The Effects of Priming and Framing on the Minimum Wage

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Abstract

In this paper I will discuss a survey experiment I conducted. This survey experiment examines the affects of both priming and framing on public opinion in terms of the issue of the minimum wage. The survey was created using Qualtrics and streamed through Amazon's MechanicalTurk. Participants were exposed to several demographic questions along with policy questions created to test the effects of cues and frames. I created four source cues (President Barack Obama, Democrats, Republicans, and generic) and four level frames (Keep the wage the same, $8.25, $10,10, and generic) that were randomly distributed to participants in the form of a policy question. I had two hypotheses that I tested in this experiment, which stated that I expect to find no significant difference in support when participants are exposed to partisan source cues and that specific frames will garner significantly greater support for raising the minimum wage. Results suggest that despite what published research states, both partisan source cues and specific frames do not significantly affect public opinion on this issue. I then finish this paper with a discussion and conclusion of the information collected.

Introduction

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of adults struggling to support a family on a minimum wage job (Morgan-Besecker and Haggerty 2013). While some live comfortably supported by a well-paying job, others are only living on a bi-weekly check that pays a meager $7.25 an hour. Recently, a story in the Times-Tribune by journalists Terrie Morgan-Besecker and James Haggerty revealed the struggles that families living on minimum wage jobs face. Morgan-Besecker reports on the story of middle-aged mother Rainie Sherr. Ms. Sherr works a minimum wage job at a fast food restaurant, which forces her to live paycheck by paycheck to not only support her children but also just to afford the bus fare to work. This has become a pressing issue as many are forced to work low-wage jobs in order to support their families. In 2012, 59 percent of low-wage workers were between the ages of 25 to 64. The decision on how to legislate on this political issue, which is powerfully shaped by the public's preferences, will have a tremendous impact on how these people live paycheck to paycheck.

Relatedly, while there is a vast amount of research on the implications of the framing and priming on welfare (Ross 2000), foreign affairs involvement (Mintz and Redd 2003), and government spending (Jacoby 2000), a recent scan of the literature turned up no research examining how framing and priming affects public support for increase in the minimum wage. This is the focus of this study. By examining how framing and priming affect public support for the minimum wage, we can better understand the consequences with political elites, legislators, and the media using specific frames and cues when discussing this very important issue. Specifically this paper will study how varying political source cues (i.e. Democrats and Republicans) and issue frames (i.e. Same Rate, General Increase, $10.10, $8.25) affect public support for the minimum wage. I have two major expectations for this research. First of all, I expect to find that both partisan cues will mostly receive support for raising the minimum wage due to the public generally agreeing that it should be raised, despite which party they hear it from. Also, I expect to find that specific issue frames will receive higher support than general issue frames.

To assess these expectations, I have conducted a 4x4 survey experiment on Mechanical Turk in which participants were randomly presented one of four source cues and one of four issue frames in the context of a question gauging their support for the current minimum wage issue. In short, I find that despite previous research showing that partisan cues affect support, the Democrat and Republican cues have no significant affects on support for raising the minimum wage. Also, I find that contrary to literature, specific issue frames do not garner more support than general issue frames when comparing wage rates. I end with a discussion of the implications of these findings.

Framing, Priming, and Public Opinion

To establish a starting point, I present my working definitions of framing and priming. More broadly, framing has been described as "the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (Chong and Druckman 2007). In regards to issue framing, some refer to this at the process used by politicians and the media as a way to define an issue for the public (Nelson et.al 1997). On the other hand, priming is the way individuals evaluate public officials by influencing the thematic areas of issues that individuals use to form these evaluations (Scheufele 2009). In politics, framing and priming are tools that political leaders, elites, policy makers, and the media all can use in order to portray an issue or policy in a certain way.

When different presentations of an issue generate different reactions to those exposed to the issue, the different portrayals are known as issue frames (Jacoby 2000). By manipulating the way an issue or policy is portrayed, those exposed to issue frames may be more likely to have a certain opinion on the subject. Various studies have recognized the effect that framing has on public opinion (Nelson and Oxley 1999; Gross and D'Ambrosio 2004; Druckman 2001a; Merolla et.al 2013). However,

when examining political opinion it is also important to recognize the effects of priming. By creating a thematic idea of an issue or elite in an individuals mind, the individual may become more susceptible to biased and inflexible opinions (Scheufele 2009). Priming over an extended period of time concretes these opinions even further. This effect may make a person's opinion less prone to changing with new information. Many researchers have recognized the effect of priming on individuals (Althaus and Kim 2006; Scheufele 2009).

Source Cues

Source cues refer to what or whom an issue or statement may be attributed to. In this experiment I will be testing how the partisan source cues of Republicans and Democrats. the elite source cue of President Barack Obama, and a generic source cue all compare when testing public support for raising the minimum wage. When analyzing priming it is important to recognize how different types of elite cues affect an individual's reaction just as much as the issue frame. Where individuals think they are receiving their information from may affect the degree to which they are affected by the issue frame (Zaller 1994; Druckman 2001b). Partisan cues may be just as effective when accompanying an issue. Studies have shown that an individual's partisanship may bias their response to an issue frame accompanied by a partisan cue by increasing their motivation to selectively process information (Taber et.al 2001; Slothuuse and Vreese 2010). The more politically aware an individual is, the less susceptible they are to opinion change through partisan or elite cues (Chong and Druckman 2007; Slothuuse and Vreese 2010).

Specific Versus General Framing

There has been little research done on the effectiveness of specific issue frames versus general issue frames. Previous studies have shown that the more specific an issue frame is the more public support it will garner (Jacoby 2000; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Schneider and Ingram 1993). William Jacoby had conducted a similar experiment, when he compared issue frames to test for public opinion on government spending (Jacoby 2000). Jacoby had found that those issue frames that were specific had received more support than those that were general. In this experiment I will be testing how public support varies between general and specific issue frames in raising the minimum wage. One issue frame will be generic while the others will list specific prices.

Hypotheses

I present two separate hypotheses designed to test the effects of framing and priming. I will begin by stating my hypotheses one at a time and then proceed to state my reasoning for each respectively.

H1: Both conditions, given either the Democrat cue or Republican cue, will not report significantly higher levels of support for increasing the minimum wage when compared to the generic cue.

Studies have linked partisan cues to affecting an individual's opinion when paired with a statement (Taber et. al 2001; Slothuuse and Vreese 2010). A study done by Slothuuse and Vreese (2010) tested the support for social Democrat issues across party lines. What they had found was that individuals are significantly more likely to support issues backed by their own party and oppose those backed by a different political party. However, despite what is stated in the literature I believe that the partisan cues will have no affect on public support because of the high levels of support for raising the minimum wage. According to a CNN poll conducted in 2014, 71 percent of Americans surveyed support a raise in the minimum wage. (Sahadi 2014) Due to the high support for this issue, I believe political parties will not have a strong effect on participant's responses because the overwhelming backing from the public to raise the minimum wage will overcome the need to base opinions on political ideology.

H2: I expect to find there will be greater average support for questions paired with a specific issue frame as opposed to those accompanied by a general issue frame.

While there has not been much research done on the study of general frames when compared to specific frames, it has been recognized that specific issue frames tend to garner more support than general issue frames (Jacoby 2000; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Schneider and Ingram 1993). This theory has been tested alongside the issue of government spending (Jacoby 2000). Jacoby (2000) finds that the more specific an issue frame is for government spending, the support for that policy increases. However, these expectations have yet to be tested when paired with the issue of the minimum wage. I expect that the issue frame specifying the minimum wage hourly rate will garner greater support than the frame that expresses a general increase.

Methods

In order assess my hypothesis, I conducted a survey experiment designed using Qualtrics Survey Software and streamed it through Amazon's MechanicalTurk. This was a 4x4 experimental design in which participants were randomly distributed across sixteen cells. The first manipulation was the source cue where participants were exposed to one of the following four cues: "Some people say", "Democrats say", "Republicans say", and "President Barack Obama says". This experiment was restricted to a target population consisting of individuals in the United States over the age of eighteen, where the unit of analysis was the individual. Those who participated in the ninety-one-question survey and agreed to the terms and conditions were provided with a payment of $0.35 upon their completion. The terms and conditions of this survey required participants to be within the parameters of the target population, provide their respective MechanicalTurk identification, and to be liable for any potential risk when taking the survey. Upon starting the survey, individuals were met with demographic questions measuring variables

such as race, gender, and religion. Next participants were asked how serious they consider certain political issues to be (Minimum wage; Healthcare; Syrian conflict; Immigration). The questions following that had measured the individual's empathy, individualism, egalitarianism, and their opinion on the role of government. The participant's personality was then measured, testing for an authoritarian personality or social dominance orientation. Then another set of questions recorded another set of demographics such as partisanship, ideology, and political interest. Participants were finally met with questions examining their opinion on the minimum wage such as: "Some people say that we should increase the minimum wage to $10.10 per hour. To what extent do you support or oppose this policy?" The cue and issue frame were randomly provided for individuals out of four possible cues and four possible issue frames. After the survey was conducted the final sample size consisted of 2,071 participants. The information was then transferred to IBM's Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) where it was recoded and analyzed.
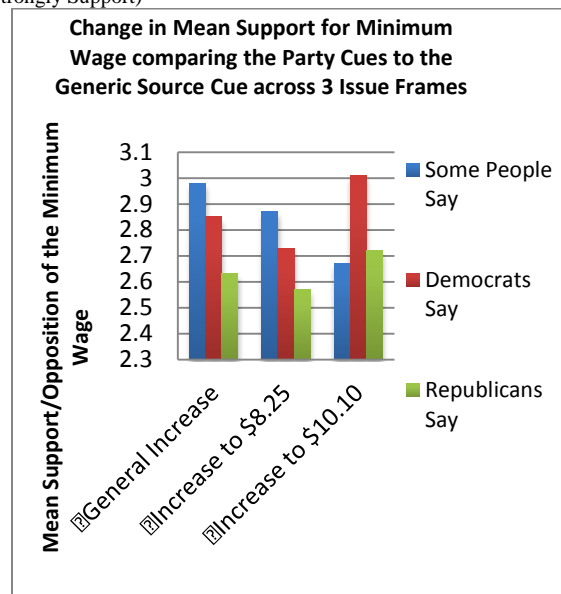
Results

H1: Both conditions, given either the Democrat cue or Republican cue, will not report significantly higher levels of support for increasing the minimum wage when compared to the generic cue.

With regards to my second hypothesis there were six parings of policy questions that had been analyzed. These pairs were chosen to see how the Democrat and Republican cues affect public opinion on three different issue frames presented to participants. The first pair was a comparison of "Some people say" and "Democrats say" accompanied by "Increase the minimum wage". Evidence showed no statistically significant difference in mean support between these groups (p=0.393). Moreover, after including relevant balance checks, a multiple linear regression indicated that there was a shift in p-values between average policy support from p=0.393 to p=0.747. The second pair was a comparison of "Some people say" and "Democrats say" accompanied by "Increase the minimum wage to $10.10 per hour". Evidence showed no statistically significant difference in mean support between these groups (p=0.725). Moreover, after including relevant balance checks, a multiple linear regression indicated that there was a shift in p-values between average policy support from p=0.725 to p=0.695. The third pair was a comparison of "Some people say" and "Democrats say" accompanied by "Increase the minimum wage to $8.25 per hour". Evidence showed no statistically significant difference in mean support between these groups (p=0.289). Moreover, after including relevant balance checks, a multiple linear regression indicated that there was a shift in p-values between average policy support from p=0.289 to p=0.770. The fourth pair was a comparison of "Some people say" and "Republicans say" accompanied by "Increase the minimum wage". Evidence showed a statistically significant difference in mean support between these groups (p=0.026). A bivariate regression revealed that the substantive effect

showed a positive 0.349 shift in policy support moving from the group paired with "Republicans say" to the group accompanied by "Some people say". Moreover, after including relevant balance checks, a multiple linear regression indicated that there was a shift in p-values between average policy support from p=0.026 to p=0.052. This suggests that the differences in mean support for the minimum wage may have been a result of unbalanced groups. The fifth pair was a comparison of "Some people say" and "Republicans say" accompanied by "Increase the minimum wage to $10.10 per hour". Evidence showed no statistically significant difference in mean support between these groups (p=0.514). Moreover, after including relevant balance checks, a multiple linear regression indicated that there was a shift in p-values between average policy support from p=0.514 to p=0.409. The sixth pair was a comparison of "Some people say" and "Republicans say" accompanied by "Increase the minimum wage to $8.25 per hour". Evidence showed no statistically significant difference in mean support between these groups (p=0.329). Moreover, after including relevant balance checks, a multiple linear regression indicated that there was a shift in p-values between average policy support from p=0.329 to p=0.244.

Table 1: Shows the average mean support and oppositions for policy questions examining the affect of source cues. (0=Strongly Opposed; 4=Strongly Support)
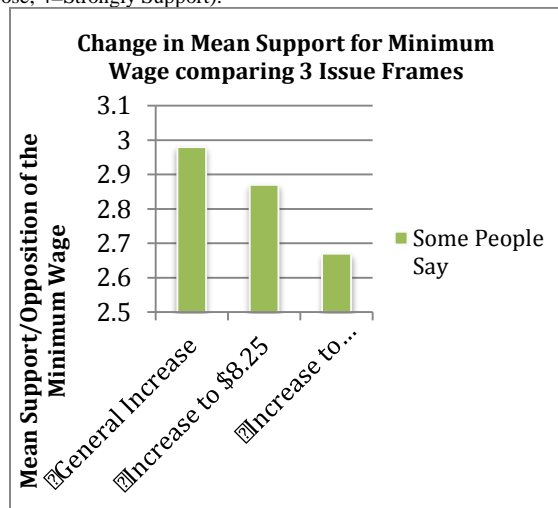

H2: I expect to find there will be greater average support for questions paired with a specific issue frame as opposed to those accompanied by a general issue frame

With regards to my fourth hypothesis there were two pairing of policy questions that had been analyzed. These pairings were selected to analyze how two specific issue frames compared to a general issue frame presented to participants. The first pair was a comparison of "Increase the minimum wage" and "Increase the minimum wage to $8.25 per hour" accompanied by "Some People Say". Evidence showed no statistically significant difference in

mean support between these groups (p=0.424). Moreover, after including relevant balance checks, a multiple linear regression indicated that there was a shift in p-values between average policy support from p=0.424 to p=0.540. The second pair was a comparison of "Increase the minimum wage" and "Increase the minimum wage to $10.10" accompanied by "Some people say". Evidence showed a statistically significant difference in mean support between these groups (p=0.048). A bivariate regression revealed that the substantive effect showed a positive 0.309 shift in policy support moving from the group paired with "Increase the minimum wage to $10.10 per hour" to the group accompanied by "Increase the minimum wage". Moreover, after including relevant balance checks, a multiple linear regression indicated that there was a shift in p-values between average policy support from p=0.048 to p=0.401. This suggests that the differences in mean support for the minimum wage may have been a result of unbalanced groups

Table 2: Shows the average support and opposition for policy questions examining the affect of specific and general issue frames. (0=Strongly Oppose; 4=Strongly Support).

Discussion

By analyzing the data gathered in my results, I can now determine how participant's responses pertain to each of my hypotheses. My first hypothesis was a null hypothesis stating that I expect to find no difference in support between those exposed to a generic cue and those exposed to a partisan cue. The data collected within this survey had supported my null hypothesis by showing no statistical significance between any pairings after running balance checks. As stated before, I believe this is due to such high levels of support for increasing the minimum wage that partisan cues do not have the affect that they usually would as stated in previous research (Slothuuse and Vresse 2010). It is important to note that one pairing ("Some People Say" and "Republicans Say" each accompanied with "Increase the minimum wage") was originally found statistically significant, and after balance checks was marginally significant with a value of p=0.052. I speculate that this is due to the high amount of people that considered themselves

to be Democrat while taking this survey in comparison to those that identified as Republican. This along with the high amount of Independents that leaned towards Democrat could account for the marginal significance of this pairing.

My second hypothesis states that I expect specific issue frames to garner significantly more support than general issue frames. The data collected within the survey had shown that my hypothesis is not supported by individual's responses. The specific issue frames garnered relatively the same support as the questions paired with general issue frames. I speculate that the levels of support going against what is stated in previous research is due to the high levels of support for increasing the minimum wage (Jacoby 2000; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Schneider and Ingram 1993). Overwhelming support for this issue may be the reason why the specific issue frame did not gain more support than the general issue frame.

There are two main factors to take into account that may have affected the results of my experiment. The first factor to take into account is the significantly high levels of support for raising the minimum wage. Because most of the American public strongly agrees with increasing the minimum wage, cues and issue frames may not have a significant effect. It has been shown in previous research that strong opinions on an issue may overcome elite cues, partisan cues, and issue frames (Druckman 2001b; Slothuuse Vreese 2010; Druckman 2001a; Jacoby 2000). A second factor to consider would be the small sample size. Overall, the size of the sample was 2,071 participants, however individuals were randomly distributed into one of sixteen policy questions. Due to this distribution there may only be about 130 participants per each pairing. This sample size is too small to assess the exact opinions of the American public as a whole on the issue of minimum wage. A larger sample size may produce significantly different results. These two factors need to be taken into account when considering the results of my experiment. American public as a whole on the issue of minimum wage. A larger sample size may produce significantly different results. These two factors need to be taken into account when considering the results of my experiment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by analyzing the data collected from this survey experiment I was able to research how individuals are affected by the framing and priming effects in terms of the issue of the minimum wage. I had two major expectations for this experiment. I believed that partisan cues representing the Republican and Democrat parties would garner the same support as a generic cue due to the amount of people in favor of increasing the minimum wage outweighing the affects of partisan cues. The results of my survey experiment supported my hypothesis, showing the ineffectiveness of partisan cues when pertaining to the minimum wage issue. My other expectation sought to find higher levels of support among those exposed to a specific issue frame than those exposed to a general issue frame. However, evidence had shown that responses were not in support of my hypothesis. I had attributed this to high levels

of support for the minimum wage. As discussed before, those with strong values or beliefs on an issue may not be affected by framing as much as those with little to no awareness (Druckman 2001a). Participants would be in favor of raising the minimum wage regardless of the issue frame being specific or not.

Due to this being the first research to analyze the affects of framing and priming on the issue of minimum wage, there are many implications that follow my findings. In terms of policy implications, political elites, the media, and policymakers can use this information. Now that it has been studied, the ineffectiveness of framing and priming in regards to this issue reveals that policy support cannot be significantly shifted through these methods. In terms of research implications, this is the first experiment to connect framing and priming with the minimum wage. This experiment also reveals how high average support is to increase the minimum wage, which can be further examined by other researchers. Overall, this experiment's findings can be of use to politicians, the media, and even other researchers.

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Biography

My name is Samuel Nicosia and I am a political science major and communications minor at the University of New Haven. I am in the graduating class of 2016 and am looking to attend law school after I am finished with my undergraduate program. I conducted this experiment alongside my fellow student researcher Matthew Serio and under the supervision of my advisor Dr. Chris Haynes. My interest in politics has driven me to examine the affects of priming and framing on important current political issues. With the help of the university's undergraduate research fellowship I was able to conduct my experiment. I plan on continuing with my research and submitting my full paper to be published.