

FUNHOUSE MIRRORS:
DO POLLS REFLECT PUBLIC OPINION OR REFRACT DEMOCRACY?

A Thesis
by
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ABSTRACT

FUNHOUSE MIRRORS: DO POLLS REFLECT PUBLIC OPINION OR REFRACT DEMOCRACY?

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The news media's dissemination of public opinion polls has increased exponentially over the past decade. While most citizens treat polls as reliable sources of information upon which to base their political decisions, political scientists have decried polls as plagued by inaccuracies and biases. This paper investigates the impact of what is known as the "bandwagon effect," the tendency for people to modify their beliefs in order to conform to the majority opinion presented by a poll. Drawing from social identity theory and self-categorization theory, I hypothesize that the bandwagon effect impacts those individuals who seek to enhance their connection to their national and political groups. I further hypothesize that the strength of group opinion moderates the impact of the bandwagon effect. With three unique experiments, I find that social identity does, in fact, moderate the impact of bandwagon effect. Self-identified political partisans change their attitudes to conform to those of their fellow Republicans or Democrats. Interestingly, Americans do not change their attitudes to conform to the opinions of their fellow Americans. I also find that the strength of group opinion does not moderate the impact of the bandwagon effect, and that people who change their attitudes are unaware of the influence of the opinion poll.

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INTRODUCTION

During a March 2010 episode of *The Colbert Report*, comedian Stephen Colbert used a meat grinder to describe the production and distribution of public opinion polls. Like unprocessed meat that is stuffed into intestinal tubing, Colbert claimed, public opinion is “neatly packaged for consumption” by “truth grinders” who “boil down public opinion to authoritative sounding numbers.” He then selected a few choice links and fed them back into the grinder to illustrate how pundits and partisan media outlets “select those results that support (their) opinions, then...go on T.V. to tell you how you feel, which you feed back into the next poll.” He concluded: “You (the public) jam the previous opinions (they have) told you about back into the circle...and eventually there is just one opinion feeding back on itself” (Colbert, 2010).

Far more than meaty fodder for late night comedy bits, the notion that polling data influences the political opinions of the public has long been debated by political scientists. In 1945, Bernays described what he labeled the “bandwagon effect,” as the tendency for people to modify their beliefs in order to conform to the majority opinion presented by a poll (1945). Considering the exponential rise in the news media’s use of public opinion polls since the mid-1990s (Igo, 2007; Streb & Genovese, 2004; Shiraev & Sobel, 2006), and the emergence of decidedly partisan news pundits and media outlets (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009) that can pick and choose which polls to present, a thorough analysis of the bandwagon effect has never been more needed. In the following, I discuss the theoretical background of the bandwagon effect, explore the literature on the psychological mechanisms that may

underlie the bandwagon effect, including social identity theory and self-categorization theory, and detail the results of three unique experiments on the bandwagon effect's impact on public opinion regarding political issues. I find strong evidence that the bandwagon effect does impact individual opinion, but only when an individual receives polling data that reflects the opinion of his or her self-identified political party. In other words, people change their positions on political issues in order to conform to the reported opinions of their fellow Republicans or Democrats.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Polls as “Heuristics” and Their Potential Effects

Research has consistently demonstrated that Americans lack basic knowledge about both their political leaders and their political system (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Zaller, 1992). In order to overcome this lack of knowledge, citizens rely on shortcuts, or heuristics, to make voting decisions and form positions on political issues (Bartels, 2008; Lupia, 1994; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Mutz, 1992; Popkin, 1991). Common heuristics include party affiliation (Lodge & Hamill, 1986; Rahn, 1993), ideology (Conover & Feldman, 1986), and the endorsements of political elites, members of the media, and interest organizations (Carmines & Kuklinski, 1990; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). As the primary provider of heuristic cues to a public that often finds itself far removed from day to day politics, the media play a tremendous role in shaping the perceptions of the public (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). In this context, the media’s presentation of opinion polls provides citizens with their primary means of conceptualizing public opinion. Researchers have demonstrated that citizens often use poll results as heuristics to make political decisions (Bartels, 1988; Ceci & Kain, 1982; Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2002; Mutz, 1992). In fact, Lau and Redlawsk (2001) list public opinion polls as one of the five most commonly used political heuristics.

However, because of the tendency for political elites and the media to manipulate polling data by asking leading questions or cherry picking which polls to disseminate, political scholars have long worried about the harmful effects that public opinion polls may have on democracy (Jacobs & Shapiro, 1995-96; Lippman, 1925; Polsby & Wildavsky,

1980; West, 1991). As far back as 1945, Bernays railed against the less-than-savory tactics employed by pollsters. Claiming that the public and many political leaders accept polls as “the voice of God and the will of the people,” he argued that opinion polls often stand-in for true democracy, quieting dissenting voices, curtailing open discussion, and cutting off opportunities for compromise (Bernays, p. 264). Recent studies of the polls currently presented by the media do little to quiet the fears of earlier scholars. These studies have shown, consistently, that the media tend to make poll results appear overly precise and scientific when they are often plagued by inaccuracies or biases (Franklin, 2003; Herbst, 1993; Igo, 2007; Jackman, 2005; Lau, 1994).

An example from early 2010 illustrates the potential danger of the media’s less-than-rigorous dissemination of polling numbers. As a heated debate raged in Congress over the Democrats’ proposed health care reform bill, pollsters bombarded the public. When posed as “Obamacare” in opinion surveys, the legislation was soundly rejected by the American public. However, key individual provisions of the bill received strong support from the American public. According to a *Newsweek* poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International in February of 2010, 76% of Americans believed that insurance companies should be prohibited from denying coverage to patients with pre-existing conditions; 59% believed that lower and lower-middle class Americans deserved some form of government-subsidized health insurance; and 59% believed that insurance companies should be prohibited from dropping patients who had become economic liabilities. Even the most vilified of the legislation’s proposals, the inclusion of a public option that would allow citizens to purchase health insurance directly from the government, received the support of 50% of Americans (Teixeira, 2010). Yet the majority of polling numbers broadcast by the

media highlighted one devastating number: 49% of Americans disapproved of “Obamacare.” Fox News reported the number at 55% (Blanton, 2010). Thus the polling information disseminated to the public reflected public opinion on the health care bill no more accurately than a funhouse mirror. Most citizens went about their daily business believing that most other citizens opposed the new health care law. Did the public respond to opinion poll reports in the manner described by Colbert? That is, did citizens “jump on the bandwagon” and amend their initial positions to conform to those supposedly held by the majority of the public? The polls may not have accurately reflected opinion, but did they refract it? If so, whose opinions did they refract?

The Bandwagon Effect on the Voting Decision

Unfortunately, much of the research on what Bernays labeled the “bandwagon effect” has focused on the impact of opinion polls on citizens’ voting decisions, rather than their political attitudes, and has returned mixed results. In 1962, for example, Dizney and Roskens conducted the first experimental test of the bandwagon effect’s influence on voting behavior. In a mock election, the researchers asked respondents to vote for a candidate (Kennedy or Nixon) with no information other than manipulated poll results. The experiment found no evidence of the bandwagon effect (Dizney & Roskens, 1962). Over the following two decades, a variety of researchers ran similar experiments and returned the same null results (Cantril, 1980; Fleitas, 1971; Laponce, 1966; Navazio, 1977; Tyson & Kaplowitz, 1977). Quasi-experimental tests (Fuchs, 1966; Lang & Lang, 1968; Mendehlson, 1966; Tuchman & Coffin, 1972) as well as non-experimental approaches (Teer & Spence, 1973; Beniger, 1976; and Johnston, 1990) also reached the same conclusion. In the 1980s, however, four studies indicated some support for the bandwagon effect in electoral scenarios (Bartels, 1985, 1987,

1988; Skalaban, 1988). Since then, researchers have also shown that polls have statistically significant effects on the preferences of primary voters (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994) and on public perceptions of a candidate's character (Hardy & Jamieson, 2005).

The Bandwagon Effect on Public Policy Preferences

Curiously, despite Bernays' initial warning that polling numbers affect attitudes, political scientists continue to focus on their effects on voting behavior. This persistent focus on the electoral effects of polls ignores the effect of public opinion on public policy *independent* of the voting context. In their foundational work on the issue, Page and Shapiro (1983) point to a multitude of instances in which an overwhelming change in public opinion led directly to sweeping policy changes. Among others, public support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 increased from 54% to 66% prior to the passage of the legislation. Public support for a woman's right to choose increased 32% from December of 1965 to April of 1972 when the Supreme Court handed down its decision on *Roe v. Wade*. Likewise, public support for admitting China to the United Nations Security Council rose 33% from 1964 to 1971, when President Nixon dramatically changed the nation's foreign policy stance toward China. "When Americans' policy preferences shift," Page and Shapiro concluded, "it is likely that congruent changes (in policy) follow" (p. 175).

Echoing the findings of Page and Shapiro (1983), Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995) asserted that policy responds "drastically" to changes in public opinion. Wlezien (1996) declared that research reveals a clear linkage between changes in public preference and changes in public policy. Hays, Esler, and Hays (1996) found that state environmental regulation is "quite responsive" to public opinion. Erickson, Wright, and McIver (1993) went a bit further and called the correlation between opinion and policy in the American system

“awesome.” In a definitive study that examined public opinion and policy data for the United States from 1935-1975, Burstein (2003) found that three-quarters of the relationships between opinion and policy were statistically significant, leading him to declare that “far more than just a linkage exists—policy is affected by opinion most of the time” (Burstein, 34).

Of course, public opinion does not translate into public policy without the actions of political elites. Once politicians sense a change in public opinion, they adjust their policy positions accordingly in order to increase their chances of reelection, a phenomenon known as “rational anticipation” (Stimson, 1999; Stimson, MacKuen, & Erickson, 1995). Thus, politicians constantly seek data on public opinion in order to fully understand the shifting moods of the electorate (Entman, 2004; Stimson, Mackuen, & Erickson, 1995). Politicians rely on a number of sources for information on the public mood, including lobbyists, interest groups, and constituent contacts (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, & Leech, 2009; Wright, 2003), but no sources are more accessible or more widely used than public opinion polls (Herbst, 1998; Klotzer, 2008; Monroe, 1998; Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987). In the 21st century, Americans are now, more than ever, bombarded by polling data compiled and presented by groups with a vast array of motivations. If the bandwagon effect is, indeed, a viable phenomenon, then it affects not only public opinion but also policymakers’ perceptions of public opinion. Thus, considering the strong linkage between public opinion and public policy, the impact of polling data on public opinion certainly deserves more rigorous inspection.

Presently, however, only a handful of studies have focused on the bandwagon effect in the context of public policy preferences. In an experiment that presented respondents with

manipulated polling data about political issues (abortion rights and the constitutional future of Quebec) rather than political candidates, researchers found strong support for the bandwagon effect (Cloutier, Guay, & Nadeau, 1993). Even though respondents held crystallized opinions about abortion and few opinions about the constitutional issue, the bandwagon effect had a similar influence on both. Polarization increased 7% in the direction of the experimental stimulus on the former and 5% on the latter. Another study, conducted in Belgium in 2010, tested the impact of the bandwagon effect across five non-electoral issues. The researchers found that while polling information did affect perceptions of collective opinion, personal opinions on political issues remained unaffected (Sonck & Loosveldt, 2010).

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

As is the case with much political science, the results of the studies on the bandwagon effect remain inconclusive. The reconciliation of the divergent conclusions from the Canadian and Belgium studies may provide a clue to the psychological mechanisms underlying the bandwagon effect. In other words, we must ask ourselves, how and when might the bandwagon effect impact public opinion?

If citizens do, in fact, alter their positions on political issues to conform to the opinion of the perceived majority—that is, if they experience the bandwagon effect—they do so out of a desire to conform. Social identity and self-categorization theorists posit that the benefits of identifying with a certain group often motivate individuals to change their beliefs or behaviors in order to conform to group norms (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The act of joining a specific group allows an individual to forge an identity based on solidarity rather than alienation (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). The act of conforming to that group’s social norms—including its political beliefs—produces positive emotions, including an increase in self-esteem, a feeling of belonging, and a sense of meaning in an otherwise meaningless world (Christiansen, Rothberger, & Wood, 2004; Terry & Hogg, 1996; Terry, Hogg, & Duck, 1999; Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999; Wellen, Hogg, & Terry, 1998).

In terms of bandwagon effect, then, individuals who identify with a certain group will modify their beliefs to conform to those of the group in order to bolster their feelings of social meaning. As Cohen (2003) claims: often, “social meaning is not inferred but

transmitted. It is defined by the judgments of other individuals who are trusted to share one's moral allegiances" (p. 809). In light of this, the seemingly contradictory findings of the Canadian and Belgium studies are not contradictory at all. Whereas the Canadian study presented subjects with the opinions of "fellow Canadians," the Belgium study presented subjects with the opinions of "others." In other words, the opinion polls presented in Canadian study primed subjects to consider their social identity, while those in the Belgium study did not. Thus, taken together, the two studies lend support for the notion that the bandwagon effect is moderated by social identity.

Studies of the effects of social identity on attitudes have illuminated a few key points as to how it works. First, the attitude issue in question must be salient to an individual's group (e.g., one's political affiliation would not affect evaluations of which film should win the Academy Award) (Cohen, 2003). Second, the degree to which an individual identifies with a group moderates the extent of that individual's attitude conformity—high group identifiers are more likely to change their initial beliefs than low group identifiers (Christiansen et al., 2004). Third, because most people believe that they base their decisions on objective analysis of the salient facts of an issue (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002), they are unaware of the influence of groups (Cohen, 2003). No studies, however, have tested these findings in the specific context of the bandwagon effect and opinion polls. Thus, I offer the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Americans will modify their positions on a political issue to coincide with the positions of a majority of fellow Americans.

Of course, in today's American political environment, no group identity is more salient to an individual's evaluation of political issues than his or her political party

identification. Research has revealed that the American electorate has recently become more polarized across a range of social, economic, and moral issues than at point since the 1950s (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Brewer, 2005; Jacobson, 2011). In fact, during the 2000 and 2004 elections, self-identified partisans remained faithful to their parties to a greater extent than during any other elections in history, and Republicans and Democrats remain consistently far apart in their evaluations of both President George W. Bush and President Obama (Jacobson, 2011; Jones, 2010). The research linking partisanship to social identity is both copious and clear. Conover and Feldman (1981), claim that individuals choose their partisanship and ideology *before* making decisions on political issues. Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, and Ethier (1995) claim that we should “expect predictions from social identity theory to be most applicable to ethnic, religious, [and] political” identities (p. 286). With a unique experiment, Hartman and Weber (2009) demonstrate that an individual’s ideological identification moderates his or her evaluation of political issues, leading them to conclude that “simply knowing how a fellow partisan stands on a political issue is often sufficient in forming a belief” (p. 540). If social identity does moderate the impact of the bandwagon effect, polls reporting the opinions of partisans should influence the attitudes of fellow partisans and have little effect on the attitudes of political independents.

Thus, I offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: Self-identified partisans will modify their positions on a political issue to coincide with the positions of a majority of their fellow partisans.

Hypothesis 2a. Self-identified independents will not modify their positions on a political issue to coincide with the positions of self-identified partisans.

Additionally, no studies have tested whether or not the magnitude of a group's support or opposition for an issue impacts the extent of attitude change. However, it is reasonable to assume that as group opinion grows more uniform, a group member will experience greater social pressure to conform. Thus:

Hypothesis 3: Group members will modify their positions on political issues to a greater extent when group opinion is strong rather than weak.

Finally, because research has shown that people are often unaware of the influence of group cues on their decisions (Cohen, 2003), I suspect that individuals do not realize that they use opinion polls as group-cues, or heuristics, for making political decisions . In other words:

Hypothesis 4: Group members who modify their positions to conform to group opinion will not recognize the impact of group opinion on their beliefs.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH AND RESULTS

Study 1

Data

A total of 230 subjects were recruited on-line via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which is a web-based platform that allows researchers to pay subjects a nominal fee to perform basic tasks (for a more detailed description of this type of sample, see Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2010; Paolacci & Ipeirotis, 2010). As with other web-based samples, the data are skewed toward younger, White, liberal, Democratic respondents. Fifty-five percent of subjects were male, and ages ranged from 18 to 75 years old (median age = 31 years old). Eighty-five percent of respondents identified their race as White, 6% as Asian, 4% as African American, 4% as Latino, and the remaining subjects selected "Other." Thirty-nine percent identified themselves as Democrats, 17% as Republicans, and 46% as Independents. A 5-point measure of ideological orientation revealed that 42% of the sample held liberal views, 41% moderate views, and 17% conservative views. Forty-eight percent of subjects reported that they had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. The sample includes respondents from 42 states and the District of Columbia.

Procedure

To test the effects of opinion polls on policy attitudes, I employed a between-subjects design, in which participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions. First, all subjects were asked to read a fictional news article about the Trans-

Pacific Partnership (TPP), which is a multilateral free trade agreement between the U.S. and nine other Asian-Pacific countries (for the exact wording, see Appendix A). After reading a brief description of the TPP, subjects then read a series of arguments for and against the plan with the purpose of minimizing the ideological appeal of either side. In addition, the article highlighted the Congressional intra-party disagreement over the TPP, thus preventing subjects from deriving any party-based cues from the text. The first five paragraphs of the article were the same across all experimental groups; the sixth paragraph contained the key experimental manipulation describing the results of a recently conducted public opinion poll along with a graphical depiction of those results (except for those in the control condition).

The key experimental manipulation concerned the extent to which fellow Americans supported the TPP (e.g., a “slight majority,” or 54%, vs. a “large majority,” or 76%). After subjects in the treatment groups viewed the polling information, they completed a brief post-article questionnaire designed to assess their support for the proposed free trade agreement. Subjects then answered a series of demographic questions regarding their age, gender, race, and citizenship status. Finally, they answered eight items designed to assess their political knowledge.

Measures

Dependent variable. The primary dependent variable is a three-item scale created to gauge subjects’ attitudes toward the TPP. Subjects were asked: “Do you support or oppose the United States joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership?” The two remaining scale items were anchored by the following endpoints: 1) “very good idea” and “very bad idea,” and 2) “very positive” and “very negative.” The first item was measured on a five-point scale, and the two follow-up items were measured on seven-point scales. This created a composite index that

could range from 3 (very negative attitudes toward the U.S. joining the TPP) to 19 (very positive attitudes). For ease of interpretation, the resulting variable was then rescaled from 0 to 1 ($\alpha = 0.94$, $M = 0.52$, $SD = 0.23$), as were all independent variables (except for age).

Independent variables. Subjects' self-reported partisanship and ideology were measured using 5-point scales (1 = strong Republicans; 1 = very conservative). Political knowledge was measured using eight general knowledge questions about politics (KR-20 = 0.77, $M = 0.65$, $SD = 0.28$). I also control for education (1=graduate degree), age, gender (1=female), and race (1= non-White).

Results

To test whether Americans respond to polling information from fellow Americans and whether these attitudes vary as a function of the size of the majority, I regressed support for the TPP on two experimental treatment dummy variables—respondents who received the poll that a slight majority (54%) of American support the TPP and the poll condition that a large majority (76%) of American support the TPP (the no-poll control condition serves as the reference category)—as well as my control variables. Looking at Table 1, I find no evidence of a bandwagon effect for either the slight majority condition ($b = 0.00$, $s.e. = 0.04$, $p > 0.95$) or the large majority condition ($b = 0.03$, $s.e. = 0.04$, $p > 0.40$). These null results reveal that the bandwagon effect does not seem to work for a large social group like Americans, nor does it matter whether the majority in support of the issue is slight or large. It is interesting that, unlike in the Canadian study (Clautier, Guay, & Nadeau, 1993), nationalist source cues were not enough to activate the bandwagon effect. This may be due to the relative homogeneity of the Canadian population as compared to that of the United States. In

other words, Canadian subjects may feel less social distance between themselves and “all Canadians” than American subjects feel between themselves and “all Americans.”

Study 2

Study 1 allowed me to test the general bandwagon effect for a trade issue and a large social group such as Americans. However, polling information is often presented with more cohesive and politically relevant social groups such as Democrats and Republicans. Because I found no support for the bandwagon effect in the “Americans support” poll conditions in Study 1, I replaced those conditions with partisan support poll conditions in Study 2. This provided tests of hypothesis 2, that partisans will change their issue attitudes to conform to the attitudes of majority of their fellow partisans, and hypothesis 2a, that independents would not change their issue attitudes to conform to those of any partisan group. By splitting the partisan support poll conditions into two groups—one in which subjects received the opinions of a slight majority of partisans, and one in which subjects received the opinions of a strong majority of partisans—Study 2 also provided a test of hypothesis 3, that the strength of group opinion moderates the impact of the bandwagon effect.

Data

A total of 302 adult subjects were recruited on-line via MTurk. Fifty-nine percent of subjects were male, and ages ranged from 18 to 83 years old (median age = 28 years old). Eighty-three percent of respondents identified their race as White, 8% as Asian, 4% as African American, 3% as Latino, and the remaining subjects selected “Other.” Thirty-eight percent identified themselves as Democrats, 20% as Republicans, and 42% as Independents. Similarly, 46% of the sample held liberal views, 34% moderate views, and 20% conservative

views. Forty-one percent of subjects reported that they had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. The sample includes respondents from 43 states (including the District of Columbia).

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four fictional news articles about the TPP (for the exact wording, see Appendix A). As in Study 1, the key experimental manipulation concerned the extent to which partisans (Democrats vs. Republicans) supported the TPP (e.g., a “slight majority,” or 54%, vs. a “large majority,” or 76%). After subjects in the treatment groups viewed the polling information, they completed a brief post-article questionnaire assessing their support for the proposed free trade agreement, as well as some demographic questions and political knowledge items.

Measures

Dependent variable. I used the same three-item dependent variable from Study 1. For ease of interpretation, the resulting variable was then rescaled from 0 to 1 ($\alpha = 0.94$, $M = 0.56$, $SD = 0.21$), as were all independent variables (except for age).

Independent variables. First, I created a social identity “match” dummy variable, which takes a value of 1 when there is a match between the partisan polling information and subjects' self-reported party identification. For example, a self-identified Democrat who received the polling information that Democrats supported the TPP would be assigned a value of 1. Mismatches serve as the reference category, which includes all self-identified Independents, since they never received a matching poll. Second, I created a dummy variable for the size of the partisan majority, for which a large majority (76%) was assigned a value of 1, and the slight majority (54%) serves as the reference category.

As in Study 1, the models also include the same set of control variables: party identification (1 = strong Republicans), ideology (1 = very conservative), political knowledge (1 = high knowledge; KR-20 = 0.74, $M = 0.64$, $SD = 0.27$), education (1=graduate degree), age, gender (1=female), and race (1= non-White).

Results

To begin, I test the general partisan bandwagon effect by regressing support for the TPP on the partisan match dummy variable, as well as a set of control variables. Looking at Column 1, Table 2, I find a significant main effect for the match variable ($b = 0.05$, $s.e. = 0.03$, $p < 0.05$), such that being in the matching poll condition increases support for the TPP. In other words, Democrats and Republicans were significantly swayed by the partisan source cues presented by the opinion polls.

Next, I test whether the partisan polling bandwagon effect varies as a function of the size of the in-group majority. To this end, I regressed support for the TPP on the partisan match and size of majority dummy variables, as well as their interaction and a set of control variables. A significant interaction would indicate that the size of the in-group majority does in fact moderate the social identity matching effect. Looking at the results presented in Column 2, Table 2, I find no evidence that the size of the in-group majority moderates the partisan bandwagon effect ($b = 0.07$, $s.e. = 0.05$, $p > 0.20$). This suggests that while partisans follow their group on political issues, the size of the majority is unimportant.

Interestingly, respondents appear completely unaware of the influence of partisan group cues from the public opinions polls. When asked to “briefly describe the most important reason why [they] believe that Congress should support or oppose the Trans-Pacific Partnership,” only one of the 302 subjects acknowledged the influence of the opinion

poll stating: “I’m just so strongly inclined to agree with Democratic beliefs.” Each of the remaining respondents claimed that his or her decision to support or oppose the TPP was based on some aspect of the arguments presented in the article. Thus, it is clear that the bandwagon effect went unnoticed by the vast majority of subjects.

Study 3

While Study 1 and Study 2 allowed me to test a number of hypotheses regarding the bandwagon effect’s impact on public opinion, their somewhat complex designs ultimately undermined the statistical power of their results. Thus, I designed Study 3 as a more streamlined version of the experiment. As in Study 2, I eliminated the two “Americans support” conditions because the opinions of Americans elicited no bandwagon effect in Study 1. I also eliminated the “slight support” conditions from both the Republican and Democrat support polls as the strength of the opinion polls had no statistical impact on the bandwagon effect in Study 2 (hypothesis 3). Thus, Study 3 provided a streamlined and statistically powerful version of the previous studies, designed to replicate the findings of Study 2.

Data

A total of 461 subjects were recruited on-line via MTurk. Fifty-seven percent of subjects were male, and ages ranged from 19 to 75 years old (median age = 29 years old). Eighty-three percent identified their ethnicity as White, 7% as Asian, 4% as African American, 4% as Latino, and 1% as “Other.” Thirty-nine percent identified themselves as Democrats, 16% as Republicans, and 45% as Independents, while 48% of the sample held liberal views, 35% moderate views, and 18% conservative views. Twelve percent of subjects reported that high school was the highest level of education they had completed, while 41%

had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. The sample includes respondents from 49 states (with the exception of Alaska) and the District of Columbia. In short, the demographic characteristics of the pool of subjects for Study 3 nearly mirrored that of the pools for Study 1 and Study 2.

Procedure

Because the size of the in-group majority did not moderate the bandwagon effect, subjects were randomly assigned to read one of three versions of the fictional TPP news article: 1) The “Democrat” polling condition shows that a majority (74%) of Democrats support the U.S. plan to join the TPP, while a majority of Republicans (71%) oppose it; 2) the “Republican” polling condition shows that a majority (74%) of Republicans support the US plan to join the TPP while a majority of Democrats (71%) do not; and 3) the control condition did not provide any polling information. After subjects viewed the polling information, they completed a post-article questionnaire nearly identical to that of Studies 1 and 2.

Measures

Dependent variable. I used the same three-item dependent variable from Study 1, with the exception that the support for TPP item was presented on a seven-point scale. For ease of interpretation, the resulting variable was then rescaled from 0 to 1 ($\alpha = 0.95$, $M = 0.53$, $SD = 0.24$), as were all independent variables (except for age).

Independent variables. As an alternative measure of social identity, I created a differenced feeling thermometer rating toward the parties (each on a scale from 0 to 10), so that positive scores indicated favorable responses toward Republicans. The resulting variable

was recoded from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating extremely favorable feelings toward Republicans. This measure should provide a more nuanced assessment of subjects' partisanship.

As in Studies 1 and 2, the models also include the same set of control variables: party identification (1 = strong Republicans), ideology (1 = very conservative), political knowledge (1 = high knowledge; KR-20 = 0.73, $M = 0.66$, $SD = 0.27$), education (1=graduate degree), age, gender (1=female), and race (1= non-White).

Results

To test whether partisan source cues moderate the polling bandwagon effect, I regressed support for the TPP on the poll condition dummy variables (the Democratic poll condition serves as the reference category), social identification—either party identification (Model 1) or feeling thermometer ratings (Model 2)— as well as the interactions of poll conditions and social identification, plus demographic control variables. A significant interaction would indicate that there is a partisan bandwagon effect. Looking at the results presented in Column 1, Table 3, I find a significant interaction for self-identified partisans in the Republican poll condition, $b = 0.45$, $s.e. = 0.14$, $p < 0.01$, as well as a marginally significant interaction for those in the control condition, $b = 0.25$, $s.e. = 0.13$, $p < 0.10$. When substituting the differenced feeling thermometer ratings for party identification, the results remain robust: The results presented in Column 2, Table 3 reveal significant interactions for those in the Republican poll condition, $b = 0.53$, $s.e. = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$, as well as a marginally significant interaction for those in the control condition, $b = 0.35$, $s.e. = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$.

To explicate these results further, I calculated predicted values of support for the TPP by poll condition and party identification (see Table 4) and differenced feeling thermometer ratings (see Table 5). Figure 1 (TPP support by poll condition and party identification) and

figure 2 (TPP support by poll condition and differenced feeling thermometer ratings) visually illustrate my findings. Perhaps the most interesting result of the analysis is that, for both Democrats and Republicans, nearly all of the statistical power of the bandwagon effect is in the negative direction—that is, partisans appear to be “jumping off” the bandwagon when their preferred group does not support the issue. In order to test the directionality of the bandwagon effect, I conducted simple slope analyses on the results of both models. For Republicans, there are no significant differences in the predicted values of TPP support between the Republican Poll and control conditions in either model (in Model 1, $p > 0.30$; in Model 2, $p > 0.30$). However, when there is a mismatch in social identity, there are significant differences between the Democratic Poll and control conditions (in Model 1, $p < 0.05$; in Model 2, $p < 0.01$), and the Republican Poll and Democratic Poll conditions (in Model 1, $p < 0.01$; in Model 2, $p < 0.01$).

Likewise, for Democrats, there are no significant differences in the predicted values of supporting the TPP between the Democratic Poll and control conditions (in Model 1 $p > 0.20$; in Model 2, a marginally significant difference of $p < 0.10$ exists). Once again, however, when there is a social identity mismatch, there are significant differences between the Republican Poll and control conditions (in Model 1 $p < 0.01$; in Model 2, $p < 0.001$). These results suggest that partisans are much more susceptible to source cues in opinion polls showing that their *out-group supports* an issue and their in-group opposes it than if their in-group supports a measure and their out-group opposes it. In other words, partisans are much more likely to jump off the bandwagon with their fellow partisans to oppose a measure than to jump on the bandwagon with their fellow partisans to support it.

Once again, respondents are completely unaware of the influence of partisan group cues provided by public opinion polls. Only two of the 461 subjects acknowledged any influence of the polling information on their political attitudes. One declared: “It must be a good idea to join it if Republicans oppose it;” the other claimed: “Because only 29% of the Republicans want it. I agree with the 71% of Republicans who oppose. So I oppose, too.” Similar to the Study 2, each of the remaining respondents claimed that his or her decision to support or oppose the TPP was based on some aspect of the arguments presented in the article. Thus, Study 2 provides clear support for the hypothesis that, while people often base their political attitudes on the reported attitudes of like-minded others, they do not recognize that they do so. In other words, people believe that they form attitudes based on logical reasoning when, in fact, they form attitudes based on their need to reinforce their own social identities. Combined, the results of both studies show that only 0.3% of subjects recognize the impact of the bandwagon effect.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Recently, public opinion polls have become a staple of political news coverage. Radio and television programs, newspapers, magazines, and internet sites conduct polls and report their results literally around the clock. Members of the public often assume that these polls are scientific, unbiased, and accurate, and use them to shape their perceptions of general public opinion. For over 50 years, however, political scholars have openly worried about the accuracy of the polls reported by the media. The recent increase in the polarization of the news media has exacerbated those worries, as media outlets seeking to promote specific political agendas can attempt to manipulate public opinion by selecting which polls to ignore and which polls to disseminate. This research sought to investigate the potential negative effects of public opinion polls. Specifically, it asked: Do polls influence public opinion?

The tendency for individuals to change their political attitudes to conform to the majority of public opinion is known as the “bandwagon effect.” Psychologically, the bandwagon effect works by activating an individual’s desire to reinforce his or her social identity. Social identity theory and self-categorization theory explain that people seek to forge identities based on solidarity rather than alienation. The act of conforming to a group’s norms or beliefs (i.e., altering one’s attitude toward a political issue to conform to the majority of group members) leads to an increase in self-esteem, a feeling of belonging, and a sense of meaning in an otherwise meaningless world.

Only two previous studies have tested the impact of the bandwagon effect in the context of political attitudes. A Canadian study that presented subjects with the opinions of

“fellow Canadians” found strong support for the bandwagon effect, while a Belgium study that presented subjects with opinions of “others” found none. Unfortunately, while each study tested the extent to which public opinion moves public attitudes, neither study investigated the psychological mechanisms underlying the bandwagon effect. Within the contexts of social identity theory and self-categorization theory, the seemingly contradictory results are not contradictory at all. Rather, they support the linkage between the psychological theories and the bandwagon effect. In short, social identity theory and self-categorization theory explain why Canadian subjects would adjust their attitudes to conform to those of fellow Canadians, while Belgium subjects would not adjust their attitudes to conform to those of nondescript others.

In this research, I attempted to reconcile the seemingly contradictory findings of those two previous studies by designing and conducting three experiments that investigated the impact of the bandwagon effect in varying contexts of social identity. In each study, I presented subjects with an article describing the debate over the Trans Pacific Partnership, a new complex issue, and manipulated both the strength and sources of opinion data that subjects received.

Study 1 returned mixed support for my hypotheses. Unexpectedly, the bandwagon effect had no significant impact on subjects who received polling information about the opinions of Americans. However, the bandwagon effect did have a significant impact on both Democrats and Republicans who received partisan polling information. The difference between the American and partisan poll conditions underscores the vital role of social identity as a moderator of the bandwagon effect. As opposed to Canadians, who moderated their issue positions in order to conform to those of other Canadians, Americans may feel far

enough removed from other Americans that they exhibit no desire to conform to national opinion. However, when polling data reflect the opinions of a much more intimate group, fellow partisans, Americans do change their issue attitudes. The fact that self-described political independents did not experience the bandwagon effect in either partisan poll condition provides further support for the linkage between social identity and the bandwagon effect. Like the subjects in the Belgium study who received the opinions of nondescript “others,” independent subjects in this study felt no desire to conform to the opinions of groups with which they do not identify.

Interestingly, contrary to my third hypothesis, the strength of partisan support revealed by the polling data does not moderate the impact of the bandwagon effect. Polls showing the issue preferences of a strong majority of partisans did not affect subjects’ issue positions any more than those showing the preferences of a slight majority of partisans. In other words, partisan subjects tended to conform to the majority position of their own party, regardless of the strength of that majority. Finally, an open-ended item that asked subjects why they chose to support or oppose the TPP revealed that the vast majority of subjects did not recognize the impact of the bandwagon effect.

I conducted Study 2 with an eye toward replicating the results of Study 1 and strengthening the statistical power of my results. As the strength of public opinion presented in opinion polls did not significantly impact the bandwagon effect, and as the American condition did not elicit a bandwagon effect, I streamlined the design of the study by separating subjects into only three treatment conditions and focusing on the three hypotheses that found support in Study 1. The streamlined design provided strong statistical support for each of the three hypotheses. Partisans felt the impact of the bandwagon effect and altered

their attitudes to conform to those of other partisans; independents did not feel the impact of the bandwagon effect; and only two of the 461 subjects stated that they based their decisions to support or oppose the TPP on the basis of the polling data. In short, partisans do use polls as heuristics, but they do so unknowingly. Although they believe that they form their issue attitudes based on logical and somewhat objective analyses of the merits of an issue, they actually form those attitudes out of a need to conform to the attitudes of their fellow partisans. Interestingly, almost all of the statistical power was generated by polls revealing in-group opposition and out-group support for the TPP. This suggests that, rather than jumping on the bandwagon, partisans are much more inclined to jump off.

While this research establishes the link between the bandwagon effect and social identity, particularly in the context of partisan in-groups, its relatively limited scope leaves many questions unanswered. Specifically, does the bandwagon effect impact the issue positions of members of racial, religious, or ethnic groups in the same way that it impacts political partisans? The difference in the results returned by the American poll and partisan poll conditions suggests that some intimacy threshold must be met in order to activate the bandwagon effect. Does that threshold have to do with the perceived size of an in-group or its relative uniformity? Moreover, this research design did not present subjects in the American poll condition with the opposing views of a perceived out-group. Previous research has shown that the presence of an out-group increases an individual's desire to conform to the social norms of his or her in-group (Cohen, 2003). The null results returned by the two American conditions, therefore, could be artifacts of the experimental design. Future studies should investigate this by providing Americans with an out-group poll. Moreover, this research design tested the bandwagon effect's impact in the context of a new issue that did

not fall neatly along partisan lines. Future research should investigate the bandwagon effect in the context of issues for which partisans have clearly established preferences. It may also be interesting to examine the bandwagon effect in the context of facts as opposed to issue preferences. Often in today's news environment, polls reflect the public's opinion on basic facts (the science behind global warming; the percentage of the federal budget devoted to welfare, etc.). Might the opinions of a perceived in-group alter an individual's perception of basic facts? Continuing studies should investigate the nature of polls as presented in today's partisan news environment. A content analysis of the news media would reveal the types of groups typically represented by polling numbers.

Finally, many political scholars tend to criticize this type of experimental approach for its inability to test the lasting effects of the experimental manipulation. However, I believe that this issue is particularly well-suited for such a design. First, the importance of the initial news frame of an issue has been well documented. Once people—partisans in particular—establish a position on an issue, reframing is often extremely difficult (Entman 2004; Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schweider, & Rich, 2000). Moreover, because the 24-hour news cycle continually repeats itself, viewers are typically exposed to the same polling data multiple times a day. Such repeated exposure should increase the durability of the bandwagon effect. Finally, the very nature of the findings highlights the importance of the first opinion poll to which partisans are exposed. As more and more individuals see polls revealing in-group partisan beliefs, they will modify their own issue positions to conform to those beliefs. Future polls, in turn, will reflect that modification.

In today's highly-partisan and poll-driven media environment, the results of this study on the bandwagon effect hold dire implications for the function of America's representative

democracy. Researchers have demonstrated that public opinion drives public policy.

Ironically, the very same polls that influence public opinion also influence the actions of political elites, who use them to derive a general sense of the public's attitude toward specific issues and policies. If polls do, in fact, influence public opinion as this study suggests, then they represent much more than pieces of objective information; they represent a crucial cog in a rather insidious cycle in which polls alter future polls and, in turn, influence policymakers.

Finally, perhaps the most meaningful implication of this research is what it suggests about our typical approach to campaign-driven representative politics. A number of studies have already shown that people are rarely persuaded to change their existing attitudes or beliefs solely by a logical presentation of the merits of an issue (Cohen, 2003; Westen, 2007). If, as this study suggests, people change their attitudes to strengthen their group identity, then political persuasion is much more about crafting a positive group identity than debating issue particulars. In short, political parties should focus primarily on clarifying and strengthening their own brand names. The best way to attract Independents, those frequently sought "persuadable voters," may not be to identify and take positions on wedge issues; rather, it may be about providing a positive group identity with which Independents want to identify.

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APPENDIX A

EXPERIMENTAL MATERIALS

The Article

Congress Debates Trans-Pacific Partnership Free Trade Agreement

This week, the United States International Trade Commission finalized negotiations on what would be the largest international free trade agreement in history—if Congress ratifies it. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (or TPP) would knock down tariff and non-tariff barriers between the United States and eight of Asia's fastest-developing economies. Specifically, the agreement will eliminate 95% of all import tariffs between the countries by January 1, 2016. It will also eliminate all import license requirements and enforce stricter exchange rate management policies to increase foreign investment between the countries. Proponents of the plan believe that it will lend a firm hand to a struggling United States economy. Others, however, are not so sure. With a vote scheduled on the floor of Congress two weeks from today, supporters and defenders of the plan are digging in for what is sure to be a vicious fight.

Supporters of the TPP claim that it will create jobs in the United States, lower the cost of certain consumer goods, open up opportunities for American investors and keep the U.S. competitive with China in a vital world region. Opponents, on the other hand, argue that the TPP would actually cost the United States jobs, encourage investors to take their money out of U.S. markets, and strengthen foreign economies much more so than our own.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this debate is that it does not fall neatly along partisan lines. Republican George Forester, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs committee, for example, claims that the TPP is "a no-brainer." He says, "When American companies sell more overseas, American businesses can employ more people." But Graham Hartwell, a Republican on the same committee, disagrees. "No one disputes that the TPP will increase American exports," he said. "But that can go two ways. Sure, we'll be exporting more goods, but we'll also be exporting more jobs."

Congressional Democrats are similarly split on the proposal. Greg Olson, a Democrat on the House Ways and Means Committee, claims that the TPP will "give American investors a chance to take part in one of the world's fastest growing economic regions." His Democratic colleague on the House Appropriations Committee, Brad Levinson, disagrees. "We should be encouraging American investors to invest in America," Levinson said. "Not overseas."

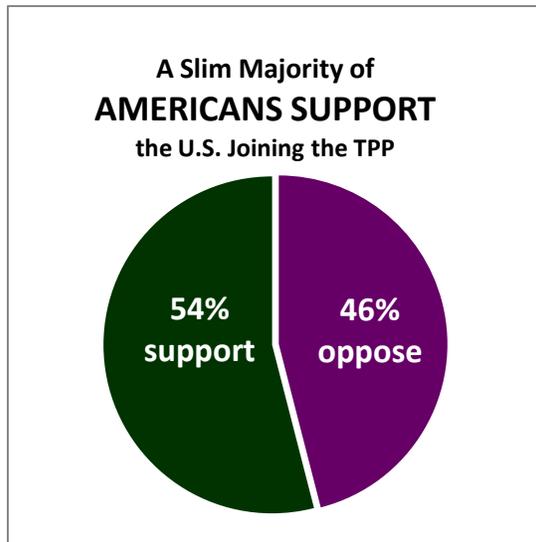
Ron Kirk, the United States Trade Representative who spearheaded the TPP negotiations, understands why this is such a difficult debate for Congress. "The issues here are not easily labeled 'liberal' or 'conservative,'" he said. "Obviously, I negotiated the deal. I think it will help Americans more than it hurts them. But that's up to Congress now." Without clear ideological cues, members of Congress may have to rely even more heavily than usual on the opinions of their constituents. Perhaps Harold Herschlog, a Congressman from Maryland, put it best: "I represent the people," he said. "I'm going to wait and see what they think."

Additional Information by Experimental Treatment Condition

Americans Support Poll/Slight Majority (Study 1)

With so much of the debate up to public opinion, USA Today conducted a poll of 1,454 Americans to see how they feel about the issue.

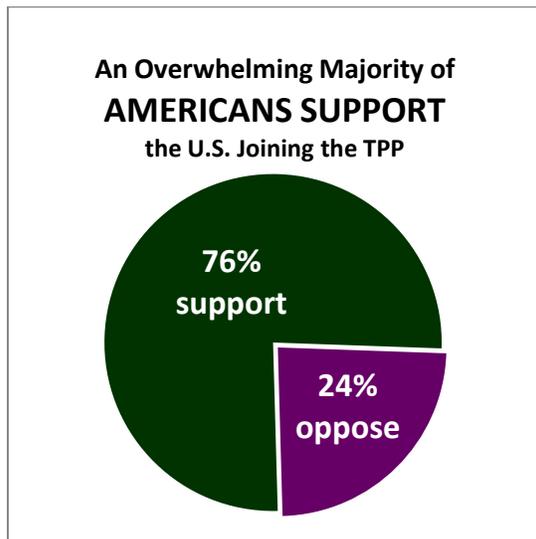
Given the complexity of the debate, public opinion is mixed. A slight majority of Americans--54%--say they want Congress to pass the TPP, while 46% oppose the plan.



Americans Support Poll/Large Majority (Study 1)

With so much of the debate up to public opinion, USA Today conducted a poll of 1,454 Americans to see how they feel about the issue.

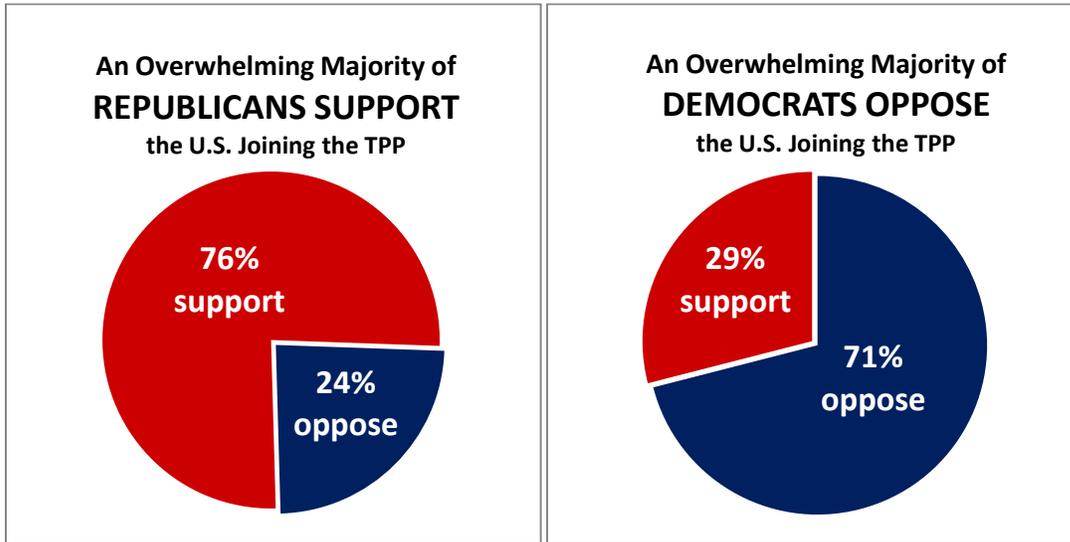
Surprisingly, given the complexity of the debate, public opinion is clear. A large majority of Americans—76%--want Congress to pass TPP, while only 24% oppose the plan.



Republican Support Poll/Large Majority (Study 2) & Republican Support Poll (Study 3)

With so much of the debate up to public opinion, USA Today conducted a poll of 726 Democrats and 744 Republicans to see how partisans feel about the issue.

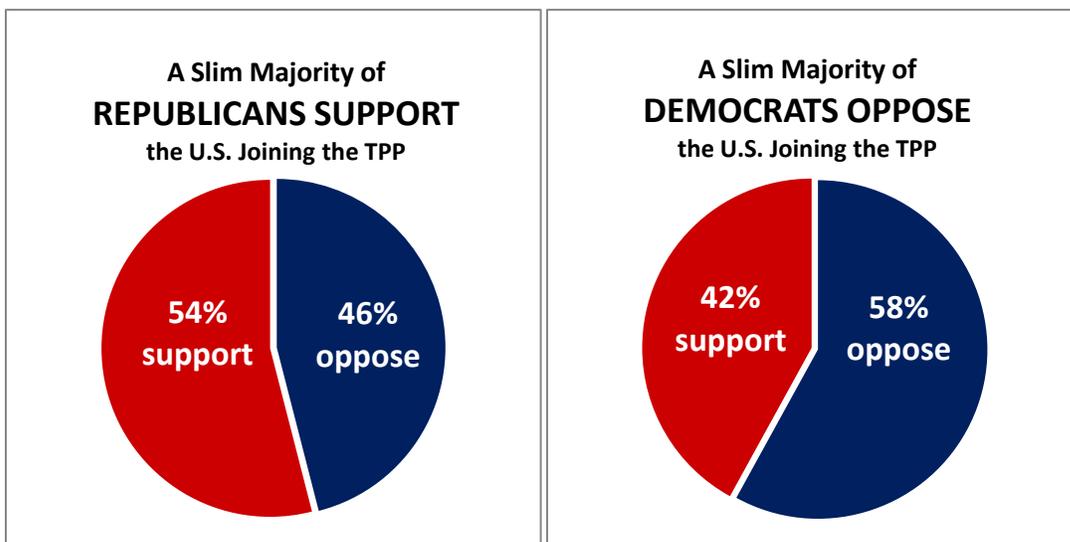
Surprisingly, given the complexity of the debate, the partisan divide among the public is clear. 76% of Republicans say they want the U.S. to join the TPP--compared to only 29% of Democrats.



Republican Support Poll/Slight Majority (Study 2)

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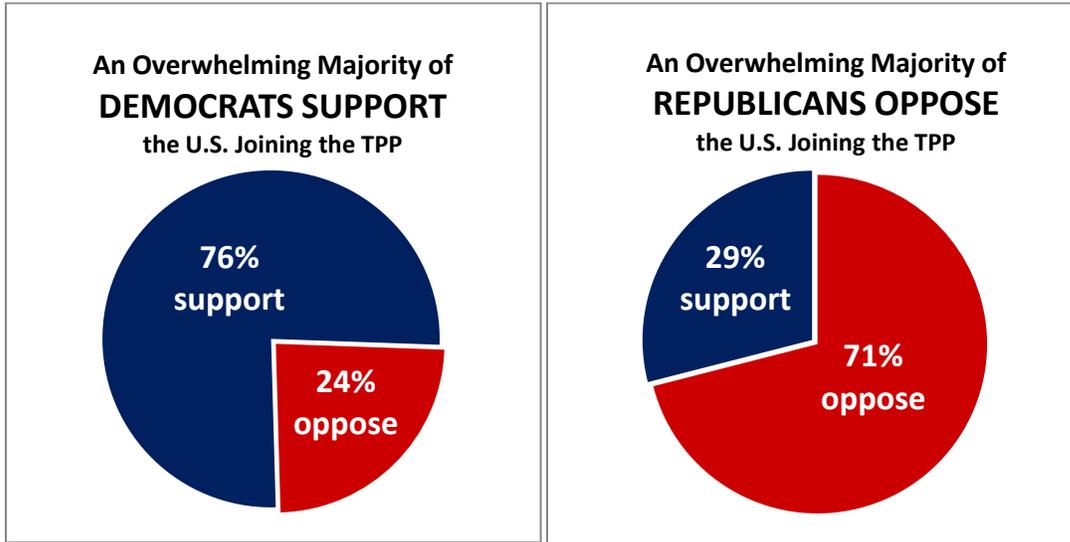
Given the complexity of the debate, public opinion is mixed. 54% of Republicans say they want the U.S. to join the TPP--compared to 42% of Democrats.



Democrat Support Poll/Large Majority (Study 2) and Democrat Support Poll (Study 3)

With so much of the debate up to public opinion, USA Today conducted a poll of 726 Democrats and 744 Republicans to see how partisans feel about the issue.

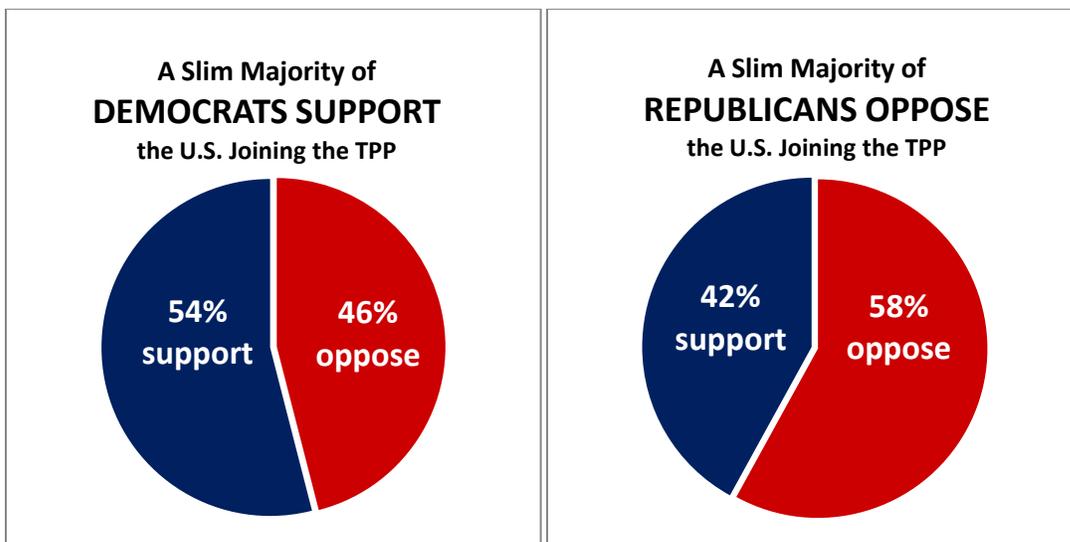
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Democrat Support Poll/Slight Majority (Study 2)

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Given the complexity of the debate, public opinion is mixed. 54% of Democrats say they want the U.S. to join the TPP--compared to 42% of Republicans.



TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. *Test of the Polling Bandwagon Effect for the Social Group “Americans”*

<i>Experimental Treatment</i>	
Slight Majority of Americans (54%) Poll	0.00 (0.04)
Large Majority of Americans (76%) Poll	0.03 (0.04)
Party Identification	-0.16 (0.11)
Ideology	0.19† (0.10)
Female	-0.16 (0.11)
Age	-0.00 (0.00)
Non-White	0.02 (0.04)
Education	0.08 (0.07)
Political Knowledge	-0.12† (0.06)
Intercept	0.59** (0.07)
R^2	0.06

Notes: $N = 222$. The dependent variable is a 3-item scale indicating support for the TPP. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression using robust standard errors. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2. *Test of the Polling Bandwagon Effect for Partisan Social Groups (Study 2)*

<i>Experimental Treatment</i>		
Partisan Match	0.05* (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)
Size of Majority	--	-0.02 (0.03)
Match x Size of Majority Interaction	--	0.07 (0.05)
Party Identification	0.02 (0.08)	0.02 (0.08)
Ideology	0.03 (0.08)	0.04 (0.08)
Female	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Non-White	0.02 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)
Education	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)
Knowledge	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)
Intercept	0.59** (0.05)	0.59** (0.05)
R^2	0.03	0.03

Notes: $N = 298$. The dependent variable is a 3-item scale indicating support for the TPP. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression using robust standard errors. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3. *Test of the Polling Bandwagon Effect for Partisan Social Groups (Study 3)*

Republican Poll Condition	-0.20** (0.06)	-0.24** (0.07)
Control Condition	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.13† (0.07)
Party Identification (PID)	-0.17 (0.11)	--
Republican Poll x PID Interaction	0.45** (0.14)	--
Control x PID Interaction	0.25† (0.137)	--
Differenced Feeling Thermometer (FT)	--	-0.19† (0.11)
Republican Poll x FT Interaction	--	0.53** (0.15)
Control x FT Interaction	--	0.35* (0.15)
Ideology	0.03 (0.07)	0.01 (0.07)
Female	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Non-White	0.07** (0.02)	0.08** (0.02)
Education	0.08† (0.05)	0.09† (0.05)
Knowledge	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.04)
Intercept	0.60** (0.07)	0.62 (0.07)
R^2	0.07	0.07

Notes: $N = 451$. The dependent variable is a 3-item scale indicating support for the TPP. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression using robust standard errors. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 4. *Predicted Levels of Support for the TPP by Experimental Condition and Party Identification*

	<u>Democratic Support Poll</u>	<u>Republican Support Poll</u>	<u>No Poll (Control)</u>
Republicans	0.43	0.67	0.59
Independents	0.51	0.53	0.54
Democrats	0.59	0.38	0.50

Table 5. *Predicted Levels of Support for the TPP by Experimental Condition and Differenced Feeling Thermometer Ratings*

	<u>Democratic Support Poll</u>	<u>Republican Support Poll</u>	<u>No Poll (Control)</u>
Republicans	0.40	0.70	0.63
Independents	0.50	0.52	0.55
Democrats	0.60	0.36	0.47

Figure 1. *Predicted Support for the TPP by Experimental Condition and Party Identification*

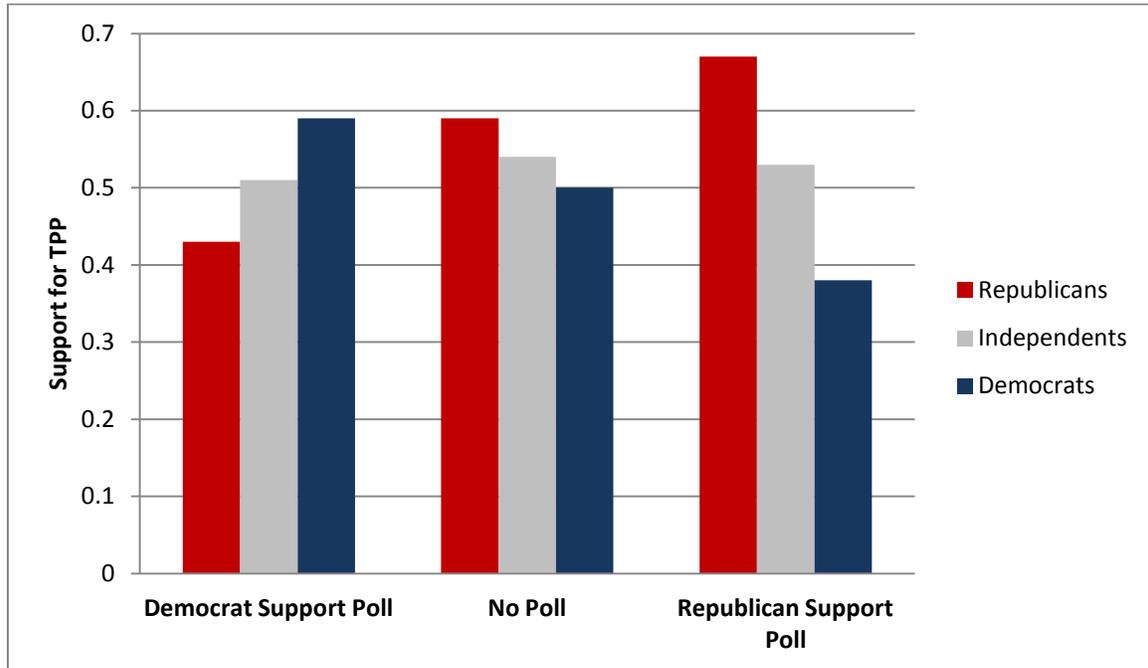
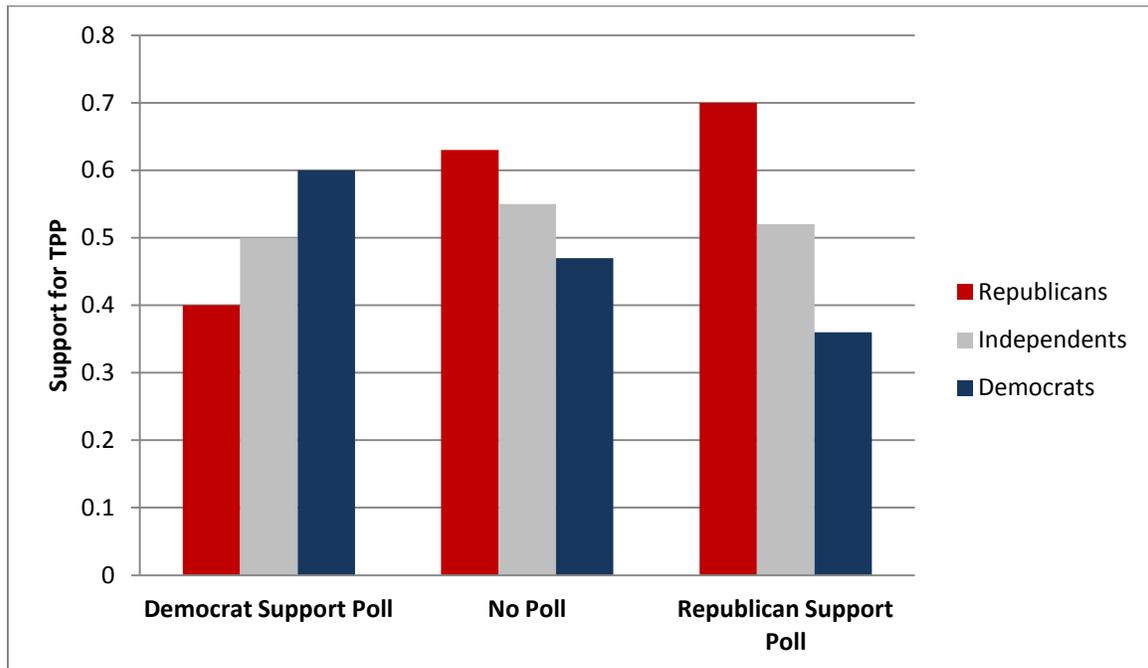


Figure 2. *Predicted Support for the TPP by Experimental Condition and Differenced Feeling Thermometer Ratings*



VITA

Michael Matthew Ragozzino was born in Stamford, Connecticut in 1978. He graduated from Trumbull High School in Trumbull, Connecticut in June 1996. The following autumn, he entered Harvard University to study English and American Literature and Languages. While at Harvard, he wrote and produced two full-length plays and, in the spring of 2001, received the Phyllis Anderson Prize for best full-length play written by a Harvard undergraduate. In June 2001 he graduated from Harvard with honors and was awarded the Bachelor of Arts Degree with a specialization in creative writing. In the fall of 2010, he entered Appalachian State University and began study toward a Master of Arts degree in Political Science. The M.A. was awarded in May 2012.