

Partisan Priming in Foreign Aid: The Effects of Presidential Elite Cues on Israeli Aid Perception

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This study aims to investigate the influence of presidential elite cues on American public opinion regarding foreign aid to Israel. The project will specifically examine whether the explicit mention of a president's name within a description of their foreign aid policies impacts public support. The research is grounded in the theory of motivated political reasoning, which suggests that citizens, in an increasingly polarized political environment, rely on partisan shortcuts to navigate complex issues. These cues act as directional motivations, leading individuals to align their attitudes with pre-existing beliefs and political identities (Bolsen & Palm 2019). Given that the U.S. has maintained a long-standing, historically bipartisan commitment to Israel, the roles of President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden become especially important. As two of the most prominent and polarizing figures in contemporary American politics, their names serve as powerful cues that can activate partisan biases on a deeply sensitive issue. By focusing on U.S. aid to Israel, a policy with a long history of bipartisan support but now under the spotlight due to highly publicized conflict, this study offers a unique, timely context to observe how these cues operate on a sensitive issue.

To test this theory, I employed a randomized online survey experiment. Data was collected via PureSpectrum, with a target sample size of 300 respondents as a pilot study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a Trump cue group, a Biden cue group, or a neutral control group, which did not contain a Trump or Biden cue. Each group read a nearly identical passage on U.S. aid to Israel, with the only difference being the specific presidential cue. Participants' approval ratings for the aid were measured both before and after they read the passage, allowing for an analysis of attitude shifts. Random assignment was crucial to ensure that any observed differences in policy attitudes could be attributed to the political cue rather than pre-existing differences or biases between participants. The findings of this research are expected to show that a president's name can measurably alter support for this long-standing policy, highlighting the power of framing and the potential for partisan identity to shape policy preferences. This is further supported by Kertzer et al. (2019) who argue that individuals process information through a lens of motivated skepticism, which "suggests that individuals might interpret signals, even costly ones, in a way that buttress or reinforce their existing beliefs so that signals induce polarization rather than convergence among recipients" (Kertzer et al. 2019, 99).

This study is crucial to foreign aid literature because it moves beyond traditional studies of policy content and public opinion. By focusing on elite cues as a powerful external factor, it highlights that public approval is not just about a policy's humanitarian or strategic merit, but is also heavily influenced by partisan signals. The project will bridge a significant gap in the literature that combines the fields of international political economy and political psychology, offering a more holistic understanding of the complex factors that determine the domestic politics of foreign aid; it also provides empirical evidence that the messenger can be as important as the message itself, offering a nuanced perspective on how public attitudes toward a specific foreign policy are formed.

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References

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