

How Party Affiliation Conditions the Experience of Dissonance and Explains Polarization and Selective Exposure*

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Objectives. Dissonance theory has been widely studied in the social sciences, especially given its implications for polarization and selective exposure. This study expands previous research by investigating how this process may differ when a foundational political identity such as party affiliation is at stake. *Methods.* This study adapts a classic dissonance paradigm—writing a counterattitudinal essay under conditions of high versus low choice—to a political context by manipulating the topic of the essay to advocating membership in the opposing political party. *Results.* In this context, party affiliation conditions response to writing a counterattitudinal essay: only Republican respondents demonstrate heightened dissonance, selective exposure, and polarization as a result of this task, particularly when the essay is political. *Conclusions.* Dissonance may not be a universal response to potentially arousing tasks, but if only some groups experience dissonance and polarization after enumerating the benefits of an opposing party, it may bias democratic functioning.

Politics and democracy are inherently about conflict. Every election cycle, politicians and parties offer differing visions for the country and competing methods for achieving those goals. This conflict is not only among politicians: adherents to the parties are called “partisans” due to this allegiance—an allegiance that often makes them hesitant to adjust or update their party affiliation, even in the face of evidence that their party is behaving badly or not representing their needs (Cooper and Mackie, 1983; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002; Groenendyk, 2012).

Yet while conflict as part of the political process can often strengthen party allegiances and mobilize voters (Fung, Vraga, and Thorson, 2010; Martin, 2004), when that conflict becomes internalized—when a person recognizes that his or her own attitudes, beliefs, or actions are incongruent with each other—it is an entirely different story. In these cases, individuals experience an uncomfortable arousal termed dissonance that they are motivated to alleviate (Cooper and Fazio, 1984; Elliot and Devine, 1994; Festinger, 1957; Vraga, 2011). Dissonance has been examined in a variety of scenarios in the social sciences: from consumer decision making to voting choices, from writing counterattitudinal essays to choosing between alternatives (Beasley and Joslyn, 2001; Bolstad, Dinas, and Riera, 2013; Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones, 2000).

While these forces extend into the political realm, little research has examined how a political context itself may change their impact, outside of choices about voting (e.g., Beasley and Joslyn, 2001; Bolstad, Dinas, and Riera, 2013; see Nam, Jost, and van Bavel, 2013 for a notable exception). Dissonance may occur in many situations, including when people recognize inconsistencies between their preferences and their party’s (Groenendyk,

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2012), or when they are asked to praise a disliked politician from an opposing party (Nam, Jost, and van Bavel, 2013). Further, dissonance is stronger when the inconsistency is more important to the individual, such as when the self-concept is involved (Aronson, 1968; Festinger, 1957). Therefore, ideas and behaviors incompatible with party affiliation—a long-standing and emotional identification (Brewer, 2001; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002; Greene, 2004)—should be especially problematic and arousing.

It is particularly important to study dissonance given its potential to influence related political attitudes and behaviors. Dissonance arousal and the desire to avoid information that might produce dissonance often lead people to engage in selective information seeking (Festinger, 1957; Frey, 1986; Hart et al., 2009)—and this type of partisan selective exposure is increasingly seen in today's media and political climate (Garrett, 2009; Stroud, 2011). Similarly, exposure to counterattitudinal information that produces dissonance can lead to polarization in favor of preexisting ideas (Batson, 1975; Cooper and Mackie, 1983; Festinger, 1957). The high levels of partisan polarization observed currently in the United States (Bafami and Shapiro, 2009) makes it important to consider whether the conflict inherent in the political process may be producing dissonance and heightening polarization and selective information seeking, especially if such a response is unevenly distributed among the population.

In other words, party affiliation may not simply heighten response to inconsistencies in attitudes and behaviors. An individual's political orientations do not just determine how that person responds to incoming information (Peterson et al., 2013; Taber and Lodge, 2006), they also signal differences in worldviews and orientations (Conover and Feldman, 1981; Jost et al., 2003), which are often reinforced through media and discussion habits (Mutz, 2006; Stroud, 2011). Therefore, party affiliation should also condition how individuals react when facing a situation in which internalized conflict is inherent, such as engaging in counterattitudinal behaviors like praising the opposing party (Nam, Jost, and van Bavel, 2013).

This study examines how the experience of dissonance is shaped by a political context. Using a precise comparison to previous studies of dissonance—writing a counterattitudinal essay under conditions of high versus low choice (Elliot and Devine, 1994)—the study varies the essay topic to be relatively nonpolitical (tuition increases) or explicitly political (membership in the opposing party). Not only should voluntarily writing an essay advocating membership in the opposing political party be more problematic, given the centrality of party affiliation to the self-concept (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002), but response to this task should depend on *which* party individuals align themselves with. Building off emergent research on group identities that influence dissonance arousal (Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005; Nam, Jost, and van Bavel, 2013), I apply a motivated social-cognitive approach to party loyalty (Jost et al., 2003) to suggest that this experience should engender more dissonance and motivated response among Republicans.

Literature Review

Cognitive Dissonance

One of the most commonly studied techniques for studying dissonance is the induced-compliance paradigm. In this paradigm, people are given greater or lesser sense of choice for engaging in counterattitudinal behaviors, such as writing an essay that advocates an

opposing position (Cooper, 1998; Steele and Liu, 1983). Although dissonance does not occur when individuals believe they have more choice over whether to perform the behavior, when perceived choice is low, this counterattitudinal behavior produces dissonance, measured by self-reports of negative arousal and tension (Elliot and Devine, 1994; Harmon-Jones, 2000).

These counterattitudinal essays have included a variety of topics, demonstrating the applicability of this method across a wide range of contexts. Because dissonance should be stronger when the inconsistency between attitude and behavior is more important (Cooper and Fazio, 1984; Festinger, 1957), scholars often select topics relevant to the student populations studied, such as increasing tuition (Elliot and Devine, 1994) or creating 7 a.m. classes (Cooper, 1998).

However, writing an essay on raising tuition, while incongruent with students' self-interests, does not implicate a core *identity* as would an essay advocating membership in the opposing political party (Brewer, 2001; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002). It is those topics that involve an individual's self-concept or threaten his or her ego that produce the most dissonance (Aronson, 1968; Festinger, 1957; Steele and Liu, 1983; Stone and Cooper, 2001). Promoting the opposing party not only creates inconsistency between attitudes and behaviors, but also undermines an individual's self-perception as a loyal party member—and thus dissonance and its related effects should be stronger when writing an incongruent political essay compared to an essay about tuition.

Responding to Dissonance

Dissonance arousal is particularly consequential because it can spur a variety of efforts to reduce discomfort that, in a political context, impact democratic functioning. One of the most common methods is to engage in selective exposure, seeking out information that confirms preexisting beliefs and avoiding incongruent ideas (Adams, 1961; Frey, 1986; Hart et al., 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009; Festinger, 1957). This desire for affirmation is also important in discussion, as people seek social support for their beliefs when experiencing dissonance (Festinger and Aronson, 1960; Festinger, Riecken, and Schacter, 1956).

Dissonance arousal not only encourages more selective information seeking, but can also directly contribute to polarization. Although previous research using the induced-compliance paradigm has tended to produce attitude change in favor of the persuasive essay, leading to a moderation of opinion (Cooper, 1998; Elliot and Devine, 1994; Harmon-Jones, 2000), this moderation may not be possible when the attitude in question is definitional to an identity like religious or political affiliations (Batson, 1975; Cooper and Mackie, 1983). In contrast, studies employing a free-choice paradigm, which ask individuals to choose between two alternatives, cause polarization in favor of the chosen option (Beasley and Joslyn, 2001; Tarvis and Aronson, 2008). As party affiliation involves an inherent *selection* between alternatives—the Republican or Democratic parties—attitude change occurring with dissonance may follow this pattern. The motivated reasoning literature also suggests that polarization in line with previous beliefs occurs when people are exposed to incongruent information (Lord, Ross, and Lepper, 1979; Taber and Lodge, 2006), a pattern that may be more prominent when dealing with political outcomes and identities.

Therefore, although attitude change is a commonly studied outcome when faced with dissonance (Elliot and Devine, 1994), the nature and direction of that change remains

uncertain for political outcomes. While previous studies have suggested that engaging in counterattitudinal behaviors can produce more moderate opinions, this moderation may not be possible when the considerations at play—in this case, attitudes and feelings about the political parties—are resistant to change (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002; Groenendyk, 2012).

The Role of Party Affiliation

Inconsistencies with one's party affiliation should not only strengthen dissonance arousal and its outcomes, but may also produce unique effects depending on which group individuals identify with. The motivated social-cognitive approach suggests that individuals select an ideology—and an associated party—to fulfill psychological needs that arise from personal and situational factors (Jost et al., 2003). Thus, Republicans and Democrats tend to affiliate with competing parties because of differences in ideology, worldview, and values (Converse and Feldman, 1981; Lakoff, 2002; Tetlock, 1986). Further, this link between political ideology and party affiliation has strengthened, as party leaders provide increasingly clear signals as to the appropriate ideology, leading to partisan sorting (Bafami and Shapiro, 2009; Fiorina et al., 2005).

Specifically, Republicans, with their more conservative ideology, should prefer simplistic models of reasoning, exhibit more rigid mental structures, and feel more intolerant of ambiguity or uncertainty than Democrats (Jost et al., 2003; Jost, 2006; Jost, Nosek, and Gosling, 2008; Tetlock, 1986; McDevitt, 2010). Research has also demonstrated that Republicans value cross-cutting information less (Borah et al., 2013), are more likely to avoid incongruent information that may provoke dissonance (Garrett, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009; Mutz, 2006), and emergent research suggests that Republican supporters are especially likely to avoid dissonance-producing situations, particularly with regard to praising a disliked politician from the opposing party (Nam, Jost, and van Bavel, 2013).

Therefore, based both on dispositional and situational factors, it seems likely that the experience of dissonance and its reduction should differ for Democrats versus Republicans. Republicans, with their intolerance of ambiguity and need for closure (Jost et al., 2003; Jost, Nosek, and Gosling, 2008) and their relative distaste for incongruent information (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009; Nam, Jost, and van Bavel, 2013), should experience greater dissonance than Democrats when publicly advocating the benefits of a partisan position they do not adopt, and be more likely to exhibit confirmatory information seeking tendencies and polarization as a result.

Method

Design and Procedure

The hypotheses were tested using a 2 (choice: high vs. low) \times 2 (topic: tuition increases vs. political party membership) experimental design embedded in an online survey. The data were collected over a two-week period in April and May 2010. Respondents were enrolled in undergraduate courses at a large midwestern university and received extra credit for their participation. Of roughly 500 students contacted via email, 273 completed the study (74.5 percent were females, mean age = 20.34) and 216 were used in analyses (75.5

percent were females, mean age = 20.32).¹ The participants were liberal in their ideology, with a mean of 3.54 out of 6, and more were affiliated with the Democratic Party (66.2 percent Democrats, 27.3 percent Republicans, 6.5 percent Independents).

This study used the induced-compliance paradigm for inducing dissonance (Cooper, 1998; Elliot and Devine, 1994; Harmon-Jones, 2000; Steele and Liu, 1983). All subjects were asked to write a counterattitudinal essay while varying the amount of choice. Specifically, subjects were either told they were “randomly assigned” (low choice) to write the essay or they were asked to “volunteer” to write the essay to help out the committee (high choice).

The second manipulation adjusted the topic of the essay that subjects were asked to write. The first condition replicated Elliot and Devine (1994), with subjects arguing for a 10 percent tuition increase at their university, while in the second condition, subjects advocated membership in the opposing political party. The wording of the prompt was adapted from Elliot and Devine with only minor changes to the purpose of the essay. To ensure that equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats participated in both types of essay, subjects were randomized based on their pretest affiliation, with those who “lean” toward either party classified as partisans (Petrocik, 2009). Independents were excluded from the subsequent analyses, reducing the sample size to 202.

Measures

Manipulation Checks. To determine whether the manipulation of choice was effective, subjects answered a single item asking them to rate on a scale from 0 (no choice at all) to 10 (a lot of choice): “How much choice did you feel you had over the position you took in the essay?” ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 2.91$). A second item asked subjects to rate their agreement on an 11-point scale with the statement: “I put a lot of effort into writing my essay” ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 2.29$).

Dissonance. Subjects were asked to rate on 11-point scales the extent to which they currently felt uncomfortable, uneasy, bothered, and tense (Elliot and Devine, 1994; Harmon-Jones, 2000). These items were combined to create an index ($\alpha = 0.93$, $M = 3.75$, $SD = 2.74$).²

Party Feelings Polarization. To examine subjects’ feelings toward the parties, they were asked to rate on 100-point feeling thermometers how they felt toward each party, for the opposing party followed by their own. A subtractive measure is used, such that a higher positive number indicates more polarization in favor of their party ($r = -0.37$, $M = 44.04$, $SD = 24.99$).

Political Attitude Polarization. Next, subjects rated their closeness to the political parties in terms of their issue positions, worldviews, and lifestyle. Subjects rated on an 11-point scale the extent to which their views matched each party’s views (opposing party

¹This study is extracted from a five-cell design. The unused cell did not cross the 2×2 experimental design examined in this study, so it was not entered as a control in the analyses. All descriptive statistics and data exclude participants in this cell. There were no significant differences in age, political interest, partisan strength, party identification, or gender between the excluded cell and the manipulations. For more information, please contact the lead author.

²An appendix of all question wordings will be made available at (<http://emilyk.vraga.org/>).

first) for each indicator. These responses are averaged separately for an individual's own party and the opposing party, then a subtractive measure is used, such that a higher score indicates more polarization in favor of one's own party (ingroup: $\alpha = 0.83$, $M = 6.94$, $SD = 1.58$; outgroup: $\alpha = 0.78$, $M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.53$; polarized: $r = -0.45$, $M = 4.41$, $SD = 2.64$).

Confirmatory Political Behaviors. Two indicators of confirmatory information patterns were used: information seeking and discussion partner selection. To measure confirmatory information seeking, individuals rated on an 11-point scale how likely they were to seek information about the opposing political party, followed by information about their own party, while for confirmatory discussion, respondents rated how likely they were to discuss politics with those who do not share their party affiliation, then with those who share their party affiliation. A subtractive measure was used for each concept to indicate polarization (information seeking: $r = 0.70$, $M = 1.47$, $SD = 2.11$; discussion: $r = 0.78$, $M = 0.81$, $SD = 1.86$).

Results

Manipulation Checks

Before testing the focal expectations, checks were performed to ensure that the manipulations functioned as planned. A series of two-way ANCOVAs, controlling for political interest, age, and party affiliation,³ was used in these analyses. First, the choice manipulation was tested. The ANCOVA demonstrates that individuals reported having significantly less choice over the position they took in their essay, $F(1, 197) = 6.847$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.035$, when they were told they were randomly assigned to write the incongruent essay ($M = 1.87$, $SE = 0.30$) compared to when they were asked to volunteer ($M = 2.94$, $SE = 0.28$), validating the manipulation of choice.⁴

A second analysis ensured that no results were driven by a difference in essay effort between conditions. No significant differences emerged based on choice, essay type, or the interaction between the two (choice: $F(1, 197) = 0.065$, $p = 0.80$; interaction: $F(2, 197) = 0.163$, $p = 0.69$).

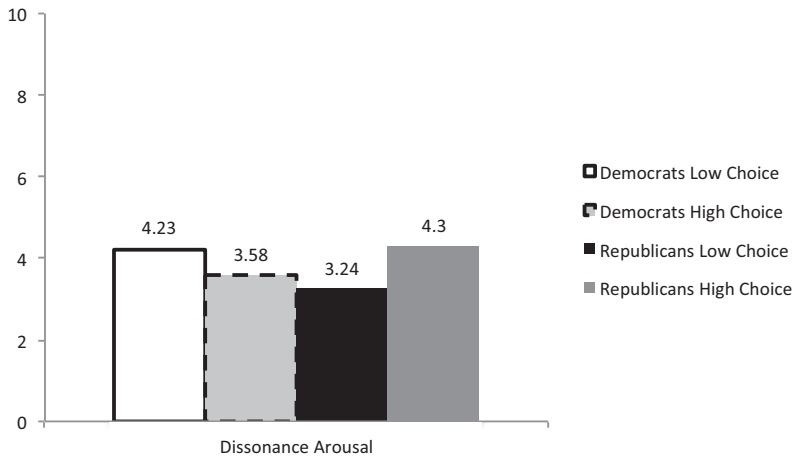
Main Effects

A series of two-way ANCOVAs, controlling for party affiliation, political interest, and age, was used to test the hypotheses. I expected that subjects who had more choice over writing a counterattitudinal essay would experience more dissonance, especially when the topic of the essay was political party membership, rather than tuition increases. Neither

³It was necessary to control for both age and political interest because they are unevenly distributed among the experimental conditions. There is a significant interaction between essay focus and choice ($F = 4.50$, $p < 0.05$) for political interest and a marginally significant interaction between party affiliation and choice for age ($F = 3.62$, $p < 0.10$). Even in an experimental design, controls ensure that the effects of experimental conditions are not confounded with other factors in predicting outcomes (Keppel, 1991). Other demographic variables such as gender were tested but were not differentially distributed by experimental condition.

⁴Individuals who wrote the political essay ($M = 2.03$, $SE = 0.30$) reported having marginally less choice, $F(1, 197) = 3.407$, $p < 0.1$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.018$, than those who wrote the tuition essay ($M = 2.78$, $SE = 0.28$), but there is no significant interaction between the two manipulations ($F(2, 197) = 0.01$, $p = 0.92$).

FIGURE 1
Interactive Effect Between Choice and Party Affiliation



expectation is supported: there is no significant main effect of choice ($F = 0.298$, $p = 0.59$), nor is there a significant interaction with essay topic ($F = 0.027$, $p = 0.87$).

The next tests examined confirmatory behavioral intentions and attitude change when the conditions for dissonance arousal are met. But, as might be expected given that dissonance was not produced for the group as a whole, the expectation that writing a political essay when choice was high would produce more confirmatory tendencies and attitude change was not supported (confirmatory information seeking: $F = 2.016$, $p = 0.16$; confirmatory discussion: $F = 1.285$, $p = 0.26$; feelings toward parties: $F = 0.620$, $p = 0.43$; attitudes toward parties: $F = 1.191$, $p = 0.28$).

Party Affiliation as a Moderator

However, this study focused on the potential impact that party affiliation would play as a moderator in this process. Testing this question required a series of three-way ANCOVAs, still controlling for age and political interest, with political affiliation entered as a factor in the model.

Examining first the impact on feelings of dissonance, a significant interaction emerges between party affiliation and choice ($F = 3.919$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.020$). Pair-wise comparisons confirm my expectations: Republicans who had more choice over their essay felt more dissonance ($M = 4.30$, $SE = 0.55$) compared to those with less choice ($M = 3.24$, $SE = 0.48$), for Democrats, the opposite pattern emerges—having more choice somewhat *decreases* ($M = 3.58$, $SE = 0.31$) dissonance compared to less choice ($M = 4.23$, $SE = 0.34$; see Figure 1). This effect is not conditioned by a three-way interaction ($F = 0.127$, $p = 0.72$), suggesting that the experience of dissonance occurred similarly regardless of the topic of the essay.

Having established that some groups—namely, Republicans—did experience increased dissonance, I next tested whether they also demonstrated differences in the outcomes associated with dissonance. A three-way interaction between party affiliation, choice, and essay topic is significant for both types of confirmatory behavioral intentions—information

TABLE 1

Difference Between Low- and High-Choice Conditions Conditioned on Essay Type and Party Affiliation

Dependent Variable	Democrats		Republicans	
	Tuition Essay	Political Essay	Tuition Essay	Political Essay
Polarization in Party feelings	-1.12 ^a	-8.38 ^a	-10.14 ^a	+30.83 ^b
Political attitudes	+0.38 ^a	+0.06 ^a	-0.37 ^a	+3.25 ^b
Confirmatory Behaviors				
Information seeking	-0.11 ^a	-0.19 ^a	-0.44 ^a	+2.72 ^b
Discussion partners	-0.10 ^a	-0.17 ^a	-0.54 ^a	+1.75 ^b

Different alphabetical superscripts indicate the means are significantly different at $p < 0.05$. Numbers are calculated by subtracting the mean on the dependent variable for the low-choice condition from the mean for the high-choice condition, such that a higher (positive) score indicates greater polarization under conditions of high choice compared to low choice.

seeking ($F = 5.905$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.030$) and discussion partners ($F = 3.872$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.020$)—and was replicated for changes in attitudes, for both polarization in party feelings ($F = 10.424$, $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.053$) and perceptions of closeness ($F = 6.008$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.031$).

To deconstruct this three-way interaction, descriptive statistics using the estimated marginal means were produced. Because the heart of the experimental design emphasizes the manipulation of choice, thought to be the source of dissonance arousal, subtractive measures are used. More precisely, confirmatory behavioral intentions and political feelings and attitudes under conditions of low choice are subtracted from those intentions and attitudes under conditions of high choice and compared across Republicans and Democrats in the different essay topic conditions (see Table 1 for mean differences).

Examining these results together provides insight into the processes at play. Among Democrats, no pattern emerges for the effects of choice and essay topic, and mean differences between conditions remain small. However, the results among Republicans paint a consistent picture. Republicans report heightened political polarization and stronger intentions to seek out congruent information only when writing a political essay under conditions of high choice compared to low choice. For all other conditions and among all other groups, little evidence of change in attitudes or behaviors exists.⁵

Additional Analyses

In contemplating these results—and specifically the different effects that choice and topic had on Republicans versus Democrats—an obvious question arises: Might these results be

⁵To ensure the results are not driven by differences in partisan strength between Democrats and Republicans, these analyses were run excluding individuals who reported “leaning” toward a party. With a sample size of 158, the results must be interpreted cautiously. Yet when examining only stronger partisans, three of the five interactions described above (dissonance arousal, polarization in political attitudes, and confirmatory information seeking) remain significant or marginally significant, and the pattern of results is consistent across all of the analyses. Thus, differences in partisan strength do not appear to account for the differences between Democrats and Republicans in response to the stimuli. Please contact the lead author for details on these analyses.

driven by differences in perceptions of choice or in effort between these groups? Therefore, each of the manipulation checks was run using party affiliation as a factor in the model. However, this explanation was not supported. Democrats and Republicans reported no differences in their perceptions of choice, either separately ($F = 0.676$, $p = 0.42$) or in conjunction with the essay topic ($F = 0.009$, $p = 0.92$), nor in the amount of effort they put into the essay (separately: $F = 0.240$, $p = 0.63$; interaction: $F = 1.567$, $p = 0.21$). Therefore, although Republicans and Democrats experienced the process differently, it did not result from differences in perceptions of choice or effort.

Additional analyses were also performed to deconstruct the three-way interaction that emerged between party affiliation, choice, and essay topic for political attitude polarization and confirmatory behavioral intentions. As polarization and confirmatory behavioral intentions seemed strengthened—as expected—among those writing a political essay, two-way ANCOVAs tested the interaction between party affiliation and choice only among those assigned to write a political essay. These findings provide additional support for the pattern described above: the interaction between political affiliation and choice is significant among those writing a political essay for polarization in party feelings ($F = 13.589$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.134$), perceptions of party closeness ($F = 11.217$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.113$), and confirmatory behavioral intentions for political information (information seeking: $F = 8.197$, $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.085$; discussion partners: $F = 3.465$, $p < 0.10$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.038$). Additionally, the pair-wise comparisons suggest that these interactions are being driven by Republican responses: the difference in polarization among Republicans under conditions of high versus low choice is significant for party feelings ($p < 0.01$) and political attitudes ($p < 0.001$), as well as confirmatory political information seeking ($p < 0.01$) and discussion ($p < 0.05$), but is not significant for Democrats (see Figure 2).⁶ These analyses support for the conclusions reached above: Republicans' polarization in political attitudes and confirmatory intentions when writing the counterattitudinal political essay under conditions of high choice were responsible for the three-way interaction between party affiliation, choice, and essay topic.

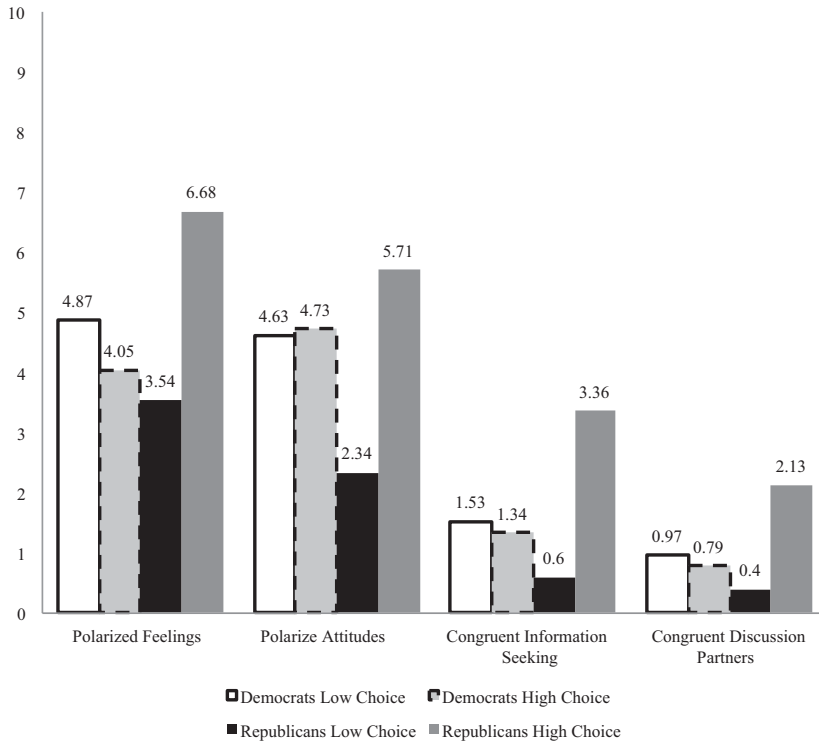
Discussion

This study set out to test a classic methodology for inducing cognitive dissonance in a political context while paying special attention to the unique role that the deeply held identity of party affiliation can play. I expected that a political context—in this case, writing a voluntary essay praising membership in the opposing party (Brewer, 2001; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002; Steele and Liu, 1983)—would not only be more arousing than a nonpolitical essay, but would make it difficult to produce a moderation of opinion (Cooper and Mackie, 1983; Festinger, 1957; Lord, Ross, and Lepper, 1979; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Even more importantly to this study, I predicted that not all individuals would respond similarly to this request. Instead, I expected that Republicans, who tend to be more intolerant of ambiguity and prone to avoid dissonance-producing situations (Garrett, 2009; Jost et al., 2003; Jost, Nosek, and Gosling, 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009; Nam, Jost, and van Bavel, 2013), would be more sensitive to the conflict

⁶For Democrats, the difference between conditions of high and low choice is not significant for polarization in political feelings ($p = 0.17$), political attitudes ($p = 0.86$), confirmatory information seeking ($p = 0.75$), and confirmatory discussion ($p = 0.77$). For additional information on the F -values for these analyses, please contact the lead author.

FIGURE 2

Polarization and Congruent Information Seeking Among Respondents Writing a Political Essay⁷



engendered by advocating a position that is antithetical to their beliefs and thus experience more dissonance, selective exposure, and attitude change.

The results suggest that a complicated picture of dissonance processes exists when party affiliation is at stake. Although neither significant main effects for choice, nor interactive effects with essay topic for dissonance arousal, attitude change, or confirmatory behavioral intentions were observed when party affiliation is controlled, these null findings do not account for the unique force that party affiliation plays. When party affiliation is entered into the model, the expectations are borne out: Democrats and Republicans differ in their response to the stimuli. Only for Republicans does writing a counterattitudinal essay under conditions of high choice lead to more dissonance. Meanwhile, the difference in dissonance arousal between conditions of high and low choice is muted or even reversed for Democratic respondents.

This difference is reinforced when the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes often concordant with dissonance arousal are considered. Republicans, who report heightened dissonance after writing a counterattitudinal essay under conditions of high choice, also demonstrate polarization in their political attitudes and an elevated desire for congruent political information after writing a political essay. The consistency of the results lends

⁷To graph these variables using the same scale, a linear transformation was used for party feelings. Specifically, the values for the feeling thermometers (measured from 0 to 100) were divided by 10 to match the scales for political attitudes and confirmatory behavioral intentions (measured from 0 to 10).

credence to these findings: among that group for whom dissonance is heightened when writing the counterattitudinal essay—in this case, Republicans—polarization occurs and confirmatory behavioral intentions are strengthened.

Conversely, this increase in polarization and confirmatory behavioral intentions is not evident among Democrats, nor, given the fact that dissonance was not produced among this group, should it be expected. Attitudinal and behavioral effects occur in conjunction with the uncomfortable arousal produced when people voluntarily engage in counterattitudinal behavior (Elliot and Devine, 1994; Festinger, 1957). If this behavior does not create dissonance, attitude change and confirmatory information seeking are no longer necessary.

These differences between Republicans and Democrats in their response when asked (or told) to write a counterattitudinal essay may have been heightened by the context of the study. Initial differences in polarization may have heightened Republican response to the stimuli. The Republicans in this study demonstrate lower levels of polarization on political attitudes,⁸ *except* when they voluntarily wrote a political essay. When choices are more difficult, such as when differences between alternatives are less pronounced, the resulting dissonance is higher (Festinger, 1957; Tarvis and Aronson, 2008). Thus, if Republicans in this study started with a more difficult decision between the parties, as might be suggested by lower polarization in other conditions, writing a counterattitudinal essay highlighting the benefits of membership in the opposing party will create *more* discomfort and thus stronger efforts to reduce that arousal. Therefore, efforts to encourage those less enamored with their current party identity to switch ties may be more likely to backfire, as wavering partisans feel a stronger sense of discomfort when reflecting on their party identity, which leads them to defend and strengthen their loyalties.

Secondly, this study occurred at a liberal college campus, raising the possibility that political disagreement was more common for Republicans than Democrats. While Democratic youth facing a Republican majority become more confrontational, initiating conversations with those who disagree, this does not occur for Republicans (McDevitt, 2010). Thus, Republicans, recognizing they are in the minority, may be more sensitive to disagreement and its effects.

Meanwhile, Democrats are not only embedded in a largely congruent community, but also in an academic climate often heralded for promoting and valuing exposure to diverse views, which Democrats already tend to value (Borah et al., 2013). This academic climate may also further reinforce a Democratic tendency towards open-mindedness (Jost et al., 2003; McDevitt, 2010) and willingness to engage in dissonance-arousing tasks on political issues (Nam et al., 2013). In this atmosphere, it is possible Democrats found the mandatory instructions more constraining than voluntary encouragement to consider an opposing viewpoint in their essay, thus explaining the surprising finding that engaging in counterattitudinal behavior did not produce more dissonance for Democrats when choice was high. Future research should continue to explore whether dissonance is a more conditional and contextual response to environmental as well as identity forces than early research suggested (see also Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005).

This raises the possibility that the partisan differences observed in dissonance arousal and responses are specific to the method used to provoke dissonance. While Democrats may have been more comfortable voluntarily promoting the opposing party than Republicans—and thus less likely to report dissonance or its related effects—they may be equally susceptible to other forms of dissonance arousal, such as credible information that counters their

⁸For perceptions of closeness to the parties, political affiliation exerts a significant main effect ($p < 0.05$), with Republicans reporting lower polarization than Democrats. Further, more Republicans report that they “lean toward” their party (45.8 percent) compared to Democrats (35.0 percent).

political identity (Vraga, 2011). Future research should continue to explore how political orientations affect response to stimuli, particularly in the realm of dissonance arousal and reduction, or in situations in which internalized conflict or ambivalence is likely to be engendered. Stronger arousal on the part of Republicans in response to this internalized conflict may also explain why they are more hesitant to engage in counterattitudinal discussion or information consumption (Garrett, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009; Mutz, 2006; Stroud, 2011), in an effort to avoid the potential for dissonance that might result if they acknowledge points in the other party's favor.

Further, it is also worth noting that although dissonance arousal felt by Republicans in this study led to more polarized attitudes, polarization is not the inevitable result of dissonance. Indeed, previous research into dissonance arousal using the induced-compliance technique has selected personally relevant issues to heighten the potential for arousal, yet still largely found moderation in attitudes (Cooper, 1998; Elliot and Devine, 1994). Two reasons may explain this difference: the nature of the identity being threatened and the ever-present choice between parties inherent in political identity. While students may not like tuition increases or 7 a.m. classes (Cooper, 1998; Elliot and Devine, 1994), they do not threaten the self-concept or identity. When identity is at stake, moderation in attitudes is less feasible and polarization in defense of that identity instead often results (Batson, 1975; Cooper and Mackie, 1983). Further, party affiliation is at its heart an ongoing selection between mutually exclusive alternatives, which the free-choice paradigm suggests leads to polarization in favor of the chosen alternative (Festinger, 1957; Tarvis and Aronson, 2008). This study argues that enumerating the benefits of the unchosen alternative (e.g., the opposing party) emphasizes the rewards inconsistent with their choice to *not* join that group, creating dissonance. The response, given that change in party affiliation is unlikely (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002), is to remind oneself of the benefits of one's party and the negatives of the other, leading to polarization. That being said, however, does not mean that dissonance will always produce polarization—and indeed, in some extreme cases, recognizing an important conflict with their party may lead an individual to switch his or her affiliation (Carsey and Layman, 2006). Further, this study cannot answer the long-term effects of this experience—it may be that the short-term defensiveness and polarization that occurred here is not only mitigated but reversed over time, as sleeper effects in persuasion might suggest. Thus, careful consideration must be given to the situations in which dissonance is likely to produce polarization in defense of previously held positions, or when instead it may lead people to rethink their existing loyalties.

This study has limitations that must be addressed; most particularly, its use of a student sample. Students tend to have more malleable and less-developed political attitudes, which solidify with participation in political events (Niemi and Jennings, 1991; Valentino and Sears, 1998). Thus, writing an essay favoring membership in the oppositional party may have aroused different feelings among this group than among adults more stable in their political attitudes. On the one hand, feelings of dissonance and the resulting polarization in attitudes and behaviors may be even stronger among an adult sample more committed to and certain of their party affiliation. In contrast, adults may be more familiar with handling political disagreement or confronting the need to compromise in their party ideals, and thus may find writing a counterattitudinal political essay less arousing. Further, other factors—traits like open-mindedness or conflict avoidance, or experience with disagreement in conversation or media use—may contribute to the relationship between party affiliation, dissonance, and polarization. The findings of the current study must be considered exploratory, pointing to the need for future research to more carefully consider the role that party affiliation and other political orientations play in predicting response

to situations that can induce dissonance and its effects on outcomes like polarization and selective exposure.

A second limitation entails the nature of the stimulus used to produce dissonance. It is unlikely that a partisan is often asked to write an essay favoring an opposing party. However, democracy does require citizens to consider the benefits of joining (even temporarily via voting for) an opposing party. Similarly, many schools and management trainings encourage students to play devil's advocate to develop critical thinking skills and improve decision making (Schweiger, Sandberg, and Ragan, 1986). While the systematic and public nature of writing the essay likely reinforced dissonance and its effects, future research should explore whether the same mechanisms apply in other situations in which partisans consider aligning themselves with an opposing political stance, and whether the response differs by party affiliation. If the same mechanisms do operate, interventions designed to encourage people to reconsider their party affiliation or political attitudes, like a deliberative poll or playing devil's advocate in discussion (Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger, 2009) may backfire and inspire more polarization.

Additionally, the explicitly political nature of the outcomes examined limits the ability to test how Republicans reduced their arousal after writing an essay about tuition increases under conditions of high choice. They showed no shift in their attitudes toward the parties or in their intentions to seek out confirmatory political information, nor, given the explicitly political nature of these responses, should it be expected. This study's focus on dissonance in *political* contexts, that people experience dissonance and often change their attitudes after writing a counterattitudinal essay on issues of personal relevance such as tuition, is well established (Cooper, 1998; Elliot and Devine, 1994) and needs no confirmation here.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study makes several contributions to our understanding of political psychology, identity, and behavior. This study demonstrates that dissonance arousal can help explain the response to internalized conflict that may arise in political contexts, while also illustrating pressures toward selective exposure and polarization. Importantly, however, this experience is not uniform. When voluntarily advocating an incongruent position in an essay, Republicans but not Democrats experienced greater dissonance and strengthened their allegiance to their party. Therefore, scholars interested in the emergence of polarized political attitudes should also consider the role that dissonance plays in this process. It may be that cross-pressures—such as considering the benefits of the opposing party or recognizing the limitations in one's own—contribute to a more polarized electorate attempting to validate and defend its existing ideals—and that this process is stronger for some political groups compared to others.

However, while many of the forces contributing to polarization in this study—including the resistance of the conflicted identity to change and the inherent choice between alternatives—may apply across contexts, it is also possible that the dissonance that occurs in a political context, especially when party affiliation is implicated, is a qualitatively different experience. For example, dissonance arousal should typically be more extreme in political contexts, given the importance of the attitudes at stake in political conflict. Future research should examine this possibility to better understand the implications of dissonance theory for political scholars.

This study also has democratically valuable implications. As part of democratic decision making, ideally citizens would consider the pros and cons of *each* party in making their

decision. If even a minor commitment to enumerating the other party's benefits—whether it is writing a counterattitudinal essay or playing devil's advocate in a conversation—leads to a deeper commitment to selective exposure to congruent information and to polarization in attitudes, it suggests that those activities thought to be valuable are in fact counterproductive.

Furthermore, careful attention must be paid to how different groups respond to situations that might arouse dissonance. In this case, Republicans experienced psychological discomfort and polarization when asked to voluntarily enumerate the benefits of membership in the other party—discomfort and polarization avoided by their Democratic counterparts. If some groups are more susceptible to dissonance arousal and polarization when faced with internalized conflict, it may create an uneven distribution of opinion. Understanding the conditions under which people are willing to reconsider their political identities and attitudes remains of paramount importance when democracy requires these considerations.

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