposure to threat-focused versus opportunity-focused messaging, I include 3 options for potential participation: (1) requesting more information; (2) signing a petition (either for or against); and (3) making a donation (to pro-ACA or anti-ACA organization), followed by a question asked only of those who planned to donate what the value of their donation would be. This aligns with options provided to field experiment participants in that 2004 study.

Additional post-test questions include measures of issue importance, vote intention, and likely vote choice – allowing for a direct test of findings in Dreher (2021a). Moreover, policy attitudes are captured regarding approval of the ACA, perceived effectiveness of the ACA, and

personal benefit from the ACA. These post-test measures closely align to those used by (Jacobs and Mettler 2018), whose findings suggest that, at least in the case of the ACA, there is more to attitude formation and policy preferences than partisanship.

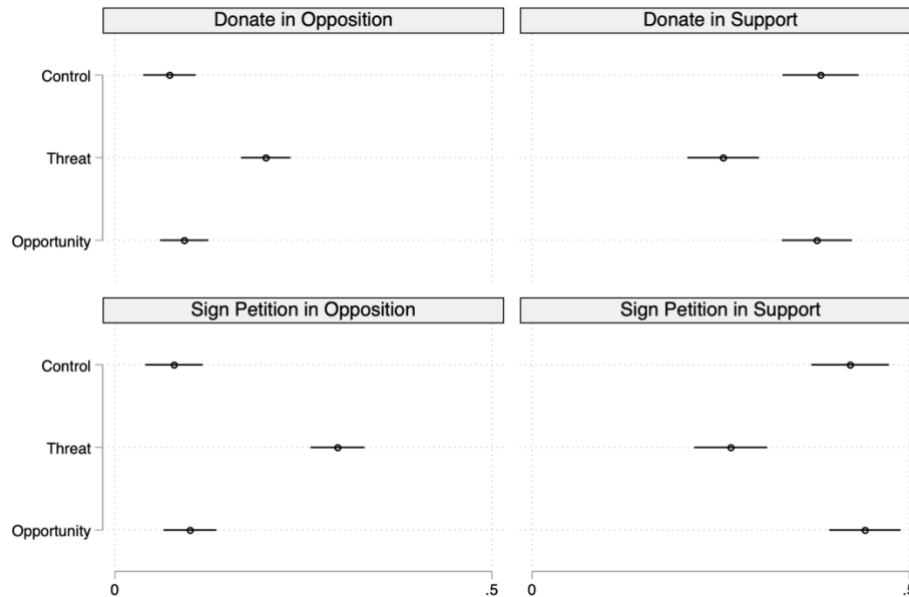
To analyze these data, I compare means across treatment groups to measure different levels of participation when participants are exposed to the opportunity article versus the threat-based article. Given this approach, I do not include covariates in my analysis and base findings on comparisons of means across treatment groups as compared to the control group. I break my analysis down by demographic indicators commonly associated with low-resourced voters, including income, race, and gender identity. In order to accurately evaluate differences between means of specific groups and their treatment effects, I generate dummy variables for women and non-white respondents. I similarly generate a dummy variable for low-income by measuring the median income among respondents and indicating those who fell below the median. This additional analysis allows me to measure differences that exist between groups insofar as their responses to the experimental treatments are likely to differ from respondents who do not deal with the same lack of political resources.

6. Results

Equal distribution across treatment and control groups of the total sample after respondents who did not consent to participation are dropped ($n=1,379$) leads to assignment of 430 participants to the control group, 464 participants to the threat treatment, and 485 participants to the opportunity treatment. Gender distribution, educational attainment, and political interest are similarly equal across treatment and control groups. This indicates successful randomization via Lucid, increasing reliability of treatment effect estimates.

6.1 Evaluating Efficacy of Threat versus Opportunity Messaging

Figure 1. Participatory Behaviors by Treatment Group

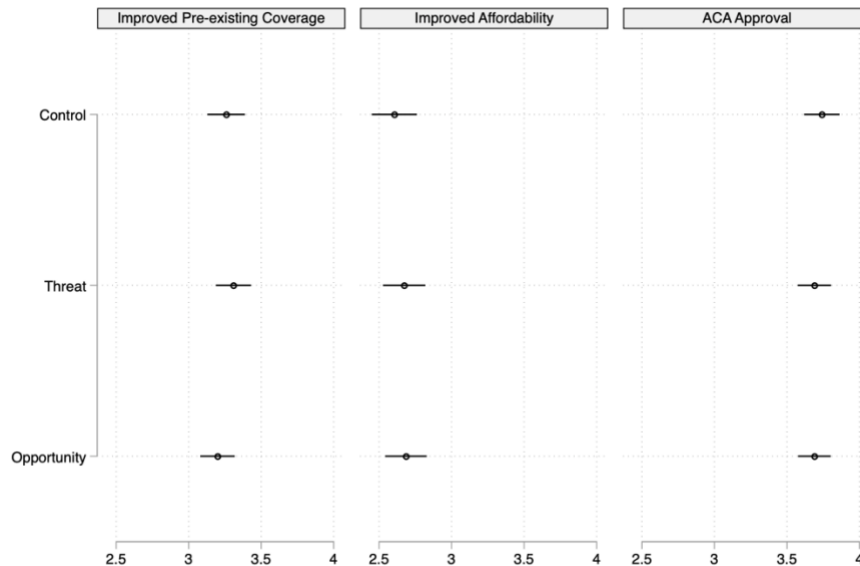


Comparing means across treatment groups (*see Figure 1*), threat prevails as more determinative in predicting protective behaviors than opportunity does in spurring supportive ones. As expected, participants in the threat treatment are more likely to donate in opposition and sign a petition in opposition to amendments that would roll back ACA protections. The difference in mean effect of the threat treatment relative to the control group is 0.13 ($p < 0.000$) for donations in opposition and 0.22 ($p < 0.000$), respectively. This is in contrast to the opportunity treatment group; whose respondents are no more likely to donate in support or sign a petition in support of prospective gains under a new amendment to the ACA meant to expand the policy. In the frame of the competing hypotheses outlined in H1, these findings indicate support for H1b, that exposure to policy threat messaging increases participation in support of policies under threat – in this case, support is shown by donating to opposition groups rather than groups supportive of threatening amendments to the ACA. These results jointly indicate that policy opportunity, at least in the frame of the ACA, does not increase participation in a similar manner.

Neither the threat nor opportunity treatments has any effect on requests for information about the hypothetical amendments discussed in the experiment.

While participatory behaviors are affected by treatment type, perceptions of coverage improvements for pre-existing conditions, affordability of the participants' own insurance, and ACA approval are unaffected across treatment groups (*see Figure 2*). This returns null results related to H2a and H2b, indicating that neither threat nor opportunity have any effect on ACA policy approval and perceptions of effectiveness.

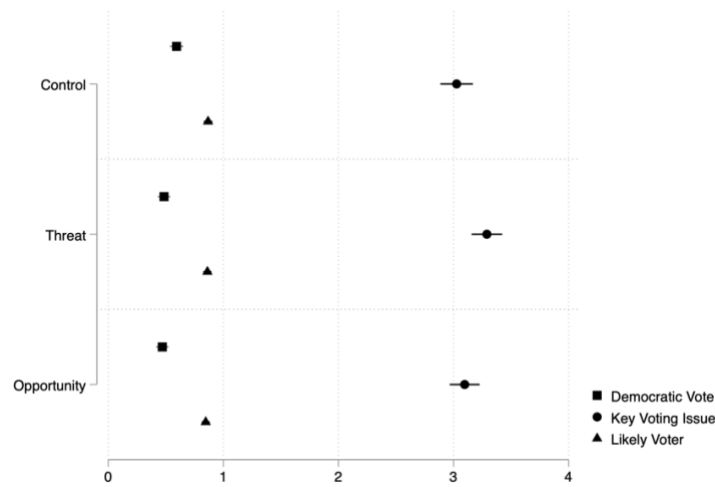
Figure 2. Policy Approval and Evaluations of the ACA by Treatment Group



In terms of voter behavior, the only treatment effects observed are on issue importance (*see Figure 3*). While threat increases importance of the ACA to respondent vote choice, with a difference in the mean effect of the threat treatment relative to the control of 0.26 ($p < 0.02$), both threat and opportunity messaging fail to increase vote preference for Democratic candidates. Together, this provides partial confirmation of H3 in terms of voter behavior being somewhat affected by treatment – however, these results are mixed and require further study. In particular, the lack of relationship across both treatment groups on Democratic vote choice is interesting

given the party’s work to preserve and expand the ACA. One possible explanation is that the ACA has become increasingly de-politicized, so connections that would explain the Democrat’s protection of the ACA when the policy was first enacted are no longer relevant in the post-repeal policy environment. Nevertheless, threat remains a prevailing force in terms of its positive relationship with the behaviors evaluated in this study – at least among those where a statistically significant relationship is observable.

Figure 3. Voter Behavior by Treatment Group



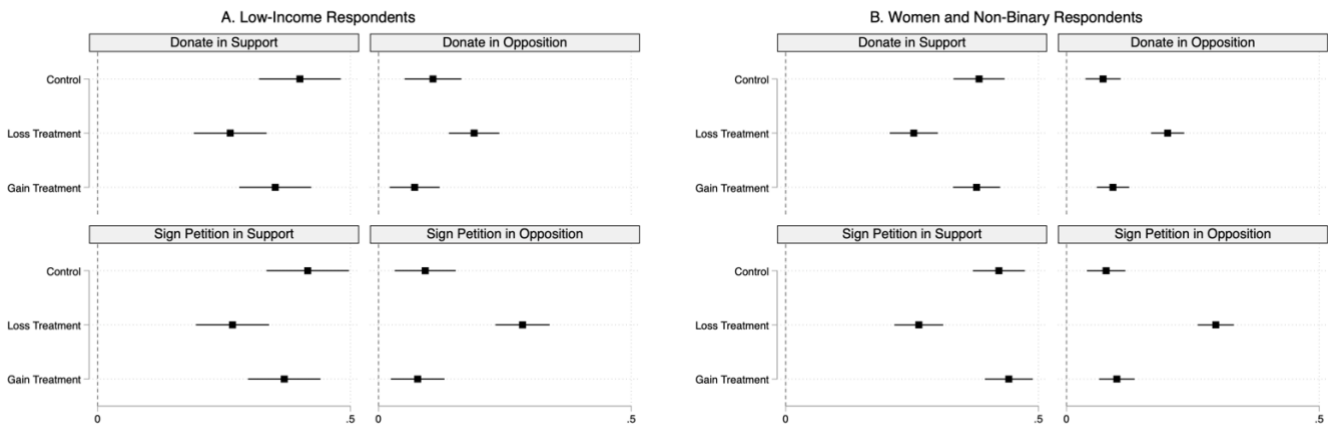
6.2 Impact of Resource Disparity on Political Behaviors

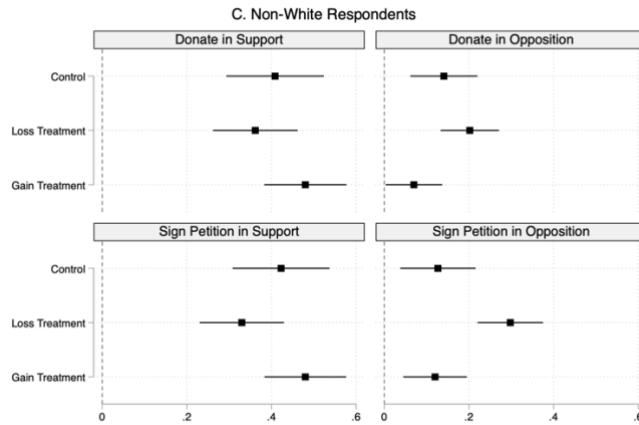
I theorize that low-resourced voters will respond differently to opportunity versus threat messaging, however results suggest the opposite. Rather than opportunity messaging wielding a positive effect on participation, it is actually threat that has a positive – though mixed across behaviors – effect on participation (*see Figure 4*). Women and nonbinary citizens donate in opposition to threatening amendments – that is, spending money to protect against the threat. The difference in mean effect of the threat treatment relative to the control group is 0.13 ($p < 0.000$) among these citizens. They are the only low-resourced group for whom there is an observable,

statistically significant relationship between policy messaging and financial contributions. The only statistically significant effects observed across all low-resourced groups is the effect of threat messaging on signing a petition in opposition to policy threat. The difference in mean effect of the threat treatment relative to the control group in terms of signing a petition in opposition to ACA threat is 0.2 ($p < 0.000$) for low-income respondents, 0.2 ($p < 0.01$) for minority respondents, and 0.22 ($p < 0.000$) for women and non-binary respondents, respectively.

This is perhaps the lowest stakes participatory behavior in terms of the limited resources required to sign, and such findings are unsurprising given that fact. Taken together, however, this evidence suggests that – at least in the case of the ACA – policy opportunity messaging is not a catch-all solution to activate low-resourced groups, who do respond to threat in some circumstances despite evidence in the existing literature of its potentially demobilizing effects.

Figure 4. Participatory Behaviors by Treatment in Low-Resourced Groups





Similar to participation, opportunity does not positively affect likelihood of voting in the next election, the ACA being noted as a key issue determining voter behavior, or likelihood of voting for a Democratic candidate. Threat does, however, increase perceptions of ACA issue importance as a voting issue among non-white citizens and women, alike. The difference in mean effect of the threat treatment relative to the control group in terms of perceptions of ACA issue importance is 0.65 ($p < 0.003$) for minority respondents and 0.3 ($p < 0.02$) for women and non-binary respondents, respectively. However, both threat and opportunity treatments decrease women's intention of voting for Democratic candidates – indicative that women are much more diverse in terms of political views and policy attitudes than other low-resourced groups who rely on the big tent coalition of the Democratic party as a sole source of social benefits. The difference in mean effect of the threat treatment relative to the control group in terms of the likelihood that women and non-binary respondents vote for Democratic candidates is -0.12 ($p < 0.02$). Taken together, these results again indicate mixed support for H4 and H5.

10. Discussion

While threat and opportunity have long been studied as significant predictors of political behavior, the results of this study indicate that – at least in the case of the ACA – threat is a more

effective motivator than opportunity in terms of political behavior. In particular, threat similarly motivates lower resourced citizens – specifically in terms of informal participation outside of the legislative process. Likely voting is not affected by threat nor opportunity, but threat increases participation outside of the electoral system.

A noted limitation of this study’s experimental design is the opportunity treatment. In the early Trump administration, the ACA was discussed as being repealed and replaced rather than improved and expanded on. In this vein, it is possible that the believability of this treatment is diminished relative to the threat treatment given the post-repeal environment that this experiment is fielded in. Nevertheless, using the ACA as a fixture in both treatments allows for closer comparison of ACA-replaced threat and opportunity, rather than comparing more general health policy threats and opportunity.

These findings have several implications for our understanding of policy threat and political behavior. Most notably, educating about policy threat and subsequently offering individuals the opportunity to act in response to threat leads to increased participation even among lower resourced groups. Threat directs people to behaviors that they perceive as most effective for policy outcomes, evident in the increased participation to protect the ACA under conditions of threat. Non-electoral strategies to effect policy change are more favorable than those focused on voting, which is a blunter measure relative to nuanced behaviors such as petition signing and financial contributions to policy and political organizations/candidates. In the frame of interest groups, threat may be considered a tool to active public involvement in interest-driven policy work – a topic that requires further study in future research.

Key Findings, Future Research, and Implications for Policymakers

This project's findings have wide-ranging implications for the existing literatures on political behavior and policy feedback effects, alike, in that they isolate how policy threat can produce feedbacks in the form of behavioral change among the electorate to act in ways that protect their benefits. Despite existing evidence that threat can depress political behavior among low-resourced groups, this study underscores conditions in which the opposite effect can be observed: specifically in instances where individuals are (1) made aware of the threat, and (2) given the opportunity to engage in protective behaviors.

The results of this project collectively support the narrative that threat produces behavioral policy feedbacks in terms of non-electoral political participation, contributing to a burgeoning literature on behavioral feedbacks and their usefulness to policymakers in consideration of mobilization and policy messaging strategies. This project similarly evaluates limits to the generalizability of its own findings, specifically in considering the effect of threat on self-reported beneficiaries and their behaviors. As is demonstrated in paper 2, misreporting of policy benefits as a function of partisan social desirability bias is an important concern when drawing conclusions from results that specifically measure the effect of threat on political behavior among self-reported beneficiaries.

This is notable in comparing the findings of paper 1, which relies on survey self-reports, versus paper 3, which leverages an experimental manipulation to induce threat. In paper 1, benefit threat is shown to have a positive effect on political participation among self-identifying beneficiaries – specifically among those whose self-interest is at odds with their own party (ie. Republican partisans who benefit from the ACA). Moreover, electoral behaviors like voter registration and turnout are similar among beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, though ACA

benefit leads to increased support for Democratic candidates across all voters – including Republicans. In paper 3, I find that exposure to threat messaging also increases non-electoral behaviors to protect against prospective threat. Voting differences, however, are not evident as they are in paper 1 – specifically in threat having no effect on preference for Democratic candidates.

Why do these differences exist, specifically in terms of electoral behaviors? First, these differences could be the result of focusing on individual benefit and self-perceptions of threat in paper 1 versus inducing threat in the treatment group within the experiment leveraged in paper 3, without specifying individual benefit status. Indeed, the experiment isolates the effect of threat on political behavior, whereas the first paper evaluates the interaction between self-reported benefit and threat perception on behaviors. Alternatively, discussion in paper 2 highlights issues with self-reports and offers another perspective on why results tied to electoral outcomes differ across studies: self-reports are not always reliable. Paper 1 relies on behavioral change among self-described ACA beneficiaries in particular, however Republicans are found in paper 2 to be less likely to report ACA benefit. In this frame, the results in paper 1 may simply be built on unreliable data and subsequent estimates of voter behavior. Evidence from paper 3, however, confirms the reliability of findings pertaining to non-electoral behaviors; indicating that further research is necessary to tease out the inconsistencies in voter behavior evident across these two studies.

Given that it is difficult to find accurate, individual-level data on ACA beneficiaries that is not built around self-reports from surveys like the ANES and others, it makes sense given the findings of this project to focus efforts on expanding experimental research to consider the ways in which threat affects all individuals regardless of their personal benefit status. Moreover,

scholars and policymakers, alike, would benefit from investing time and resources into building national datasets similar to existing voter databases that identify policy beneficiaries and allow for matching to political behavior datasets so that future research can better trace the impacts of threat among these populations specifically. This has the dual effect of improving reliability of results in studies that examine the impact of threat on political behavior and the scope of those behavioral policy feedbacks, while also tracing the implications of these behaviors for future policy change with consideration for how individuals can gain and lose benefits over time.

Since the ACA has now faced and overcome the threat of repeal head-on, with wide-ranging behavioral impacts among voters of all partisan leanings as is demonstrated by this project, it is reasonable to expect that the policy is unlikely to face another similar challenge as it did in 2017. Future research stemming from this project should therefore evaluate its findings along the backdrop of other policy issues. Though I argue that the ACA is a unique policy issue for a myriad of reasons, examining which strategies work to mobilize individuals in the face of threats against other policies will further enhance the literature on behavioral policy feedbacks – which largely focuses on attitudinal change rather than protective mobilization.

Aside from the implications of this project from a scholarly perspective, there are actionable takeaways relevant to policymakers and campaign professionals, alike. Namely, that this is largely a non-electoral story. Non-electoral mobilization is a much more attainable goal than electoral mobilization in the face of policy threat. Whether or not this is portable to other policy areas warrants additional study in future scholarship, however making people aware of threat – and offering them an opportunity to act on that threat – is an incredibly effective mobilizing tool that works across all groups, regardless of resource disparities that have typically limited the political ability of low-income and non-white citizens. If policymakers aim to protect

other policies against threat of repeal, they cannot reliably focus on turning out more voters and should instead shift their focus to non-electoral strategies that can shift the policy narrative in their favor. This is of particular benefit because, unlike the blunt force of voting and elections, non-electoral participation is a constant tool that can be employed at any time. Considering that the threat of ACA repeal took place in the first year of the Trump administration, more than a year out from the 2018 elections, non-electoral strategies were the only option available to actively combat the threat of repeal at the time. Despite continuing advocacy for getting out the vote – and the merits of increasing voter registration and turnout – this project ultimately underscores the importance of leveraging other, non-electoral participatory behaviors under conditions of policy threat to mobilize and protect against it.

Appendix

A. Experimental Treatments and Post-Treatment Questions

Figure 1. Neutral Control

AP

Associated Press -- For Immediate Release
Washington, DC

SENATE COMMITTEE OVERSEES CONGRESSIONAL POLICY MAINTENANCE

Passed in 2010, the Affordable Care Act has been maintained via regular appropriations since it was signed into law.

This week, the Senate Finance Committee is discussing the latest of these budget appropriations for the ACA similar to amendments passed under previous administrations.

These actions are part of regular business to help maintain the policy and are similar to maintenance that occurs for other policies after they have passed, ensuring they continue to operate effectively and efficiently, and ensures adequate appropriations to that effect.

Coverage of this developing story will continue this week while Congress is in session.

Figure 2. Threat Treatment

AP

Associated Press -- For Immediate Release
Washington, DC

THREAT OF ACA REPEAL LOOMS, MILLIONS COULD LOSE INSURANCE

Passed in 2010, the Affordable Care Act has been under threat since it was signed into law. This week, legislators are debating a new amendment to the ACA which would gut its protections for pre-existing conditions, threatening insurance coverage for millions of Americans.

For many Americans, the threat of insurance loss means higher medical bills and decreased access to necessary care, which could result in bankruptcy or even death for those who lose their insurance or access to coverage for necessary treatment covered by ACA protections.

This news affects all Americans - not just those who purchase their insurance on the Marketplace. Congressional action to gut the ACA would leave millions scrambling for insurance and threatened by a loss of protections for things like pre-existing conditions regardless of their source of coverage.

Coverage of this developing story will continue this week while Congress is in session.

Figure 3. Opportunity Treatment



Associated Press -- For Immediate Release
Washington, DC

NEW POLICY OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACA GROWTH, MILLIONS COULD BENEFIT

Passed in 2010, the Affordable Care Act has presented new opportunities to expand coverage since it was signed into law. This week, legislators are debating a new amendment to the ACA which would lay the groundwork for additional, new opportunities to increase insurance access to produce new gains in coverage across the country.

These opportunities for expansion could mean increased access to health care, keeping more money in the pockets of Americans, and allowing them to spend more on things that matter to them and their families.

These policy opportunities will benefit all Americans - not just those who purchase their insurance on the Marketplace. New gains under the ACA are possible given new discussion arising in Congress to improve access to insurance and quality health care, including coverage for those with pre-existing conditions regardless of how they get their health insurance.

Coverage of this developing story will continue this week while Congress is in session.

Post-Treatment Measures

Given the news article you just read about the ACA, would you request more information about the proposed amendment to the ACA?

Response options:

- *Yes*
- *No*
- *Maybe*

Given the news article you just read about the ACA, would you sign a petition about the proposed amendment to the ACA?

Response options:

- *Yes, in support of the amendment*
- *Yes, in opposition to the amendment*
- *I would not sign a petition either way*

Given the news article you just read about the ACA, would you donate to an organization regarding the proposed amendment to the ACA?

Response options:

- *Yes, in support of the amendment*
- *Yes, in opposition to the amendment*
- *I would not donate either way*

You indicated that you would make a financial contribution in light of news on the proposed ACA amendment. How much would you donate?

Do you intend to vote in the 2022 midterm elections?

Response options:

- *Yes*
- *No*
- *Maybe*

You indicated that you are likely to vote in the 2022 midterm elections. What party do you plan to support in that election?

Response options:

- *Democratic*
- *Republican*
- *Independent*

How important is the proposed ACA amendment to your vote choice in the 2022 midterm election?

Response options:

- *Extremely important*
- *Very important*
- *Moderately important*
- *Slightly important*
- *Not at all important*

How much do you approve or disapprove of the Affordable Care Act (ACA)?

Response options:

- *Strongly approve*
- *Generally approve*
- *Neither approve nor disapprove*
- *Generally disapprove*
- *Strongly disapprove*

How effective do you believe the ACA has been at improving coverage for pre-existing conditions?

Response options:

- *Extremely effective*
- *Very effective*
- *Moderately effective*
- *Slightly effective*
- *Not at all effective*

How effective has the ACA been at helping your own family afford health insurance?

Response options:

- *Extremely effective*

- *Very effective*
- *Moderately effective*
- *Slightly effective*
- *Not at all effective*

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