

United they Stand, Divided they Fall?

An Experimental Examination of the Political Cost of Party Dissent

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Abstract — Debate has re-emerged about the desirability of weakening Canada’s notoriously rigid party discipline to empower Members of Parliament with a greater role in the policy process. Thus far, parties have been reluctant to embark on meaningful reform due to the perceived political cost. Interviews with MPs have suggested that party dissent damages parties in the polls by changing perceptions of party leader competence. This proposition, however, has received scant empirical attention. This paper will address this issue by employing the experimental method. Student respondents were exposed to mock newspaper articles about a hypothetical K-12 education policy proposal in British Columbia. Coverage was manipulated to test for whether intra-party dissent on the issue influences policy preferences and party leadership evaluations, and for the latter, if any effect is contingent on media framing that links dissent to party leader competence. Findings suggest intra-party dissent negatively affects party leader evaluations of partisan voters, particularly those high in political sophistication, but only when the media frame highlights the negative implications for dissent on the party leader’s leadership capacity. Dissent also undermines support for related policy regardless of the media frame. This appears to have additional knock-on effects on leader performance evaluations.

George Drew, as leader of the federal Progressive Conservative opposition in 1956, was the first to note that members of parliament were “trained seals” due to their unwillingness to deviate from the direction of party leaders (Franks 1987: 99). Prime Minister Trudeau famously remarked that “MPs are nobodies 50 yards off Parliament Hill.” More recently, Michael Chong’s *Reform Act* was inspired by a desire to restore the power of parliament by strengthening its members vis-à-vis party leaders. The popular view of the powerless backbench MP has a long history in Canada.

There is good reason for the persistence of this theme. For most of the past century, Canadian political parties have been assured that their members in the legislature will vote according to party lines the vast majority of the time. Not only is cross-voting rare, but it is generally confined to a limited number of “maverick” MPs with little effect on parliamentary outcomes when it does occur (Franks 1987). This situation has been lamented by political commentators and parliamentarians alike. A survey of Members of Parliament (MPs) conducted by Docherty (2005) shows that almost 90 percent would either strongly support more free votes, or support them with qualifications. He further estimates that over 60 percent believe party discipline harms their ability to represent constituents

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(161-2). Party discipline is a feature of parliamentary life that many complain about, but few do anything about (Docherty 2005: 157). The question is why. This paper will seek to explore the costs of parliamentary dissent on political parties in public opinion.

The Political Cost of Dissent

Party discipline persists, in part, because of the need for actors to resolve collective action dilemmas. There is strategic incentive to coordinate votes in an assembly to maximize the utility of legislators, and a reason to accept party discipline depending on certain parameters, such as parliamentary rules and party size (Eguia 2011). Party leaders in parliamentary systems need to maintain a certain level of cohesion in order to function effectively as a party – a fact which is even more salient for the party in government. They need to be able to survive votes on matters of confidence and present a stable government to the electorate. The opposition, for its part, must provide a compelling “government-in-waiting,” which would not be well served if its members vote often with the government (Docherty 1997: 139).

Discipline is essential where party cohesion is low. Cohesion can be defined as the ability of group members to work together to forward group goals (Özbudun 1970: 305). Discipline, on the other hand, is the extent to which “followers regularly accept and act upon the commands of the leader” and the means by which wayward members are coerced to follow instruction from the top (Özbudun 1970: 305). This is arguably the case in Canada’s two dominant brokerage parties, the Conservatives and Liberals. Both parties are not anchored firmly in social cleavages. Class, in particular, does little to structure partisan loyalties in Canada (Carty and Cross 2010; Johnston 2010). The major parties are loose coalitions geared towards winning elections. Party discipline thus stands in the place of natural cohesion more so than in a comparatively more cohesive party system.

Scholars have long noted that party discipline is, to a large degree, voluntary. Discipline is maintained because MPs believe cohesion is to their personal advantage, is mutually advantageous to their parties and themselves, and that disciplined behaviour is required to maintain viable parties (Kornberg 1966: 83). A consistent theme in Kornberg’s survey of parliamentarians was that “the majority of Canadian MPs act in concert with their parties *because they want to*. The reason for this is that most legislators “internalized a party preference and were exposed to party-relevant attitudes and values by members of their family” (Kornberg 1967: 130). MPs are ultimately partisans, so party loyalty comes naturally to most. However, another reason that MPs voluntarily toe the line and party leaders crack down on intransigent parliamentarians is that there is a common perception that breaking ranks entails a cost to the party.

Scholars have argued rigid discipline exists because there are obvious and unacceptable costs of dissent for parties and their leaders. Franks notes two factors. First, increased uncertainty about votes on government business leads to a loss in power for the government party. But even if this loss is trivial due to the strength of a government’s majority, the party can take a hit in public opinion. As Franks (1987) argues, “The media in particular are quick to jump on any presumed disagreement within a party as a failure of leadership and proof of incapacity and incompetence within the party. Such bad press harms the party’s image and weakens electoral support” (109). Dissenting puts a member’s colleagues in a difficult situation. As Kam (2012) points out, “By dissenting, an MP weakens

the authority and credibility of party leaders, places colleagues in the difficult position of having to explain away their loyalty to their own constituents, and undermines the party's image as a unified and coherent political force." Interviews with MPs tend to reinforce this view. An Australian Labor Party senator declared "Disunity is death. *It's about the media and people's perceptions*, and it [disunity] leads directly to unpopularity" (emphasis added). The reason for this, a shadow minister of the same party remarked, is that "There's a perception out there that if you can't run your party, you can't run the country" (Kam 2012). There is general agreement among parliamentary scholars and politicians themselves that dissent carries a cost in public opinion.

Leadership Evaluations and Media Frames

There is a strong belief that cross-voting and more general dissent carries a cost to parties and their leaders by both parliamentary scholars and legislators themselves. One of the key mechanisms that has been highlighted is that dissent negatively impacts voter perceptions of a party leader's competence, which, in turn, influence overall performance evaluations and vote choice. There is a notable lack of agreement on the relative importance of leadership evaluations. Estimates of a leadership effect on the vote have varied from 0-2% in Canada (Johnston 2002) to 0.5-3.5% in the U.S. (Bartels 2002) and 0-8% in the U.K. and Australia (Bean and Mughan 1989). Some scholars argue that leadership evaluations aren't particularly important (Pierce 1995; Bartle and Crewe 2002) or that the effect is small relative to other important factors such as partisanship and ideology, while others contend that it is a consistent and substantively meaningful factor in Canada (Winham and Cunningham 1970) and comparatively (Banducci and Karp 2000; Bittner 2011).

The mixed assessment of the importance of party leader evaluations in vote choice has likely been muddled by its operationalization with flawed feelings thermometers (Johnston 2002). It is for this reason that recent scholarship has made it a point of moving beyond such catch-all evaluations to the unpacking of leadership traits and their impact on vote choice. Drawing from social psychology literature, traits that relate to leader attributes can be broken down into four categories: integrity, competence, leadership, and empathy, which can be further incorporated into two larger dimensions: competence and character (Bittner 2011). The former of which is most likely to be affected by dissent judging by the opinions of parliamentarians and parliamentary scholars. These traits can have a large effect on vote choice. In perhaps the most systematic effort to date, Bittner (2011) found that competence and character evaluations rival partisanship and ideology in seven countries across 35 election studies.

There are good theoretical reasons to suspect leadership traits matter a great deal in voter behaviour. News coverage frames particular stories in terms of their implications for the "horserace" or the leadership capabilities of the party leaders. This framing in coverage primes voters to weight leader evaluations more highly, and potentially other factors less, in their vote choice (Mendelsohn 1993). This was found to be the case in the 1988, 1993, and 1997 Canadian federal elections (Mendelsohn 1993, 1994, 1996; Gidengil et al. 2000). Additionally, the findings suggest the most politically sophisticated of us are more prone to a media priming effect of leadership. This was further supported by Bittner (2011) who found that only the most politically sophisticated make distinctions about leader competence and character.

We thus have strong reasons to suspect leader evaluations, particularly traits such as competence and character matter in vote choice. We also have also reason to believe party dissent may tie directly into perceptions of competence. This may be a direct effect, or, as implied with the above discussion, it may require the media to frame the topic in a way that highlights the implications of the dissent for the leader's competence. In order for a framing effect to occur two things need to hold a frame must be *available* for use and *accessible* in that it can be easily retrieved from long-term memory (Eagly and Chaikin 1993; Fazio 1995; Chong and Druckman 2007). There are two implications. First, citizens must have an understanding of how dissent may reflect on a party leader's competence and performance given expectations set by Canada's political system and media culture. Second, citizens would need to have made connections between party dissent and leader competence in the past, so that this consideration of the issue is accessible. Both of these conditions are likely only met by the citizens most attentive to politics – the politically sophisticated.

Despite the rather strong theoretical grounds to expect party dissent to influence public opinion in some fashion, empirical evidence has failed to find a convincing link. Research by Kam (2012) cited earlier, attempted to address this question by assessing whether party dissent caused a decrease in a party's popularity trend. He found that dissent had no impact on electoral outcomes once party popularity was controlled. Rather, dissent occurs because of weak party popularity. The problem of endogeneity plagues any observational effort to assess whether cross-voting affects public opinion. Dissent can be a function of the trend in a party's popularity. MPs may have an incentive to cross-vote in order to distance themselves from their unpopular party policies. There are ways to attempt to deal with this issue, such as with instrumental variable analysis, but ultimately observational research is limited in its ability to address this problem. This is particularly true given a lack of consistent overtime measures of both public opinion and monthly, or annual breakdowns of cross-voting. Observational research also cannot answer the question of whether any effect of cross-voting on public opinion is the result of the cross-voting or the frame placed on dissent by the media. The experimental method has the potential to dig deeper into this question.

Design and Procedure

The experimental manipulation in this study involved the exposure of respondents to carefully designed mock newspaper articles about the proposal and passage of an education policy by Christy Clark's Liberal government in British Columbia. The treatments varied the existence of dissent on the proposal, and if there was such dissent, the existence of a media frame attached to the issue that linked intra-party disagreement to leader competence. An important feature worth noting in the treatments is the emphasis on realism. Mock newspaper articles were specifically designed so that they appear to be from a wide variety of news sources. Respondents were given the choice of which source they wished to receive their information on the policy initiative.² An example is shown in Figure A1 in the Appendix. The aim was to ensure that respondents trusted the information they were receiving, while simultaneously believing that the issue was real and important. Respondents were also exposed to

² Options included the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *CBC News*, the *Vancouver Sun*, *The Province*, and *Yahoo News Canada*. 66 percent of respondents selected the *Globe and Mail* and *CBC News*.

enough information to make a judgment on the issue, and to engage effectively with the treatments. Subjects first received a primer on independent schools policy in British Columbia and an article where Premier Clark introduced the legislative initiative in which they were exposed to arguments on both sides of the issue. The primer and first article did not vary across treatment conditions. Next, subjects received one article that covered debate and discussion about the legislative initiative and a second article that talked about its passage in the B.C. legislature. These two articles varied across conditions. The goal was for subjects to receive enough information on the issue that any treatment effect would not be excessively blunt to call into question its external validity.

Figure 1. Experimental Protocol

- I. Pre-treatment questionnaire (demographics, political sophistication, PID, ideology, etc.)
- II. Independent schools policy primer
- III. Newspaper article introducing voucher policy proposal by Clark government
- IV. Treatment articles
- V. Dependent variables
- VI. Post-treatment questionnaire (manipulation check, recall, attitudes towards party discipline and vouchers)
- VII. Debriefing

A number of choices had to be made in the design of the treatments. First, the scale and scope of dissent may condition how citizens perceive party dissent. A small group of three MLAs was chosen to oppose the Premier to find a balance between a lone maverick MLA casting a predictable vote against his or her party and a full-scale backbench revolt. Second, the treatments manipulate dissent in the government benches rather than in the opposition. This choice was taken because maintaining discipline is tougher while in government, while also being substantively more important, as it reflects the party's capacity to govern. Moreover, there was a concern that getting a treatment effect would be too easy in the B.C. context because of how little subjects knew about the opposition leader (only $\frac{1}{4}$ of subjects could identify John Horgan). Lastly, and most importantly, a suitable policy had to be chosen. The use of a budget bill was perhaps the most logical choice. However, we want to rule out any special effect of dissent on matters of confidence that could potentially bring down the government. The K-12 education policy field was selected because it likely has greater importance for students without being so applicable to their current lives that the nature of the experimental deception would be uncovered.³ A finding of an effect of dissent on leader evaluations will almost certainly generalize to more important bills, such as those that involve matters of confidence. All told, most of

³ We also wanted an issue that could be relatively salient in practice, and anchored in the ideological and partisan divides. Public support for independent schools is contentious in B.C., and a voucher program would be even more so. Liberals and those on the right would be inclined to support such a policy, and NDP supporters and those on the left would tend to stand in opposition. But, we also wanted there to be a bit of ambiguity in the ideological placement of such a policy, so the policy was designed such that the rich would fail to receive a voucher subsidy and arguments by the Clark government emphasize the importance of expanding independent school access to low-income B.C. residents. This worked as expected. As Table 1 below shows, ideology and partisanship are determinants of voucher attitudes. However, the R^2 remains low. There remains ambiguity in subject attitudes towards school vouchers. The distribution of this variable can be found in the right-panel of Figure C2 in the Appendix.

the choices made in the design of this study will make it harder to find a treatment effect even if there is an actual effect of dissent on public opinion.

The study was conducted with an online survey experiment using 497 undergraduate political science student subjects who participated in the semi-annual subject pool for the University of British Columbia's Political Opinion Laboratory in December and April in exchange for course credit. Subjects were required to be Canadian citizens or permanent residents. The full protocol is shown above in Figure 1. Respondents were exposed to three newspapers articles, the last two of which varied depending on their random assignment into one of three conditions:⁴

- i. **United:** policy debate features a unified government caucus. Disagreement with education policy is confined to teachers' unions and the provincial N.D.P.
- ii. **Dissent:** policy debate features dissent on the education policy from three government MLAs.
- iii. **Framed Dissent:** policy debate features dissent on the education policy from three government MLAs where media coverage emphasizes the implications for the Premier's legislative agenda and leadership capacity.⁵

The text of the articles and the highlighted changes across conditions can be found in Appendix A. After reading the newspaper articles, respondents were asked to fill out a questionnaire that included the dependent variables. Of particular interest are questions on leadership traits. Respondents were asked to rate how well the following terms described Christy Clark: competent, strong leader, really cares about people, and honest. The first two fall on the competence dimension, and the last two on the character dimension (Bittner 2011). Subjects were also asked to rate their satisfaction with the performance of the party leaders and to identify who they would vote for in an upcoming election. Subjects were tasked to recall certain features of the news stories, such as the positions taken by various actors on the debate, and the arguments they used. Subjects also reported their opinions on party discipline and school vouchers. The summary statistics for the measures used can be found in Appendix B.

Hypotheses

The design of the experiment suggests the exploration of three relatively simple hypotheses. First, we may expect the presence of intra-party dissent to lower support for related policy. Citizens may look for low-cost signals from elites about the acceptability of the policy to form their preferences.

⁴ Random assignment was successful. There were no significant differences in key variables across the three conditions. The results can be found in Table C1 in the Appendix.

⁵ Engagement with the treatments was better than expected. First, respondents correctly perceived the dissent manipulation 70 percent of the time. This is lower than hoped, but given reported treatment effects are only found among the successfully treated, this gives us greater confidence we are seeing genuine responses to the treatment in the results that follow. Second, respondents did genuinely engage with the news articles. 96 percent commented on the policy proposal when given an opportunity, and only one respondent questioned the existence of the policy proposal. It elicited strong opinions on both sides. The vast majority of the sample read the articles for a longer time period than they were designed for (approx. 90-100 seconds each). The mean score on the recall battery was 17.3 out of 22, which is impressive, given that some of the arguments for and against the proposal they were asked about appeared in the primer, but not the articles. Distributions are shown in Figure C1 of the Appendix.

When they do so, intra-party dissent may lower their support for a policy. This has not been identified as a potential cost of party dissent, however, given the importance of party cues in political persuasion we may expect such an effect (Popkin 1991; Cohen 2003; Berinsky 2009).

Policy Dissuasion (H1): Subjects in either dissent condition should have less support for school vouchers than those in the united condition.

Second, if party dissent negatively impacts leadership perceptions, we would expect lower evaluations in the dissent condition compared to the united condition. This should only apply to the competence dimension of leadership traits. Performance evaluations should, in turn, be influenced by changes in those competence traits.

Undermined Leadership (H2A): Subjects in the dissent condition should have lower competence evaluations of Premier Clark than those in the united condition, but this should not apply to character traits.

Third, if we believe the leadership frame matters in linking observed dissent to competence evaluations subjects in this condition should have lower competence evaluations of Christy Clark than in both of the other conditions. Similarly, performance evaluations should be affected through changes in competence evaluations.

Media Framing (H2B): Subjects in the framed dissent condition should have lower competence evaluations of Premier Clark than those in both the united and dissent conditions, but this should not apply to character traits.

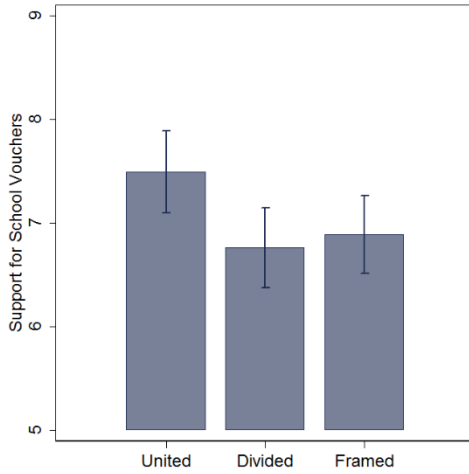
Lastly, we may expect the effect of the treatments to vary based on partisanship and political sophistication. Liberal partisans likely react more to dissent within their own party than other groups of voters. Partisanship, even in Canada, is an identity with which citizens identify. Like-partisans should react most negatively to instances where their team appears fractured and take this frustration out on evaluations of the party leader, part of which is based on the ability of the leader to keep their team united in pursuit of its agenda. As the discussion above alluded to, politically sophisticated respondents are the ones likely to have the link between competence and party unity available in their long-term memory, and accessible for use. We thus expect the politically sophisticated to respond more to the dissent treatment conditions.⁶

Results

First, there does appear to be strong support for the policy persuasion hypothesis (H1). As Figure 2 below shows, both dissent conditions generate a modest drop in support for school vouchers. Moving from the united condition to the dissent condition decreases support for school vouchers by 0.75 points or about 8 percent of its distribution (defined here and throughout as between the 5th and

⁶ Political sophistication was operationalized with a political knowledge battery. Students were asked to identify the Major of Vancouver, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the leader of the B.C. N.D.P., and the political party of Jason Kenney. The resulting scale was dichotomized at approximately the 50th percentile.

Figure 2. Treatment Effect on Policy Attitudes



about the acceptability of a policy given uncertainty surrounding a novel issue.⁷

Second, we find limited support for the undermined leadership hypothesis (H2A), but evidence for its equivalent when framed by the media (H2B). Figure 3 below plots the means of competence, character, and performance evaluations from left to right. Both treatment conditions with party dissent have a negligible effect on character evaluations when compared to the united condition. Similarly, intra-party dissent, on its own, fails to put a significant dent in competence and performance evaluations. However, when the media frame emphasizes the leadership implications of the dissent, the party leader's competence and performance evaluations take a significant hit. They drop 0.4 points in their competence evaluation (about 5 percent of the distribution with is significant at the 0.1 level), and 0.44 points in their performance evaluation (about 7 percent of the distribution with is significant at the 0.05 level). It appears that subjects' leader evaluations were responsive to the presence of party dissent, but that it required the media to explicitly link the dissent to leadership considerations in their framing of the story.

95th percentile). This effect is significant at the 0.05 level. The framed dissent condition has a similar effect on voucher attitudes although this is only approaching significance at the 0.1 level ($p=0.12$).

Although the magnitude of this treatment effect is minor at first glance, its importance is revealed when compared to other factors that may influence attitudes towards school vouchers. Table 1 below shows the results of an OLS regression where gender, income, religiosity, political sophistication, ideology and partisanship are regressed on voucher attitudes, along with the treatments. As the beta coefficients show, the treatment has an effect that approaches that of religiosity and ideology, which is remarkable given the subtlety of the treatment. Subjects appear to have been persuaded to some degree by the very presence of intra-party dissent it likely sends them a signal

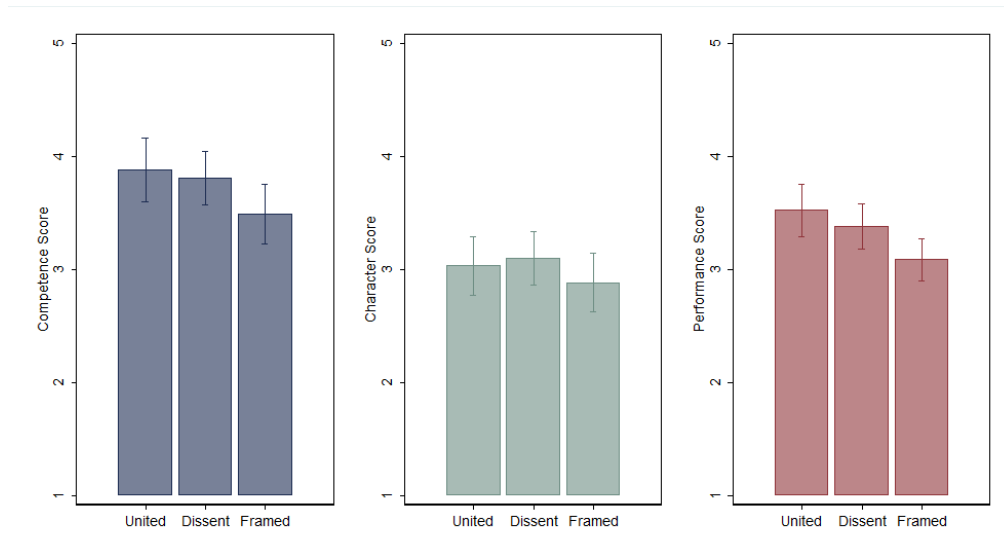
Table 1. Determinants of Voucher Attitudes

| | Coefficient | SE | Beta |
|----------------|-------------|------|-------|
| Dissent | -0.79*** | 0.31 | -0.13 |
| Framed | -0.58* | 0.32 | -0.10 |
| NDP | -1.42*** | 0.29 | -0.24 |
| None/Other | -1.23*** | 0.37 | -0.16 |
| Ideology | 0.26*** | 0.10 | 0.18 |
| Income | 0.01 | 0.11 | 0.00 |
| Knowledge | -0.33 | 0.18 | -0.06 |
| Religious | -0.43*** | 0.12 | -0.16 |
| Gender | 0.22 | 0.26 | 0.04 |
| Constant | 8.34*** | 0.82 | |
| R ² | 0.17 | | |
| N | 439 | | |

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

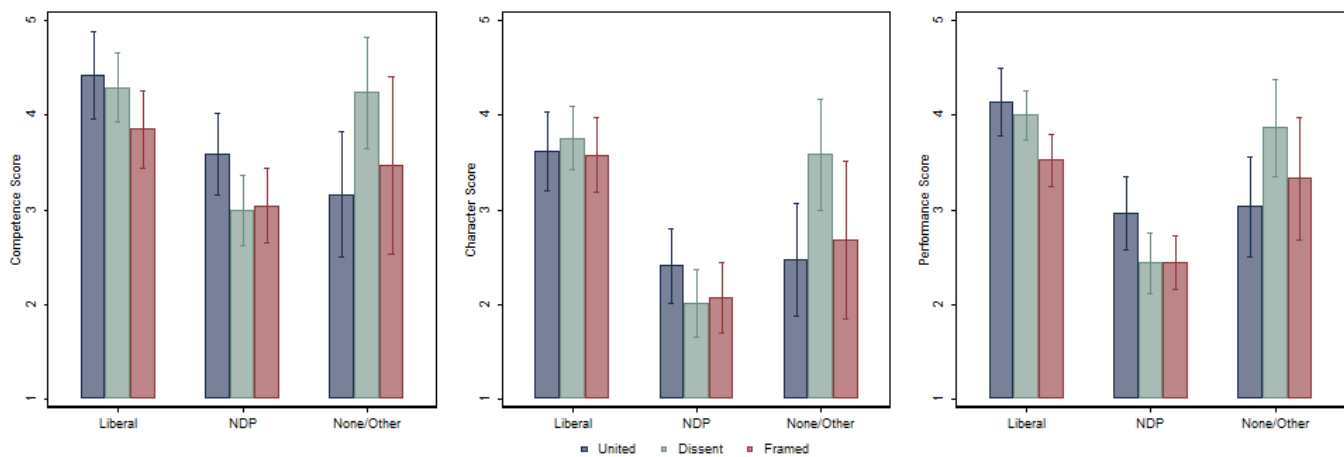
⁷ There were few expectations on whether the treatment effect on policy attitudes would be conditioned by partisanship or political sophistication going into this project. It does appear that the effect is found exclusively among partisans, likely

Figure 3. Mean Leader Evaluations across Treatments



There is also evidence that the treatment effect shown above varies by partisanship among subjects. The means for each experimental condition are broken down by partisanship below in Figure 4. As expected, Liberal partisans appear affected by the framed dissent treatment. The effect is not quite significant for competence evaluations ($p=0.12$), but is significant at the 0.05 level for performance evaluations. Interestingly, NDP partisans also appear to be affected by the treatment articles, and in contrast to Liberal partisans, this happens in both in the dissent and framed dissent conditions. Aside from on the character dimension, both conditions feature significantly lower leader evaluations that reach statistical significance at the 0.05 or 0.1 levels.

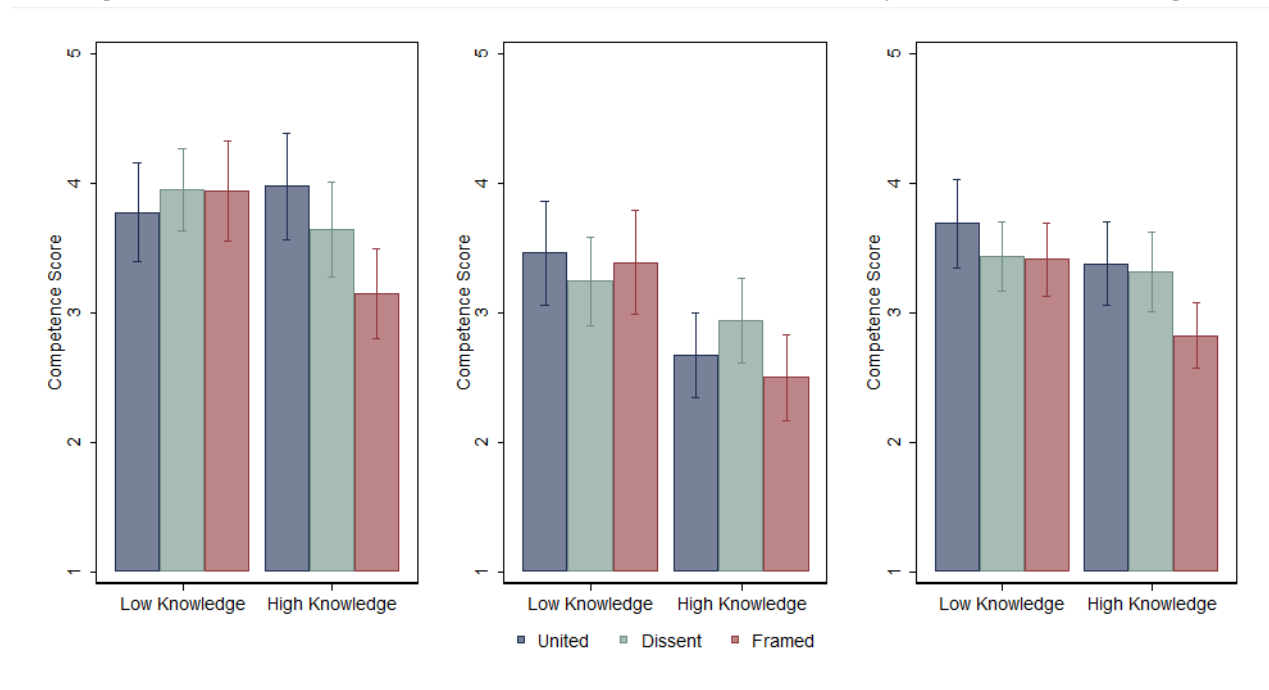
Figure 4. Mean Leader Evaluations across Treatments, by PID



because dissent for them is a more meaningful signal about the acceptability of a given policy for these voters. Among these subjects, the effect of such dissent matches the magnitude of ideology as a determinant of voucher attitudes. Dissent, regardless of its framing by the media, has a meaningful effect on related policy attitudes.

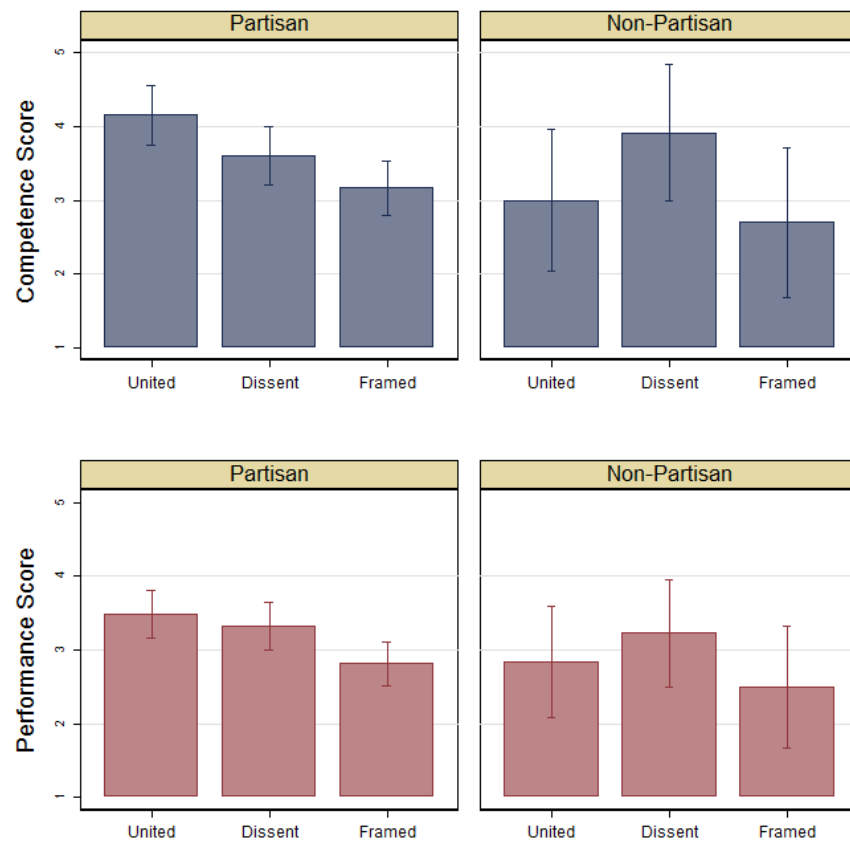
In sharp contrast, non-partisans appear to reward dissent in their leader evaluations at some level. It significantly improves both leader traits and performance evaluations. This effect is erased when media coverage highlights the leadership implications of the dissent. There were no strong expectations going in about how non-partisans would react to the treatment. It seems likely that, given their lack of partisanship, they perceive party dissent in a different light until the media pours cold water on it with their leadership frame. The limited sample of non-partisans and lack of theoretical expectations, however, should lead us to be cautious toward this result. It does seem, however, that party dissent, particularly when framed by the media, affects competence and performance evaluations of partisan voters in the expected direction.

Figure 5. Mean Leader Evaluations across Treatments, by Political Knowledge



There also appears to be differences in the treatment effects between subjects of different levels of political sophistication shown in Figure 5 above. Competence evaluations for the politically sophisticated take a hit in the framed dissent condition. Competence evaluations drop by 0.85 points, or 12 percent of its range. This is significant at the 0.01 level. Performance evaluations also drop by a similar magnitude and the difference is significant at the 0.05 level. In contrast, character evaluations are not significantly affected by the treatment conditions, nor does dissent alone seem to matter. This suggests that in order for the media's emphasis on the implications of dissent to matter in conditioning leader evaluations, citizens must have some requisite knowledge of why unity matters for competence. We, of course, cannot be entirely sure this is the mechanism. Future research should probe this further.

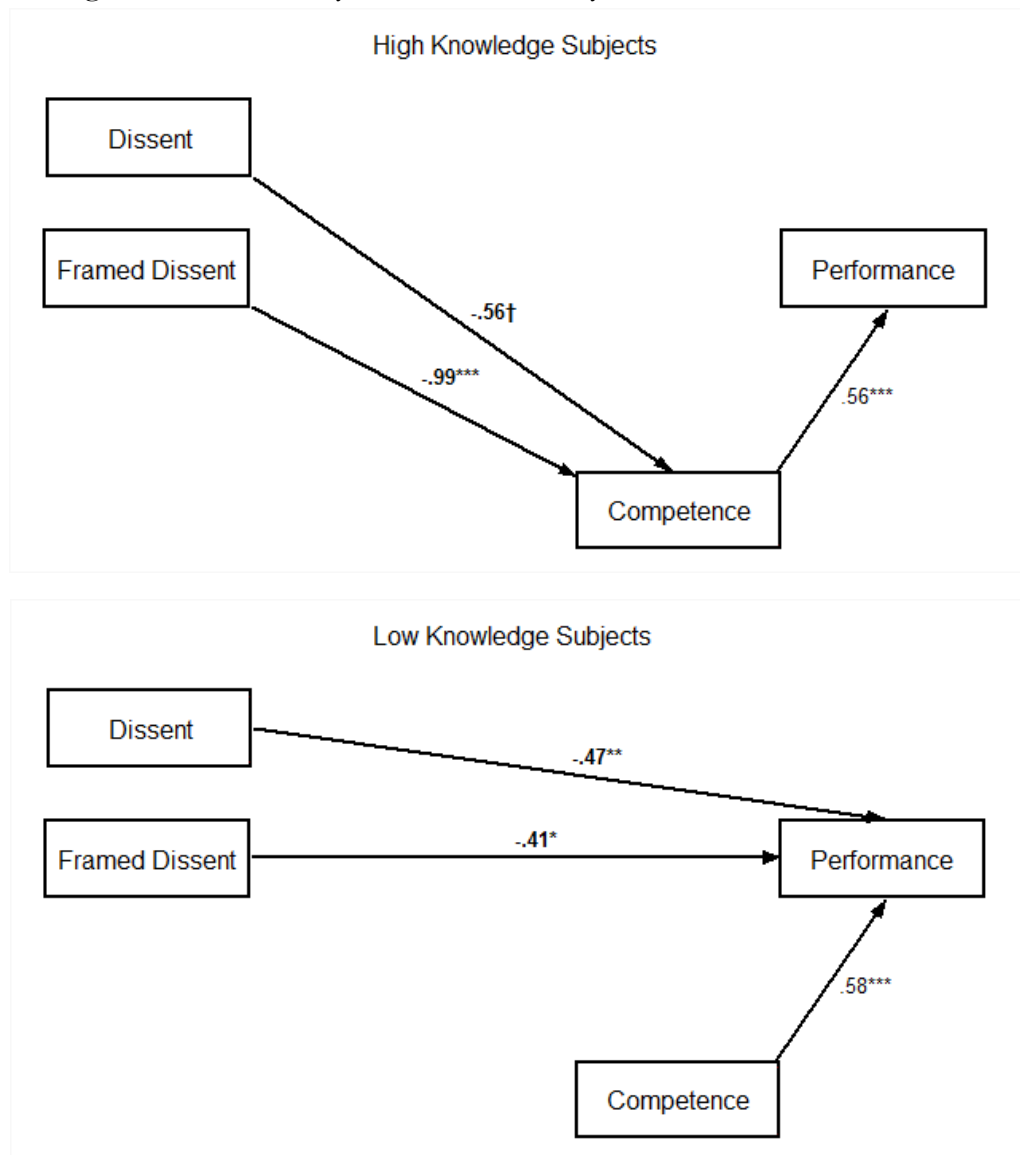
Figure 6. Linear Predictions, Competence and Performance Evaluations among High Knowledge Subjects



Thus far we have found that partisans and political sophisticates are most likely to have their leader evaluations affected by the party dissent treatment. This effect is strongest when the media highlights the link between dissent and leadership considerations. It appears that these two mediating factors do not operate independently, but rather jointly. The treatment effect is found exclusively among partisan subjects who scored highly in political knowledge. Competence and performance evaluations were regressed on an interaction of partisanship, political sophistication, and the treatments. The linear predictions for high knowledge subjects are shown above in Figure 6. The left panels display the predicted evaluations for partisans among this politically sophisticated subset, while the right shows the effects for politically sophisticated non-partisans. Among sophisticated partisan subjects, the effect of the framed dissent condition on competence and performance evaluations is significant at the 0.01 level. It reduces both evaluations by 13 percent of their distributions. There is no such effect among high knowledge, non-partisans.⁸ The linear predictions for low knowledge subjects can be found in Appendix D. This shows that low knowledge partisans are affected by treatments, but interestingly only in their performance evaluations, and not in their competence trait evaluations. This suggests something else may be at work for these subjects.

⁸ The regression table can be found in Appendix D.

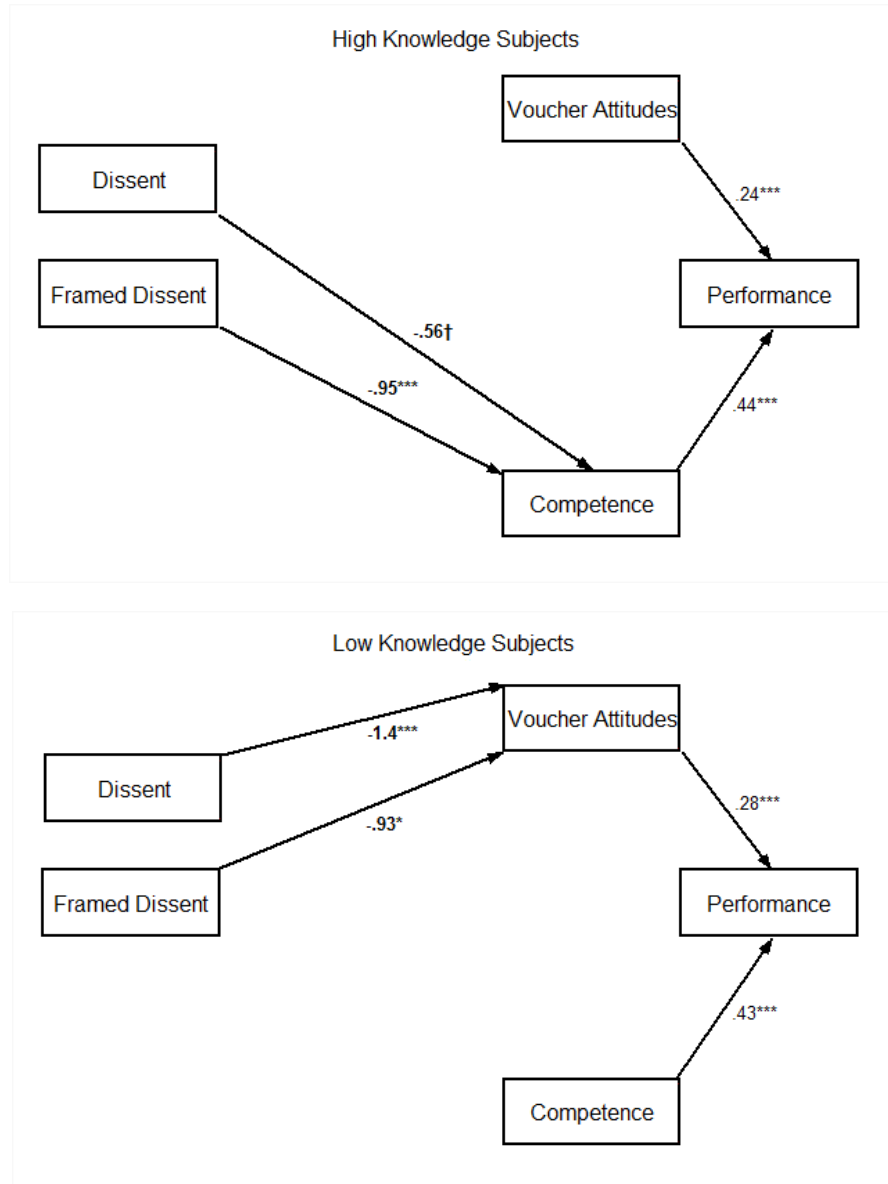
Figure 7. Path Analysis without Policy Attitudes – Direct Effects



Note: Partisan subjects only. Paths depicted if $p < 0.15$; $^{\dagger} < 0.15$, $^{*} p < 0.1$, $^{**} p < 0.05$, $^{***} p < 0.01$

Previous work has argued that character and competence traits together feed into a leader's overall performance evaluation (Bittner 2011). Thus, the expectation was that performance evaluations would be affected by the treatments through changes in competence evaluations. However, performance evaluations are also influenced by policy considerations. Since the findings here indicate that party dissent affects support for both the policy and the leader, this suggests a more complicated causal story may be at work. This could also explain why low knowledge partisan subjects have their performance evaluations influenced by the treatments, but not their leader trait evaluations.

Figure 8. Path Analysis with Policy Attitudes – Direct Effects



Note: Partisan subjects only. Paths depicted if $p < 0.15$; $^\dagger < 0.15$, $^* p < 0.1$, $^{**} p < 0.05$, $^{***} p < 0.01$ †

We can construct a path analysis for the primary variables under consideration for subjects that were affected by the treatment – partisan voters with high and low levels of political knowledge. We have strong theoretical expectations about the causal flow. Our treatment is clearly exogenous due to random assignment. Policy preferences are prior to leadership evaluations (Miller and Shanks 1996), and leader traits are themselves prior to the overall evaluation (Bittner 2011). Figure 7 above provides the direct effects of our variables omitting related policy attitudes for high and low knowledge partisan subjects. Indirect effects can be found in Table 2 below. As expected, the treatment primarily affects performance evaluations indirectly through changes in competence evaluations among high knowledge partisans. The indirect effect is significant at the 0.01 level and composes just over three quarters of the total effect of the treatment on performance evaluations. In contrast to previous

expectations, there is no indirect effect of the treatment through competence evaluations among low knowledge partisans. The effect runs directly from the treatment to performance evaluations. The question is why.

Table 2. Indirect Effects of Path Analyses

| High Knowledge | No Policy | | With Policy | | Low Knowledge | No Policy | | With Policy | |
|--------------------------|-----------|------|-------------|------|--------------------------|-----------|------|-------------|------|
| | Coef. | SE | Coef. | SE | | Coef. | SE | Coef. | SE |
| → Performance Evaluation | | | | | → Performance Evaluation | | | | |
| Framed | -0.54*** | 0.20 | -0.59** | 0.20 | Framed | -0.04 | 0.20 | -0.23 | 0.22 |
| Dissent | -0.31 | 0.20 | -0.40** | 0.20 | Dissent | 0.00 | 0.21 | -0.41** | 0.21 |

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

The reason for this is that policy attitudes themselves affect performance evaluations. Among low knowledge subjects, support for related voucher policy drops in response to party dissent and this, in turn, affects overall performance evaluations. The effect does not operate through leader traits. As the bottom panel of Figure 8 shows, the direct effect between the treatments and performance evaluations disappear when policy attitudes are entered into the model. An indirect effect emerges, although it is only statistically significant for the dissent condition. In contrast, as the top panel of Figure 8 shows, adding policy attitudes hardly affects the story for high knowledge partisan respondents. Thus, party dissent influences the leader performance evaluations of low knowledge partisans, but through changes in policy attitudes rather than through changes in leader competence traits, as is the case for high knowledge partisan subjects.

This may signal two distinct mechanisms that link party dissent to leader performance evaluations for two groups of citizens. For partisans with low levels of political knowledge, intra-party dissent acts as a low-information shortcut to form their issue preferences and update their leader performance evaluation. For politically sophisticated partisans with stronger priors, such a cue is less valuable. But, they make distinctions between competence and character traits (Bittner 2011) and have the contextual knowledge to link the former to instances of intra-party dissent – particularly if this frame is activated by the media. Thus, performance evaluations are influenced through changes in leader traits for these subjects. This story is compelling, but ultimately more work needs to be done to flush out the mechanisms that link dissent to leader performance evaluations across different groups of citizens. If party dissent influence leader and policy evaluation, it's an effect that is unlikely to be homogenous.

Discussion

The results presented above provide strong support for the policy dissuasion (H1) and media framing (H2B) hypotheses from above. First, party dissent appears to depress support for related policy initiatives. Supporters in both dissent conditions reported weaker support for school vouchers than those in the united condition. This was particularly true for partisan voters. Further, the magnitude of the effect was impressive relative to other determinants of voucher attitudes. Citizens

take cues from party elites. The presence of internal party dissent signals to voters that such a policy may be unacceptable, independent of the details of the policy or arguments used for and against the policy. This possible effect of party dissent has not been a focus of the literature. Second, party dissent appears to negatively affect the perceived competence of the party leader in the public. Subjects were less likely to rate Christy Clark as a competent, capable leader in the presence of party dissent. However, this was only the case if the media frame of the stories drew clear links between the dissent and competence considerations. Without such a link, leader evaluations are relatively stable. As we expected, leader character evaluations were unaffected by the dissent treatments.

The literature on leadership evaluations and media framing suggested clear links between political sophistication and potential treatment effects. In order for dissent to matter for leader evaluations, subjects need to understand *why* it matters in demonstrating leadership incapacity. The implications need to be obvious for citizens. It is the politically sophisticated who would be most attuned to this. They are most likely to have read political process stories that highlight party dissent and to recognize the norms of Canada's political system that reward party unity. Those not attuned to Canadian politics likely do not have the link between party unity and leader competence available or accessible in their long-term memory to be activated by a media frame. Partisans, for their part, have the most invested in the political process. They have the *motivation* to punish leaders for violating these norms. It should not be surprising that it is among politically sophisticated partisans that treatment effects on leader evaluations are most prominent.⁹

As far as dissent leads to a political cost, it is notable that partisans, the voters least liable to change their vote, are the most responsive to treatment. This may explain why similar results do not turn up in observational work using election results as the dependent variable, while parliamentarians – more attuned to the attitudes of politically attentive partisan voters – are convinced there is a real cost to dissent. Non-partisans appear to respond to party dissent very differently. There is some evidence they reward dissent on its own, while the effects of this diminish if the media frames the dissent in a negative way vis-à-vis competence considerations. This, however, is based on a limited number of students. To the extent one views dissent as only having a meaningful cost if it influences accessible voters, further research that oversamples non-partisans may be helpful.

Lastly, the path analysis from above suggests that the causal story is not quite as simple as the treatment causing changes in policy attitudes, leadership trait evaluations, and performance evaluations independently. For high knowledge partisan voters, dissent influences performance evaluations through its effect on competence trait evaluations, particularly when framed by the media. This makes sense given previous findings. Bittner (2011) has found that it is the politically sophisticated who use leader traits to inform their performance evaluations. They also have the contextual knowledge to link party dissent to competence and have strong enough priors such that their policy attitudes are

⁹ It is important to keep in mind that mediating variables themselves are not randomly assigned. On its face, it is possible that political sophistication and partisanship are correlated with other factors that are doing the actual work. This cannot be ruled out entirely. However, given the fact that both factors seem necessary to generate a treatment effect, it seems plausible to claim that citizens need to understand the norms of our political system and have motivation to defend them, even if that is not perfectly captured by political sophistication and partisanship. It is also worth noting that this motivation does not stem from an apparent hostility towards more leeway for MP influence. High knowledge partisans are actually *more* likely to say they believe in such reform.

comparatively unaffected by treatment. In contrast, low knowledge partisan voters have their performance evaluations influenced by changes in policy attitudes. For these subjects, intra-party dissent provides a useful cue to form their attitudes towards related policy and how they evaluate the party leader. More research, however, is needed for greater confidence in the story presented here about how party dissent affects different groups of citizens.

This paper makes several important contributions through its findings. First, it provides evidence that party dissent imposes a cost on party leaders by undermining their leadership with highly attentive partisans, and depressing support for related policy – the latter possibility having not been a focus in previous literature. This bolsters the claims made anecdotally by parliamentarians and parliamentary scholars in Canada that parties are punished by the public for dissent. Second, this paper provides a novel approach to studying the political implications of internal party dissent for party leaders that can be extended to different levels of government, different issues, and for different magnitudes of dissent. It does not suffer from endogeneity, can more closely home in on predicted effects on policy and leader evaluations rather than using blunt measures of election results, and is able to distinguish between the causal effect of the party dissent itself, and the media frame, on public opinion, all unlike previous observational research.

There are two major limitations to this paper. First, the number of feasible experimental manipulations was limited. The number of treatment conditions was reduced in order to conserve statistical power. The literature, however, points to many other factors that may condition the effect of dissent on public opinion, such as the scale and frequency of dissent (Kam 2012), and whether it involves an opposition party or if it involves votes that are matters of confidence (Franks 1987). More work needs to be done to replicate the design and explore other potentially interesting mediating factors. Second, although great pains were taken to provide a realistic treatment embedded in news coverage respondents would receive in their daily lives, ultimately external validity is best ensured through replication. The use of student subjects also potentially limits any finding of an effect of dissent on public opinion. It seems likely political science students are unusually supportive of more power for parliamentarians than the general public. At some level, this is a positive, since the sample provided a tough test for the hypotheses explored in this paper. However, we cannot rule out that dissent, in addition to its framing, may matter in influencing public opinion in the broader public. A representative sample is needed. With that being said, both of these limitations mean these results likely present a conservative estimate of the political cost of dissent. Considering prior observational research found no such effect, this allows us to have a better and more nuanced understanding of this issue.

The findings of this paper present a rather conservative estimate of the effect of dissent on public opinion. Advocates of reform need to recognize that loosening the reigns of party discipline entails a cost to party leaders. At a minimum, it appears to undermine support for related policy initiatives and their leadership, particularly among politically attentive, partisan voters. However, to the extent that lower leadership evaluations and policy support may create party dissent, party leaders may find themselves in a negative feedback loop when they loosen the reigns, particularly if opposing parties fail to follow suit. All told, there appears to be all downside, and little upside, for leaders in allowing greater voice for their backbench members.

We must also recognize that the media may play an important role in heightening this cost through its framing of coverage. Although columnists from across the political spectrum have bemoaned the lack of power for ordinary parliamentarians, they and their outlets likely play an important role in the maintenance of the status quo by framing disputes within a party as a reflection on the competence of the party leader rather than perfectly acceptable policy disagreement. If advocates of reform are to have any success, this needs to change.


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Appendix A – Experimental Design

Figure A1. Example Mock Newspaper Article, CBC News


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School choice bill passes amid labour opposition

CBC News



Premier addresses reporters after passage of Bill 20

VICTORIA – Bill 20, the “School Choice for British Columbians Act,” passed its third reading with 45 MLAs in favour and 36 opposed. The effect of the law will be to give parents a five thousand dollar school voucher which they can use at a public school or a group one or two independent school of their choice.

The adoption of the school voucher proved divisive. Amid labour push-back on the bill, Liberal MLAs were united in their support of Premier Clark’s initiative. “There will always be spirited disagreement on important policy decisions facing the province. But make no mistake. This is a huge win for parents. It’s a huge win for students, and it’s a huge win for this province. It will go down as a signature accomplishment of this government,” argued Education Minister Mike Bernier.

Teachers’ unions, however, decried the result. “Christy Clark and the Liberals have once again abandoned our public schools. We should be investing in our schools to develop the skills and values needed for the 21st century. Instead we are moving backwards,” argued Jim Iker, President of the B.C. Teacher’s Federation.

Other groups cheered the development. “The reality is we have a strong and vibrant independent school system in B.C., we should be finding ways to make it accessible to everyone, and this new law does exactly that, explained Elizabeth Moore, Executive Director of the Independent Schools Association of British Columbia.

The NDP have vowed to repeal the legislation if they win the upcoming provincial election in 2017.

Primer

Thank you for answering these questions so far.

In the next few minutes you will read a handful of newspaper articles describing a political issue that has recently come up in British Columbia. You will be asked questions about the articles at the end. Please read the articles the way you would when you are following political issues that interest you.

You only need a little background to proceed. Education policy in British Columbia is very different than other provinces such as Ontario. K-12 schools are given operating grants per pupil as a means of rewarding schools for attracting students. Between 2000 and 2013 per pupil funding has increased 37.4 percent. Grants to public schools are thus increasing despite declining enrollment.

British Columbia also has a large network of independent schools. Unlike in many other provinces, many of these schools are publicly funded. There are 5 categories of independent schools and the level of public funding varies accordingly. The two largest are the following:

Group 1 – receive 50 percent of their local board of education's per student operating grant. They are required to employ B.C. certified teachers, have programs consistent with ministerial directives, provide a program that meets the learning outcomes of the B.C. curriculum among other requirements. The vast majority of students enrolled in independent schools fall into this category (56,062)

Group 2 – receive 35 percent of their local board of education's per student operating grant. They must have all the requirements of Group 1 schools, but have operating costs that exceed ministry grants paid to local boards of education. There are approximately 14,352 students in Group 2 schools.

11 percent of B.C. students are enrolled in independent schools. Total enrollment has grown 8.7 percent in the past five years.

Supporters of the independent school system argue that it allows parents maximum flexibility on where they send their kids to school, and allows students to potentially acquire specialized education that isn't facilitated in the public school system. Additionally, many people believe competition among education providers, both public and independent, will generate lower costs and better outcomes. Supporters want to extend choice in education further by making it easier for lower-income families to afford education at independent schools, which have a tuition averaging over \$16,000 per year.

Opponents of the independent school system argue that these schools are diverting important tax dollars away from public school education. They further argue that independent schools generate serious inequities because of their high tuition. High income families are able to send their kids to expensive independent schools, while others are not as fortunate. They also voice concerns that the specialization of independent schools facilitate religious, class, and ethnic segregation, and believe all students should be able to learn together in public schools. Opponents want B.C. to claw back grants to private schools and increase grants to public schools to reduce class sizes.

Premier Christy Clark is in the process of passing legislation that facilitates greater access of independent schools for lower income families. It is being touted as a potential signature accomplishment for her tenure as Premier.

Article 1 – Introduction

Premier launches ambitious plan for education reform

By Carol Saunders

VANCOUVER – Premier Clark stood at a podium in front of York House in Vancouver to announce a sweeping new policy designed to expand school choice in the province.

“I stand here today in front of the top-ranked school in our province to announce our government’s intention to make choice in education more affordable for ordinary British Columbians,” announced Premier Clark. “All students, regardless of their wealth or status, should be able to access the quality of education found at schools like York House.”

The premier’s proposal would institute a voucher system. Parents will be given a voucher, worth up to \$5,000, which they can utilize at any public school or independent schools from Groups 1 or 2 that fulfill B.C. program and teacher certification requirements. The value of the voucher declines with total family income. It disappears entirely for families that earn over two hundred thousand dollars per year.

“This new program will ensure the wealthy pay their fair share to allow the children of less fortunate British Columbians the opportunity to access alternative forms of high quality education,” explained Premier Clark. “Education providers should have to compete for all students regardless of the financial means of their parents.”

The Independent Schools Association of British Columbia (ISABC) cheered the development. “We believe that parents should have the ability to shop around for education that suits the needs of their child,” explained Elizabeth Moore, Executive Director of the IASBC. “Public dollars do not cover the cost of providing high quality education, so tuition remains too high for too many British Columbians. This proposal is starting an important conversation.”

Critics are concerned that essential money will be diverted from public school funding. “It is laudable that the government wants to give low income British Columbians access to quality education. But the best way to achieve this is to make sure our public schools have adequate funding to reduce class sizes,” argues Jim Iker, President of the B.C. Teacher’s Federation. “The government has failed at this task, and their latest proposal is a large step backward.”

A bill is expected to be introduced in the legislature later this week.

Article 2 – Debate

Divided Liberals, NDP clash on school vouchers

By Mike Donnelly

VICTORIA – Education Minister Mike Bernier today introduced Bill 20, the “School Choice for British Columbians Act,” for first reading. The Clark Government is hoping to pass the bill before the end of the legislative session.

Premier Clark seems to have lost some grip over her legislative caucus. **Liberal MLAs appear to be somewhat divided on the issue. One MLA, who refused to be identified, expressed concern the government was pushing too far too fast in expanding the reach of independent schools in the province.** Such caucus unrest would represent an unusual challenge to the Premier’s leadership on a signature piece of the government’s agenda.

It appears the government MLAs are holding firm in support of the proposal for now despite of increasing opposition to the school voucher proposal.

The NDP pounced on the bill, depicting it as an attempt to undermine public education in the province. “Once again this government is failing our system of public education. At a time when our public schools are suffering declining enrollment and limited resources, this government has decided to pour even more taxpayer money into private education,” charged Rob Fleming, NDP education critic, in the debate on First Reading. “If this government cared about quality education, they would be increasing funding for our struggling public schools.”

The premier swatted down NDP attacks at a press conference today, arguing that they are ignoring the facts. “Mr. Fleming seems to conveniently forget that per pupil funding of public schools has risen continuously over the past decade despite declining enrollment,” declared Premier Clark. “Our plan includes new funding in the form of vouchers to provide greater choice to all British Columbians. The NDP, as always, wants to take that choice away from families.”

The B.C. Teacher’s Federation and other unions are stepping up attacks on the government’s voucher plan. Protests are scheduled to take place outside the Legislative Assembly later this week. Organizers expect over five thousand to attend.

Bill 20 is expected to pass first reading tomorrow.

***Text in italics was included in unified treatment. Text in bold was included in the dissent condition. Underlined text was featured in framed dissent condition.*

Article 3 – Bill Passage

School choice bill passes amid labour opposition, Liberal division/disarray

By Mike Donnelly

VICTORIA – Bill 20, the “School Choice for British Columbians Act,” passed its third reading with 45 MLAs in favour and 36 opposed. **Three Liberals MLAs broke ranks from the government to vote with the NDP against the bill – an unusual rejection of Premier Clark’s agenda.** The effect of the law will be to give parents a five thousand dollar school voucher which they can use at a public school or a group one or two independent school of their choice.

The adoption of the school voucher proved divisive. Amid labour push back on the bill, Liberal MLAs were united/divided/deeply split in their support of Premier Clark’s initiative. As a sign of growing turmoil in Liberal ranks, three Liberal MLAs voted against the initiative, and another two abstained. Some expressed their reservation with the adjustment of the voucher’s value to family income, while others preferred to put the funding towards public schools. The dissent marks a notable challenge to the Premier’s leadership. It is unclear how this disorder will affect her agenda moving forward.

“There will always be spirited disagreement on important policy decisions facing the province. But make no mistake. This is a huge win for parents. It’s a huge win for students, and it’s a huge win for this province. It will go down as a signature accomplishment of this government,” argued Education Minister Mike Bernier.

Teachers’ unions, however, decried the result. “Christy Clark and the Liberals have once again abandoned our public schools. We should be investing in our schools to develop the skills and values needed for the 21st century. Instead we are moving backwards,” argued Jim Iker, President of the B.C. Teacher’s Federation.

Other groups cheered the development. “The reality is we have a strong and vibrant independent school system in B.C., we should be finding ways to make it accessible to everyone, and this new law does exactly that, explained Elizabeth Moore, Executive Director of the Independent Schools Association of British Columbia.

The NDP have vowed to repeal the legislation if they win the upcoming provincial election in 2017.

Appendix B – Summary Statistics

| | Mean | Standard Deviation | Max | Min |
|-----------------------------------|--------|--------------------|--------|-------|
| Competence Evaluation | 3.72 | 1.95 | 7 | 0 |
| Character Evaluation | 3.01 | 1.88 | 6 | 0 |
| Performance Evaluation | 3.32 | 1.60 | 6 | 1 |
| Political Knowledge | 2.21 | 1.23 | 4 | 0 |
| Political Knowledge - Dichotomous | 0.52 | 0.50 | 1 | 0 |
| Leader Affect | 2.99 | 1.57 | 6 | 1 |
| Ideology | 3.89 | 1.96 | 7 | 1 |
| Liberal PID | 0.46 | 0.50 | 1 | 0 |
| NDP | 0.38 | 0.48 | 1 | 0 |
| No PID/Other | 0.16 | 0.37 | 1 | 0 |
| Voucher Attitudes | 7.04 | 2.82 | 13 | 1 |
| Parliamentary Power Attitudes | 4.65 | 2.05 | 8 | 2 |
| Recall | 17.30 | 2.91 | 21 | 12 |
| Time in Treatment | 120.44 | 51.60 | 223.35 | 63.20 |

Appendix C – Subject Engagement and Randomization Check

Figure C1. Subject Engagement – Treatment Timer and Recall

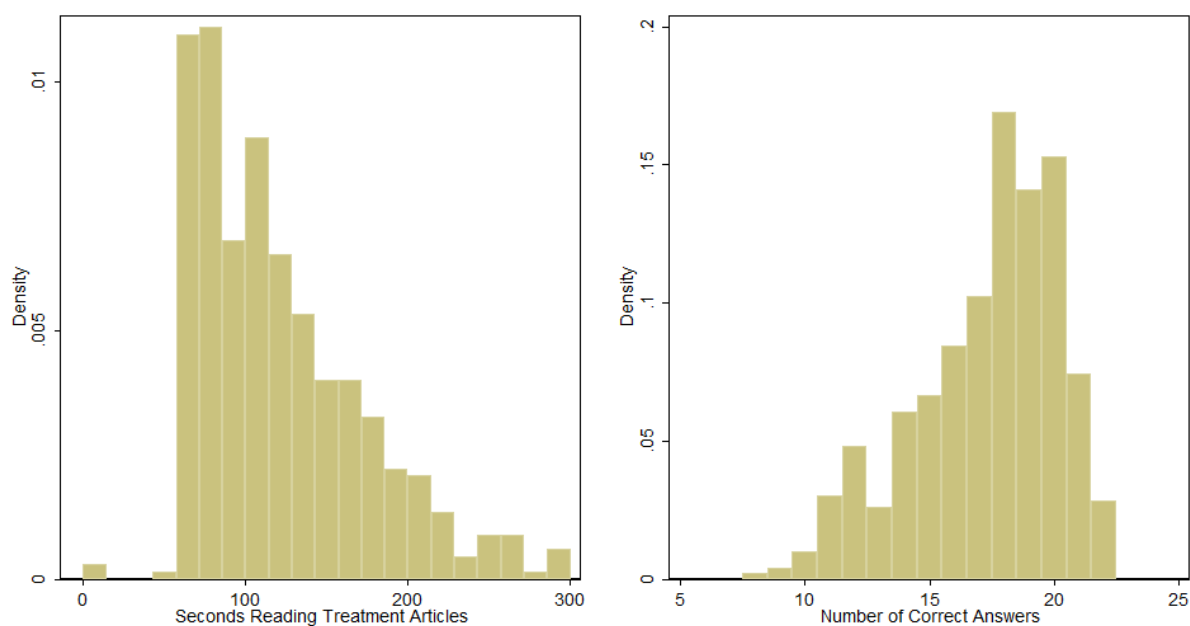


Figure C2. Parliamentary Reform and Voucher Attitudes

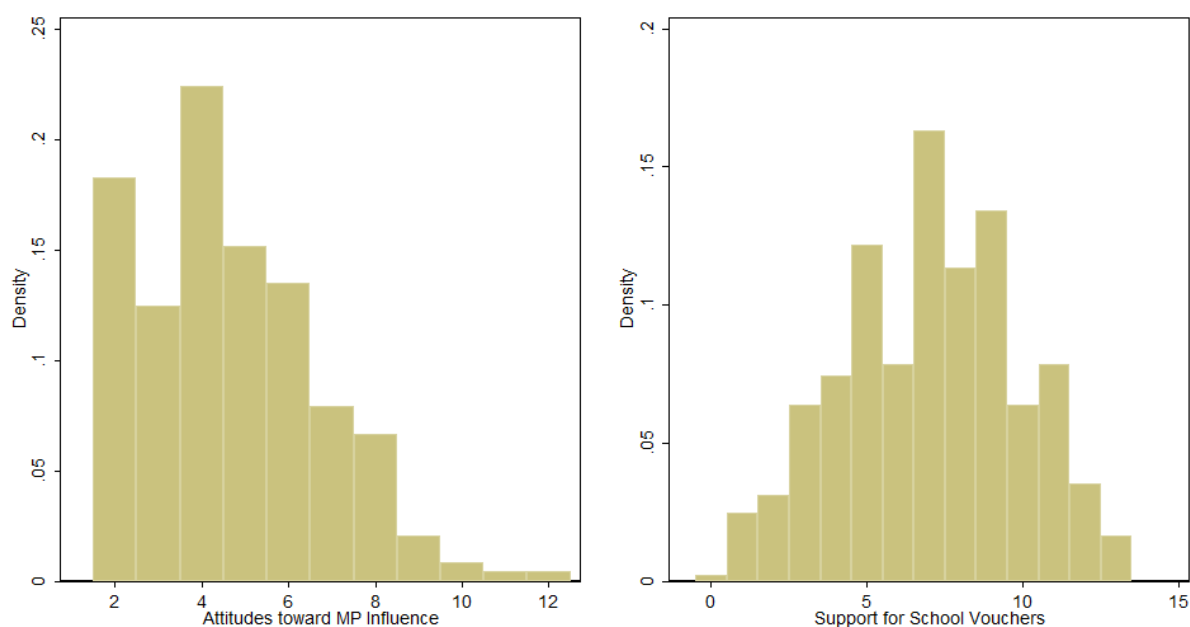


Table C1. Randomization Check, Multinomial Logistic Regression Estimates

| Outcome | Dissent | | Framed | |
|---------------------|---------|------|--------|------|
| | Coef. | SE | Coef. | SE |
| Gender | 0.16 | 0.25 | 0.18 | 0.25 |
| Income | -0.02 | 0.07 | -0.02 | 0.07 |
| Religiosity | -0.10 | 0.11 | 0.08 | 0.12 |
| Political Interest | 0.13 | 0.07 | 0.02 | 0.07 |
| Political Knowledge | -0.04 | 0.10 | 0.14 | 0.11 |
| NDP | 0.06 | 0.28 | 0.11 | 0.28 |
| None | -0.06 | 0.34 | -0.34 | 0.37 |
| Ideology | 0.10 | 0.07 | 0.04 | 0.07 |
| Constant | -1.07 | 0.95 | -1.04 | 0.97 |

† p<0.15, * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

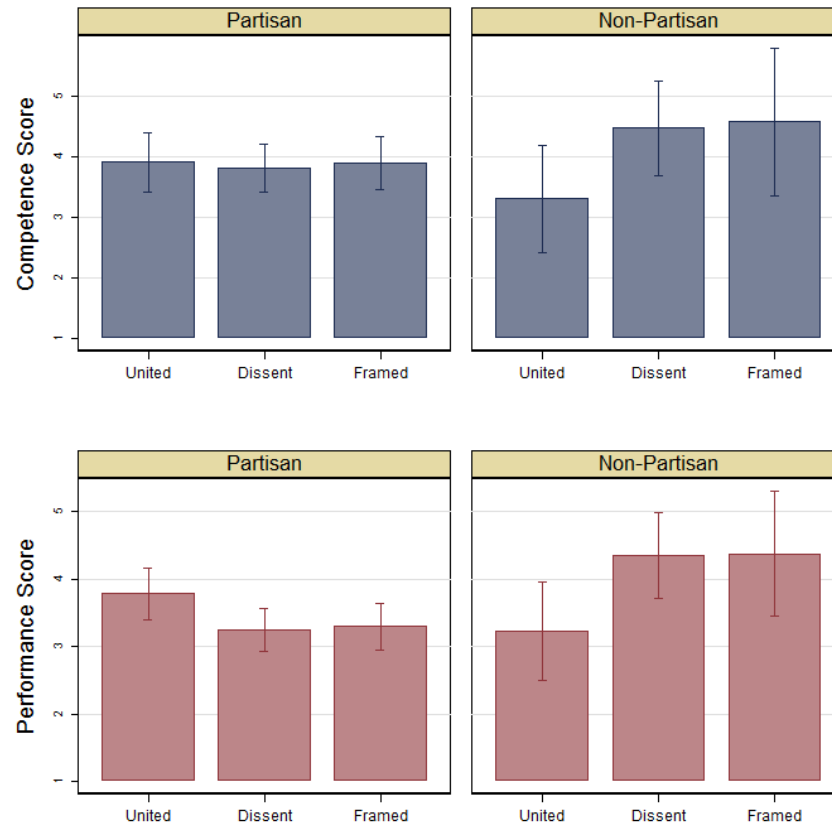
Appendix D – OLS Estimates and Linear Predictions

Table D1. OLS Estimates, Competence and Performance Evaluations

| | Competence | | Performance | |
|------------------------------------|------------|------|-------------|------|
| | Coef. | SE | Coef. | SE |
| Dissent | -0.10 | 0.38 | -0.54* | 0.30 |
| Framed | -0.02 | 0.40 | -0.49 | 0.31 |
| Non-Partisan | -0.60 | 0.61 | -0.56 | 0.50 |
| Dissent * Non-Partisan | 1.27 | 0.81 | 1.66*** | 0.66 |
| Framed * Non-Partisan | 1.28 | 1.00 | 1.63** | 0.78 |
| Knowledge | 0.25 | 0.38 | -0.30 | 0.30 |
| Dissent * Knowledge | -0.45 | 0.51 | 0.38 | 0.41 |
| Framed * Knowledge | -0.97* | 0.52 | -0.18 | 0.41 |
| Non-Partisan * Knowledge | -0.56 | 0.88 | -0.10 | 0.70 |
| Dissent * Non-Partisan * Knowledge | 0.21 | 1.20 | -1.10 | 0.96 |
| Framed * Non-Partisan * Knowledge | -0.59 | 1.35 | -1.30 | 1.07 |
| Constant | 3.91*** | 0.30 | 3.79*** | 0.23 |

† p<0.15, * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Figure 6. Linear Predictions, Competence and Performance Evaluations among Low Knowledge Subjects



Note: There appears to be a slight treatment effect in performance evaluations among low knowledge partisans, but not in competence evaluations. This is likely due to the influence of related policy attitudes. Low knowledge partisans did lower their support for school vouchers in response to dissent, which likely had a knock-on effect on performance evaluations as shown with the path analysis above.