

**What's So Amazing about Really Deep Thoughts?
Cognitive Style and Political Misperceptions**

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Abstract

What helps partisans learn uncomfortable truths—ones that contradict partisan points of view? I investigate the roles of two aspects of cognitive style, the need for cognition and the need to evaluate, along with the roles of partisan ambivalence and political awareness. I find that each factor is at times associated with correct knowledge of political facts, but not in consistent ways. For example, the need for cognition is associated with knowledge of comfortable, but not uncomfortable, truths. Other factors, such as partisan ambivalence and political awareness, have similarly mixed effects.

So you found a girl
Who thinks really deep thoughts
What's so amazing about really deep thoughts?
—Tori Amos, “Silent All These Years”

In a 2003 essay, Robert Luskin asked a simple question: what would the “heavenly public” be like? That is, how would citizens behave—politically speaking—if they were to exemplify democratic ideals? Any attempt to answer this question must confront an important paradox: the citizens who are the most attentive to politics are sometimes the most misinformed. This is because the qualities associated with attentiveness are often associated with an unwillingness to learn or update beliefs in light of new evidence. This paradox is embodied in current politics by the behavior of partisans.

It has long been known that partisanship serves as a perceptual filter, influencing how citizens view political figures and issues (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960). But it has become increasingly clear that partisanship also influences perceptions of fact. Republican doubts about Barack Obama’s birthplace are perhaps the most salient contemporary example, although Democrats are not immune from similar biases. The solution, however, is probably not the elimination or weakening of partisanship. A heavenly public will almost always be a partisan public—in part because partisanship sustains attention to and involvement in politics (see Rosenblum 2008). People care about politics in large part because they care who wins. A better solution is to identify those members of the public who possess the laudable qualities of many partisans, such as deep engagement in politics, but can also overcome partisan biases.

This leads to the question at the heart of this paper: What helps partisans form correct beliefs about political facts? My answer to this question draws on a 2010 survey that included questions about several salient political facts. In each case, responses to these questions reveal strong patterns of partisan bias. Partisans are much less likely to believe “inconvenient” than “convenient” facts. I then examine the relationship between correct perceptions and four factors. Two are elements of cognitive style and proxies

for “deep thoughts”: the “need for cognition” and the “need to evaluate.” One captures ambivalence in a person’s partisan views. The last captures their general attentiveness to politics.

Although several of these factors are associated with correct answers, their role is incomplete or problematic. The need for cognition is associated with correct answers, but almost always among Democrats and only for correct answers that are “convenient.” Partisan ambivalence is associated with knowledge of inconvenient facts, but it is also associated with ignorance of convenient facts. Regardless, there is so little partisan ambivalence among respondents that its substantive effects are small. Finally, general attentiveness to politics is positively associated with correct knowledge of facts, and even inconvenient facts, but not when those facts have been “politicized” by partisan messaging—as has Obama’s birthplace, among others. These results reveal no single quality that consistently helps partisans embrace uncomfortable truths.

Partisan Bias and Its Potential Remediation

Although one often hears laments that the American public is uninformed about politics, perhaps even more troubling is that it is frequently misinformed. Americans often hold factually incorrect beliefs and do so with confidence (Kuklinski et al. 2000). Unsurprisingly, those beliefs are largely aligned with party identification, which can then help filter new information so that prior beliefs are maintained (for a review, see Gerber and Green 1999). The difficulty of dislodging those perceptions is illustrated in Nyhan and Reifler’s (2010) study, in which correct information either failed to correct misperceptions or actually backfired, strengthening those misperceptions.

What might enable partisans to form correct perceptions? One possibility involves cognitive style, which consists of relatively stable traits that regulate information processing and decision making. For example, Philip Tetlock (2005) contrasts hedgehogs and foxes. Foxes are typically better forecasters than hedgehogs because they are better at integrating complex ideas, incorporating dissonant information, and updating beliefs. Two specific qualities that may affect partisan bias and factual misperception are the *need for cognition* and the *need to evaluate*. Neither quality has been considered as a possible predictor of whether individuals can overcome partisan biases in factual perceptions.

The need for cognition is defined as a “stable individual difference in people’s tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity” (Cacioppo et al. 1996). Relative to individuals with a lower need for cognition, individuals with a greater need for cognition recall more information and respond more readily to higher-quality arguments and less readily to simple cues. Political science findings, however, do not consistently support this portrait. The need for cognition is inconsistently related to the ability to place candidates on ideological or policy scales or articulate reasons to support or oppose candidates (Holbrook 2006). Similarly, those with a higher need for cognition are not necessarily more likely to rely on policy-based arguments than party cues (Bullock n.d.; Kam 2005).¹

With regard to knowledge of political facts—especially those characterized by partisan bias—the need for cognition could have two different effects. First, individuals with a greater need for cognition may be more knowledgeable. This is a logical conclusion of knowing more information, thinking more deeply, and, in particular, relying on better arguments—if it is true that the correct factual position is accompanied by more complete or persuasive evidence (e.g., proof that Obama was born in Hawaii). On the other hand, individuals with a greater need for cognition could end up more polarized along partisan lines. As Cacioppo et al. (1996: 233) note: “If individuals high in need for cognition engage in greater thinking about an issue, and this thinking is guided by a consistent evaluative schema, then evaluations are likely to polarize with thought...” Because partisanship provides a “consistent evaluative schema,” individuals with a greater need for cognition could manifest attitudes even more consistent with their partisan loyalties.

The need to evaluate is an individual tendency to assess the positive and negative qualities of objects (Jarvis and Petty 1996). Bizer et al. (2004: 998) elaborate:

People high in need to evaluate (HNE) are more chronically engaged in evaluation of various aspects of their lives and environments than are people low in need to evaluate (LNE). To a greater extent than LNE people, HNE people spontaneously evaluate information they receive and experiences they have as good or bad, thus forming overall evaluations. Whereas LNE people tend not to evaluate unless they need to do so, HNE people enjoy the process of assessing the advantages and disadvantages of that which they observe.

¹ Bullock (n.d.) notes that this may derive from unreliable measurement. The need for cognition scale used in Holbrook’s and Kam’s studies—which derives from the American National Election Study—consists of only two items. By contrast, his study uses a six-item index.

Relative to individuals with less need to evaluate, those with a greater need to evaluate demonstrate a greater propensity to form political attitudes: they are more likely to provide answers to survey questions about politics (Jarvis and Petty 1996), more likely to place candidates on ideological or policy-related scales (Holbrook 2006), and better able to provide likes and dislikes of political candidates (Bizer et al. 2004; Holbrook 2006). They also report a greater level of electoral activism and emotional engagement with politics (Bizer et al. 2004). The bases of their attitudes are also different, as they are better able to draw on their beliefs about issues and their party identification when evaluating candidates (Bizer et al. 2004). Taken together, these findings suggest that the need to evaluate should be associated with incorrect factual perceptions. It will encourage individuals to form opinions and to form opinions that are consonant with their party identification.

The third factor I consider is *partisan ambivalence*. This concept, developed by Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen (n.d.), captures the extent to which people have mixed feelings about the political parties. This includes unfavorable feelings about the party with which they identify and/or favorable feelings about the opposite party. Ambivalent partisans exhibit what Lavine and colleagues call “critical loyalty”—the ability to reflect critically on their preferred party even as they continue to identify with it. In their account, partisan ambivalence is associated with correct perceptions of economic conditions and the crime rate. For example, among Democrats, partisan ambivalence was associated with the belief that, under Reagan’s presidency, the unemployment and inflation rates had improved. Among Republicans, ambivalence was associated with the (correct) belief that the crime rate fell during Clinton’s presidency (although not with the belief that the budget deficit had also shrunk). This suggests that partisan ambivalence, at least under many circumstances, helps partisans learn inconvenient facts.

The final factor is *political awareness*. This concept taps a “general attentiveness to politics” (Zaller 1992: 18). It is typically operationalized with a set of factual questions about politics. Thus, it could conceivably be associated with greater knowledge of the facts under consideration here. Attention to politics begets knowledge. This is consistent with the findings of Blais et al. (2010), who found that knowledge was associated with correct perceptions of a political scandal among partisans of every stripe. However, political

awareness may have an opposite effect. As Zaller's theory posits (and considerable evidence suggests), awareness is associated with the reception of elite messages. Partisans who are highly aware therefore tend to polarize when prominent elites from each party disagree. Thus, if political elites are pushing two different versions of reality—one factually correct and one not—politically aware supporters of factually incorrect party may have more egregious misperceptions than less aware supporters.

Evidence of Partisan Bias:

To assess these expectations, I included a battery of 8 items measuring political facts on the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.² Three items represent contemporary or recent controversies: whether Obama was born in the United States, the existence of “death panels,” and whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. For each of these questions, Democrats should be more likely than Republicans to answer correctly. I also asked a fourth item that, unlike the previous three, captures a fact inconvenient for Democrats: which of the 2008 candidates eschewed public funding and raised only private funds for his presidential general election campaign (Obama, obviously). These items were worded and ordered as follow:

- Do you believe that Barack Obama was born in the United States of America or not?
- Based on what you have read or heard about the health care law passed by Congress and signed by President Obama, do you think that this law will allow a government panel to make decisions about end-of-life care for people on Medicare?
- Which presidential candidate in 2008 opted out of the public funding system in order to accept hundreds of millions of dollars in private contributions for his fall campaign?
- Do you believe that Iraq had usable weapons of mass destruction when the US invaded in 2003?

I consider a correct answer to be that Obama was born in the United States, that no such government panel exists, that Obama (and not McCain) opted out of public funding, and that Iraq did not have usable WMDs.

The next four items capture perceptions of economic conditions under the George W. Bush and Obama presidencies. These items mimic similar batteries analyzed in previous work (Bartels 2008; Blais et al.

² The CCES is conducted by YouGov/Polimetrix on a sample drawn from a panel of individuals who are recruited and/or volunteer to take surveys. There is obviously an ongoing debate about the validity of these panels—one that I do not engage here. Suffice it to say that I believe it would be important to replicate my results on a traditional probability sample.

2010). Respondents were asked about the trends in the unemployment rate and budget deficit under each president. The items were worded as follows, and the order of the presidential administrations was varied (i.e., whether respondents were first asked about conditions under Bush or Obama):

- As you know, George W. Bush was elected President in November 2000, took office in January 2001, and served 8 years as President. The next two questions ask how you think things changed when Bush was in office. Would you say that between 2001 and 2008, the federal budget deficit grew larger, grew smaller, or stayed about the same?

Would you say that between 2001 and 2008, the unemployment rate grew larger, grew smaller, or stayed about the same?

- As you know, Barack Obama was first elected President in November 2008 and took office in January 2009. He will soon be completing 2 years as President. The next several questions ask whether you think things have changed since Obama came into office. Would you say that compared to 2009, the federal budget deficit is now larger, smaller, or about the same?

Would you say that compared to 2009, the unemployment rate is now larger, smaller, or about the same?

Under both Obama and Bush, both the budget deficit and the unemployment rate increased from the time when they were inaugurated until the end of their presidency (Bush) or the time at which the survey was taken (Obama).

Figure 1 presents histograms of these items separately by party. Here, and in the rest of this paper, I focus on self-identified Democrats and Republicans, with independents who lean towards a party counted as partisans. This figure depicts a profound level of partisan bias. Partisans are far more likely to believe convenient facts than inconvenient ones. This creates massive divisions between partisans in their perceptions of facts. For example, large majorities of Democrats believe that Barack Obama was born in the United States, that no government panel will make decisions about end-of-life care, and that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction (87%, 62%, and 75%, respectively). Only small numbers of Republicans believe likewise. Only 25% believe Obama was born in the United States, whereas 40% believe he was not and 34% say they do not know. Similarly, only 28% of Republicans do not believe that or are uncertain about whether a government “death panel” exists, and only 35% believe that or are uncertain about whether Iraq lacked weapons of mass destruction. Such biases are not confined to Republicans: only 38% of Democrats, as compared to 61% of Republicans, believe that Obama was the candidate who opted out of public funding.

[insert Figure 1 about here]

The partisan gaps in economic perceptions are at times smaller—perhaps reflecting the difficulty in ignoring the dramatic changes in economic conditions that occurred as Bush left office and Obama assumed office. For example, the vast majority of both Republicans (78%) and Democrats (88%) believe that the deficit increased under Bush, although there is a small gap nevertheless. But other perceptions reflect a larger gap. Over three-fourths of Democrats (78%) believe (correctly) that the unemployment rate increased under Bush, whereas 23% of Republicans believe this. Democrats are less likely to believe that the unemployment rate and budget deficit increased under Obama. For example, although 91% of Republicans believe that the unemployment rate increased under Obama, only 49% of Democrats do. In sum, partisan biases color all of these perceptions of fact, often to a substantial degree.

The Correlates of Partisan Bias

To investigate the factors associated with correct perceptions, I construct simple models of each of these 8 items, where the covariates are the 4 factors identified earlier: the need for cognition, the need to evaluate, partisan ambivalence, and political awareness.³ The appendix summarizes how each of these measures was constructed. Each dependent variable was coded 1 for a correct answer and 0 otherwise, and thus each model is estimated via logit. I also estimate separate models for Democrats and Republicans, as the levels of partisan bias, and potentially its correlates, vary widely between the parties, depending on the particular fact in question. Table 1 presents the coefficients and standard errors from these models. Figures 2-4 present changes in the predicted probabilities and confidence intervals associated with changes in the need for cognition, partisan ambivalence, and political awareness, respectively. In these figures, the predictions are based on shifts from the sample minima to maxima (within each party), with all other variables held at their mean values.

[insert Table 1 and Figures 2-4 about here]

³ There certainly could be other factors for which I should control. I am opting at this moment for simpler models—in the spirit of Achen's (2002) "rule of 3."

The value of “deep thoughts” appears limited. The need to evaluate is rarely associated with correct answers to any of these eight items. The need for cognition is associated with correct answers to several items, but in a peculiarly limited fashion: only among Democrats, and only for items where the correct answer is convenient to Democrats (see Figure 2). For example, Democrats who score higher in the need for cognition are more likely than low-scoring Democrats to know that Obama was born in the United States, that there is no “death panel,” and to know that the deficit and unemployment rate increased under Bush. Among Republicans, the apparent effects of the need for cognition are much more muted. In only one case, Republicans’ knowledge of changes in the deficit under Obama, does its coefficient approach conventional standards for statistical significance, and here again the dependent variable is another convenient fact. “Deep thoughts” thus appear to do little good where they are needed the most: learning *inconvenient* facts.

The apparent effects of partisan ambivalence have their own peculiarity. As Lavine et al. find, they can help partisans learn. For example, in nearly every model, ambivalent partisans are more likely to know inconvenient facts. For example, relative to other Republicans, ambivalent Republicans are more likely to have correct beliefs about Obama’s birthplace, death panels, WMDs, and the deficit and unemployment rate under Bush. Ambivalent Democrats are more likely than other Democrats to know that Obama presided over a growing deficit and unemployment rate.

But partisan ambivalence’s relationship to knowledge is two-edged: ambivalent partisans are more likely to know inconvenient facts but *less likely* to know convenient ones. As ambivalence increases, for example, Democrats are less likely to believe that Obama was born in the United States, that there is no “death panel,” that Iraq lacked usable WMDs, and that the deficit and unemployment rate had increased under Bush. Similarly, ambivalent Republicans are less likely than other Republicans to know that the deficit had increased under Obama. Partisan ambivalence thus appears to have both “learning” and “un-learning” effects.⁴ Moreover, the substantive magnitude of both effects is small. Figure 3’s illustration shifts ambivalence from its observed minimum to its observed maximum, but in fact 95% of the sample is below

⁴ The unlearning effect of ambivalence is not an artifact of ideology. Even when controlling for self-reported ideology on the liberal-conservative scale, the apparent effect of ambivalence remains.

the midpoint of the scale, and 60% of the sample is at one of the two lowest values on this scale. Whatever its relationship to correct knowledge, the true magnitude of this relationship is small (at least in this sample).

The effects of political awareness are similarly mixed. In several cases—and in line with the Blais et al. results—awareness is positively associated with correct knowledge. Among both Democrats and Republicans, awareness is associated with knowledge of which presidential candidate opted out of public financing as well as trends in the deficit under each president. But for another set of facts—Obama’s birthplace, “death panels,” and WMDs—awareness is associated with correct knowledge only among Democrats. Thus, the most politically aware partisans are actually more polarized in terms of factual misperceptions. This result, which parallels Zaller’s “polarization effect,” suggests a reason why: in each of these three cases, political elites from both parties have depicted reality quite differently. Some Republican and conservative leaders have raised questions about Obama’s birthplace, raised concerns about the government’s role in end-of-life decisions, and defended the threat the Iraq posed to the United States. Democrats obviously disagree. Thus, political awareness is associated with correct knowledge when political elites are mostly in agreement about what counts as correct.

Conclusion

This paper began with a potential standard for democratic citizenship. Part of that standard involves attentiveness to and engagement in politics—qualities that partisans frequently have. Indeed, the fraction of the public that is politically engaged and truly non-partisan is vanishingly small. But democratic citizenship also demands a quality many politically engaged partisans lack: the willingness to learn new information and update beliefs as necessary. This paper was a search for an elusive creature: the open-minded partisan.

None of the factors examined here definitively locate this creature. Cognitive style—and in particular the need for cognition—does matter, but deep thoughts rarely appear to help partisans learn uncomfortable truths. Partisan ambivalence did accomplish this task, but only at the expense of weakening partisans’ grasp of many comfortable truths. Political awareness helped as well, but not for facts about which partisans argue. This is small consolation in an era of partisan polarization.

Assuming the value of open-minded partisanship, how might this study be expanded and developed further? One possibility is that I have not adequately tapped any tendency toward “deep thoughts” or other related aspects of temperament. For example, a focus on personality dispositions—e.g., the “Big 5”—might be fruitful. A second possibility is to look outside individual-level factors and consider the contextual factors that may influence partisan bias. For example, is there a way of presenting political information, and even inconvenient facts, in a way that helps partisans learn? Although intensive media coverage tends to exacerbate this bias (Jerit and Barabas 2011), perhaps there is a particular way to frame this coverage that would tend to minimize bias—e.g., a willingness by journalists to desist with a “he said, she said” frame and identify truths, half-truths, and outright lies. This begs the question, however, of what might motivate people to read the “fact-check” and not simply take cues from their partisan kindred.

Ultimately, there are good normative and empirical reasons to pursue these questions further. We still know far more about how partisans get things wrong than why they get things right.

Figure 1. The Prevalence of Partisan Bias in Perceptions of Facts

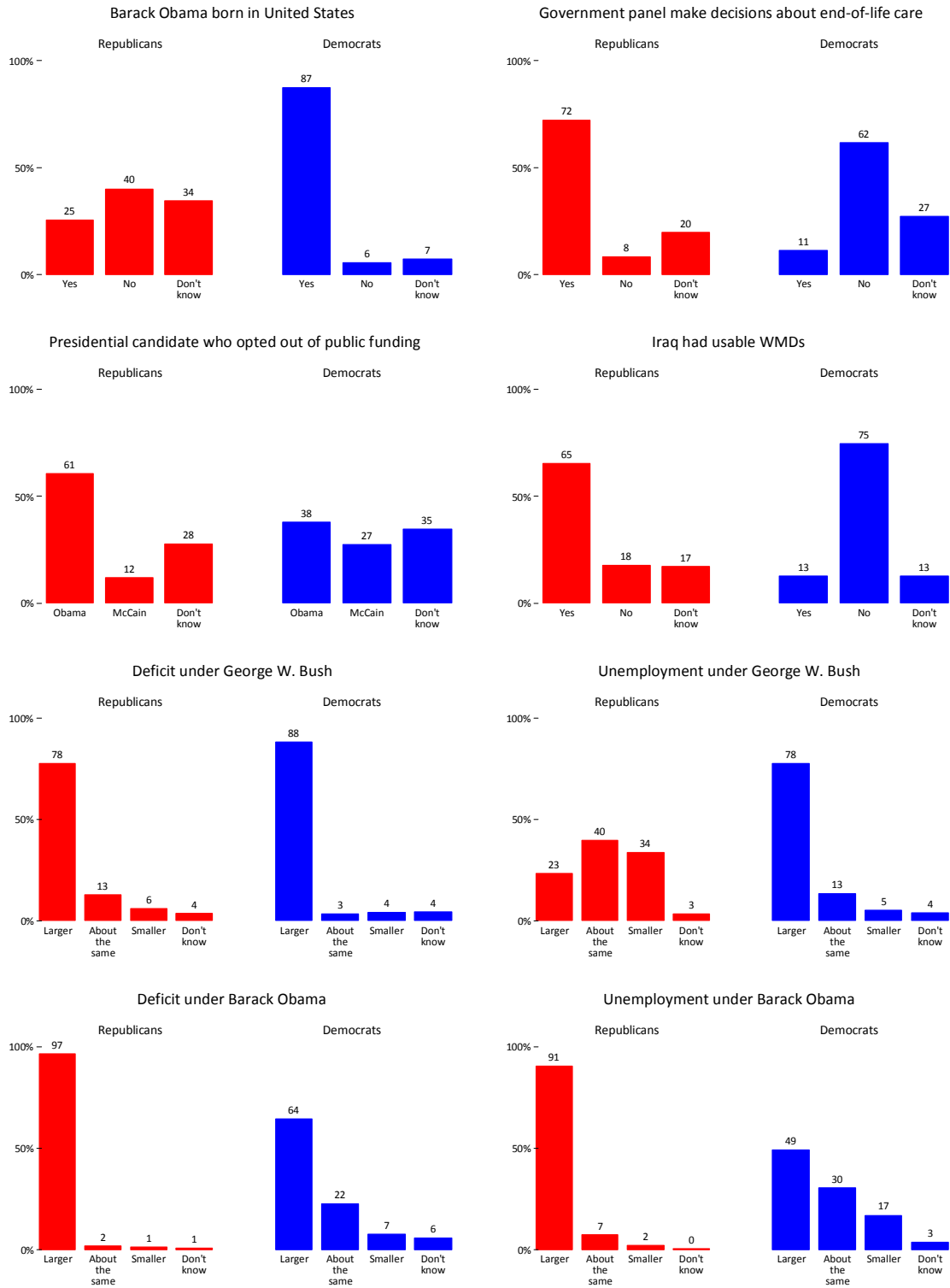


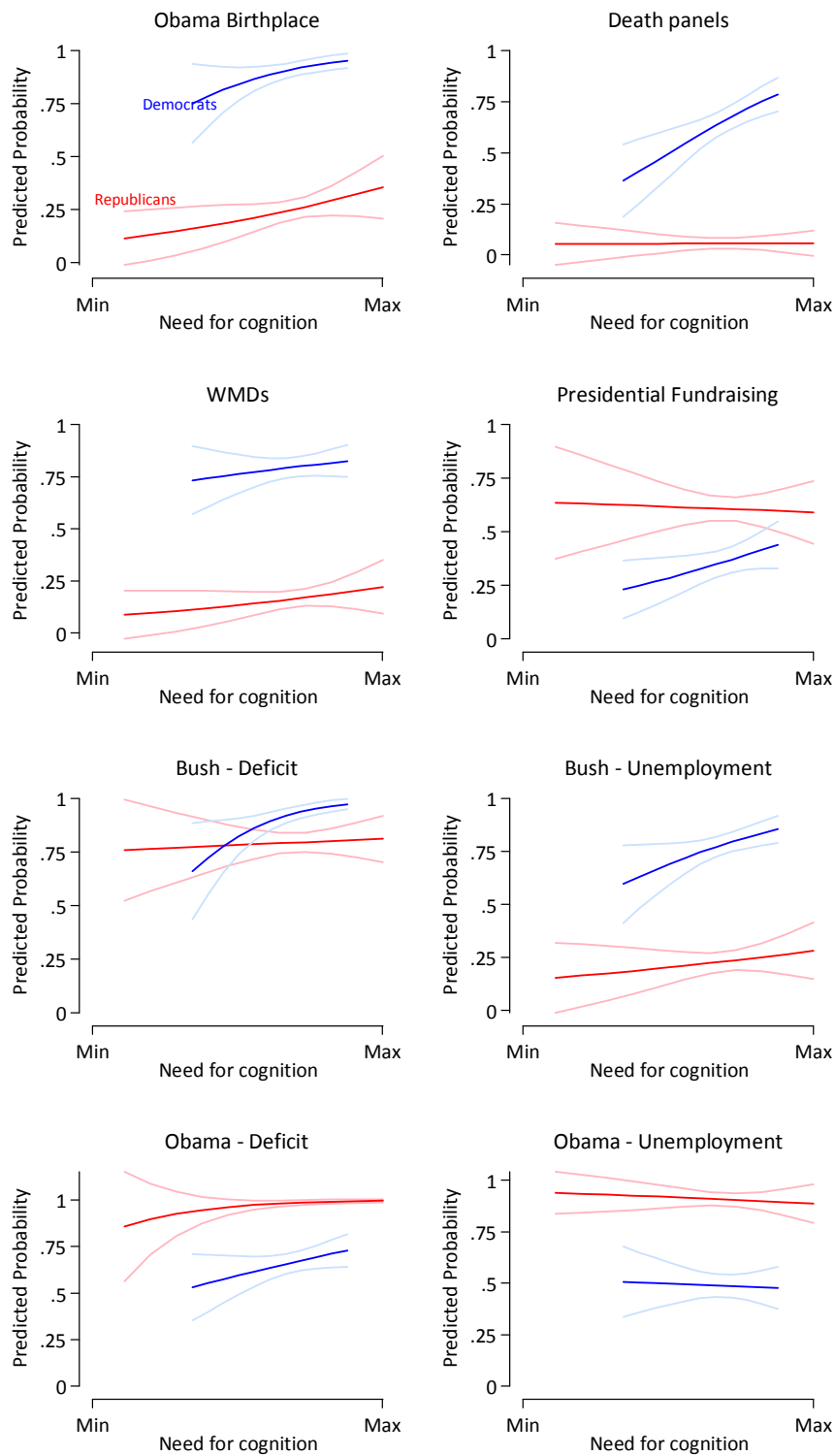
Table 1. Models of Political Knowledge

Part A								
	Obama birthplace		"Death panels"		WMDs		Presidential fundraising	
	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem
Need for cognition	0.27	0.60*	0.02	0.58*	0.20	0.17	-0.04	0.30
	[0.18]	[0.25]	[0.29]	[0.18]	[0.20]	[0.20]	[0.16]	[0.17]
Need to evaluate	0.40*	-0.34	0.14	-0.33	0.18	-0.47*	-0.17	-0.04
	[0.18]	[0.24]	[0.31]	[0.18]	[0.20]	[0.19]	[0.16]	[0.17]
Partisan ambivalence	0.48*	-0.59*	1.01*	-0.59*	0.49*	-0.43*	-0.18	0.18
	[0.22]	[0.20]	[0.34]	[0.19]	[0.25]	[0.18]	[0.22]	[0.18]
Political awareness	0.26	1.97*	-0.78	2.96*	-0.17	2.53*	2.37*	3.61*
	[0.50]	[0.52]	[0.73]	[0.47]	[0.55]	[0.45]	[0.49]	[0.59]
Constant	-3.40*	1.80*	-4.19*	-0.65	-3.03*	1.07	-0.84	-3.98*
	[0.84]	[0.91]	[1.35]	[0.73]	[0.94]	[0.74]	[0.75]	[0.83]
Observations	367	360	367	360	366	361	367	360

Part B								
	Bush deficit		Bush unemployment		Obama deficit		Obama unemployment	
	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem
Need for cognition	0.06	0.91*	0.14	0.43*	0.67	0.27	-0.13	-0.04
	[0.18]	[0.27]	[0.18]	[0.18]	[0.36]	[0.17]	[0.24]	[0.16]
Need to evaluate	-0.13	-0.20	0.31	-0.29	0.01	0.02	-0.36	0.25
	[0.19]	[0.26]	[0.18]	[0.18]	[0.44]	[0.17]	[0.25]	[0.16]
Partisan ambivalence	0.65*	-0.41*	0.63*	-0.48*	-0.85*	0.43*	-0.31	0.64*
	[0.26]	[0.21]	[0.23]	[0.17]	[0.42]	[0.17]	[0.30]	[0.17]
Political awareness	2.13*	2.04*	-0.01	0.07	3.51*	2.03*	0.88	1.06*
	[0.48]	[0.53]	[0.50]	[0.43]	[0.84]	[0.41]	[0.61]	[0.40]
Constant	-1.36	0.86	-3.14*	2.13*	1.58	-2.07*	3.02*	-2.52*
	[0.81]	[0.94]	[0.84]	[0.74]	[1.53]	[0.69]	[1.08]	[0.66]
Observations	367	361	367	361	367	361	367	361

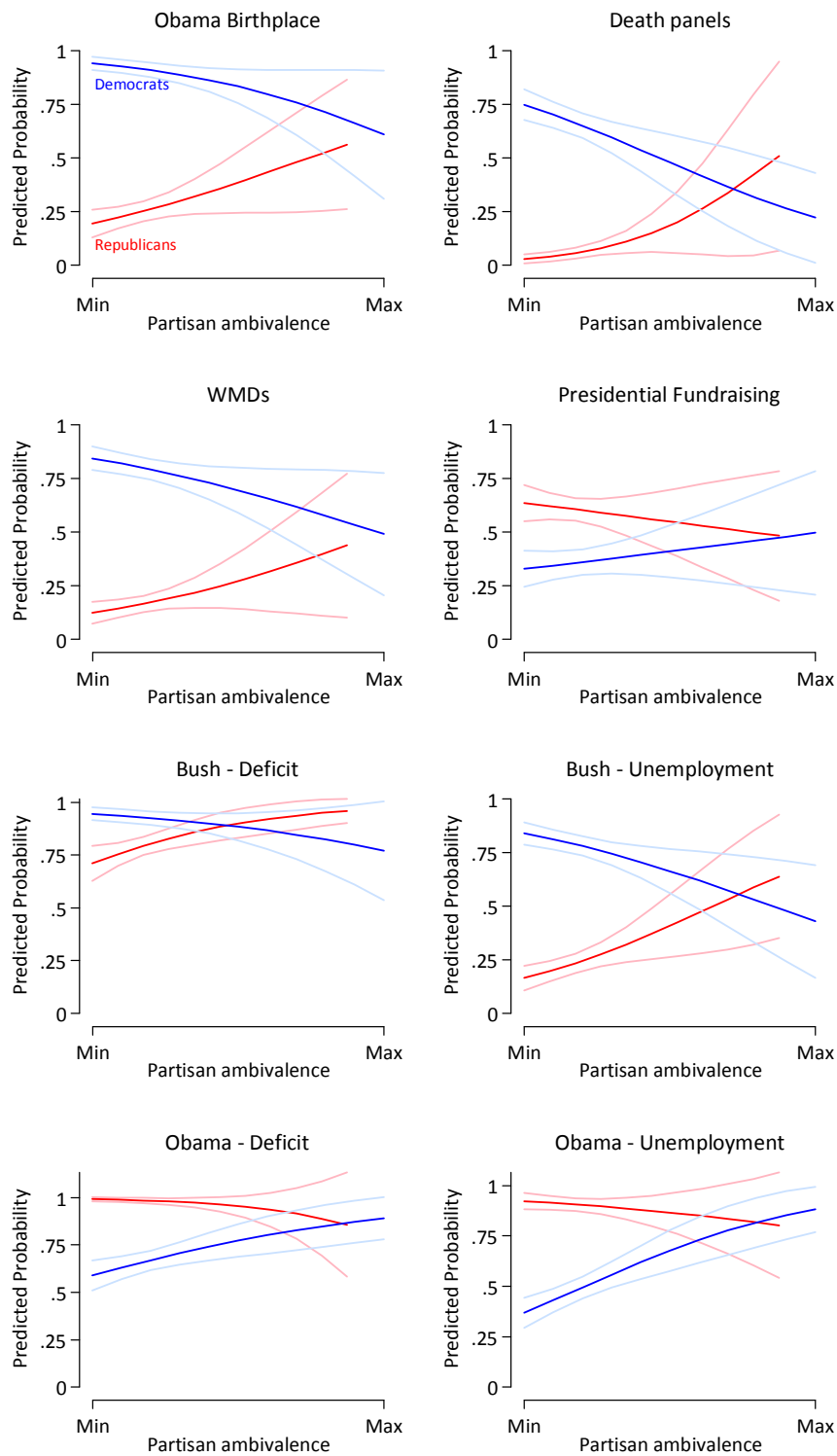
Cell entries are logit coefficients, with estimated standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variables are coded 1 for the correct answer and 0 otherwise. * $p < .05$. Source: 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

Figure 2. Predicted Effects of the Need for Cognition on the Likelihood of a Correct Answer



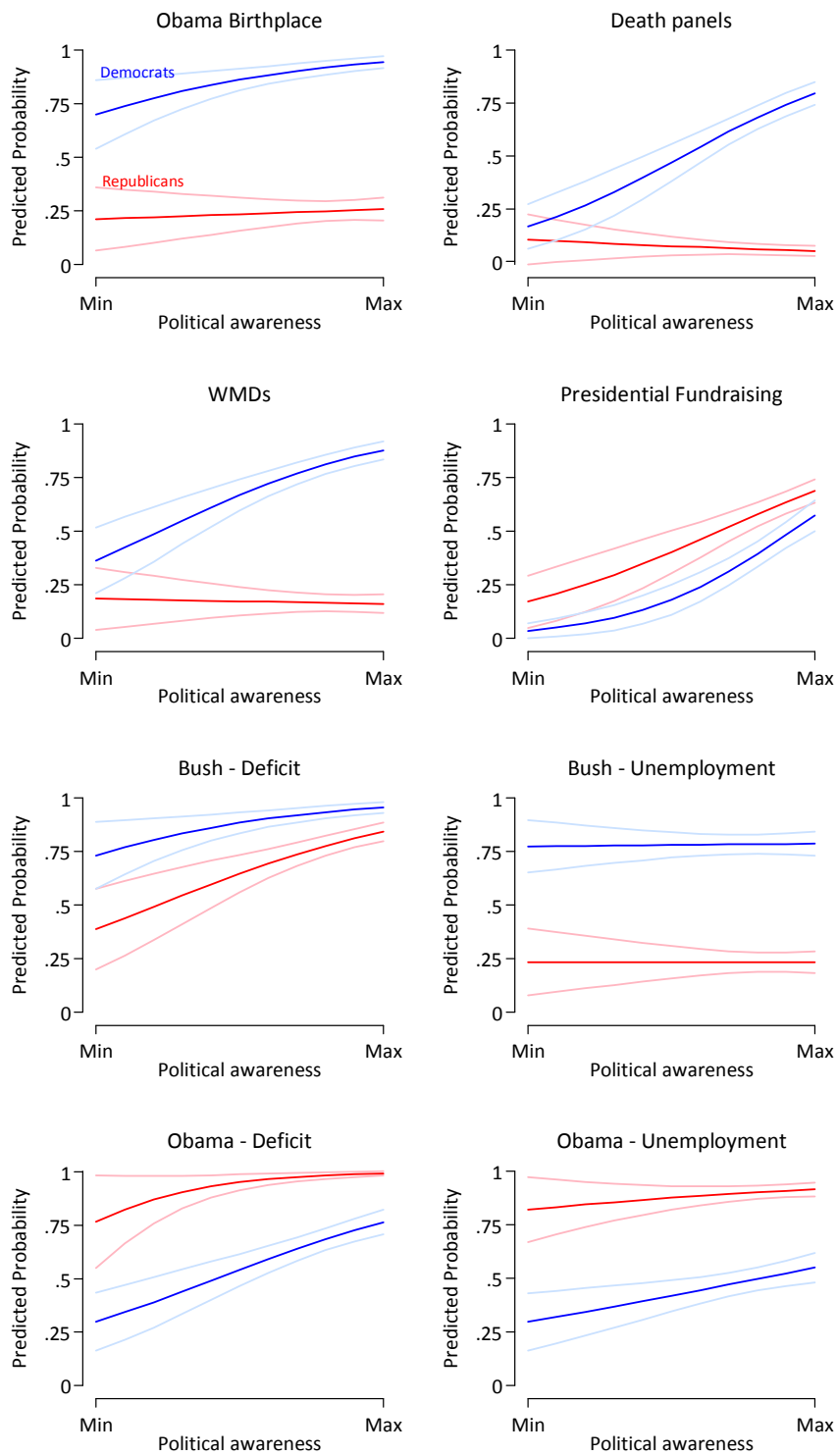
Graphs depict predicted probabilities and 95% confidence intervals, based on models in Table 1. All other variables held at their means.

Figure 3. Predicted Effects of Partisan Ambivalence on the Likelihood of a Correct Answer



Graphs depict predicted probabilities and 95% confidence intervals, based on models in Table 1. All other variables held at their means.

Figure 4. Predicted Effects of Political Awareness on the Likelihood of a Correct Answer



Graphs depict predicted probabilities and 95% confidence intervals, based on models in Table 1. All other variables held at their means.

Appendix: Measurement of Independent Variables

Need for Cognition

This variable is a scale based on responses to five items:

- I would prefer complex to simple problems.
- Thinking is not my idea of fun.
- I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.
- I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.
- I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is likely a chance I will have to think in depth about something.

For each item, the response categories were: very characteristic, somewhat characteristic, uncertain, somewhat uncharacteristic, and very uncharacteristic. The reliability of the scale is 0.69.

Need to Evaluate

This variable is a scale based on responses to five items:

- It is very important to me to hold strong opinions.
- I only form strong opinions when I have to.
- I often prefer to remain neutral about complex issues.
- I would rather have a strong opinion than no opinion at all.
- I like to have strong opinions even when I am not personally involved.

For each item, the response categories were: very characteristic, somewhat characteristic, uncertain, somewhat uncharacteristic, and very uncharacteristic. The reliability of the scale is 0.66.

Partisan ambivalence?

This variable is based this sequence of questions:

You might have favorable thoughts or feelings about the Democratic Party. Or you might have unfavorable thoughts or feelings about the Democratic Party. Or you might have some of each.

We would like to ask you first about any favorable thoughts and feelings you might have about the Democratic Party. Then in a moment, we'll ask you some separate questions about any unfavorable thoughts and feelings you might have.

First, how favorable are your thoughts and feelings about the Democratic Party? Extremely favorable, very favorable, moderately favorable, slightly favorable, or not at all favorable?

How unfavorable are your thoughts and feelings about the Democratic Party? Extremely unfavorable, very unfavorable, moderately unfavorable, slightly unfavorable, or not at all unfavorable?

The same two questions were also asked of the Republican Party. The order of the parties was varied randomly. Partisan ambivalence is then constructed as the mean of favorability to the out-party and “unfavorability” toward the in-party. This measure comes from Lavine et al. (n.d.).

Political awareness

This is a scale capturing the number of correct answers given to this set of 6 items: the party in control of the House and also the Senate, as well as the party affiliation of the respondent's governor, House representative, and two Senators. The reliability of the scale is 0.85.

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