

**Blame Attribution and the Limits of Partisan Rationalization**

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## **ABSTRACT**

How do citizens attribute blame after elected officials make mistakes? Such choices are crucially important for democratic accountability and government responsiveness. Based on the bulk of research in political behavior, one would think that partisan attachments strongly influence how people construct attributions, even though traditional conceptions of retrospective voting require citizens to punish co-partisans. This paper assesses the extent to which individuals utilize diagnostic information to mitigate partisan rationalization. Three experimental studies using nationally-representative samples demonstrate that citizens readily use diagnostic information when available to reduce partisan polarization in the wake of government failure. Moreover, partisanship does not bias people's assessment of cause and effect. By testing the limits of partisan rationalization in the domain of blame attribution via the presentation of multiple stimuli, we challenge traditional conceptions of motivated reasoning.

Elected officials sometimes make mistakes. For instance, they may implement misguided policies, incompetently manage bureaucracies, or engage in corruption. In democratic societies, citizens have the opportunity to vote against incumbents and their parties, punishing them for their errors. This creates incentives for public officials to be accountable and responsive to the electorate's needs and competently manage the government. An intermediate, psychological step between negative outcomes and retrospective voting is blame attribution, an understudied topic in political science. Citizens must first determine the extent to which various government actors are to blame for negative outcomes by analyzing the events that took place and then attributing responsibility. In a federal, separation-of-powers system such as the United States, blame attribution can be cognitively demanding and complicated. How do citizens make such choices, which are crucially important for democratic accountability and government responsiveness?

An immediate, but normatively troubling, answer is that citizens may simply blame political figures of the opposite party, and therefore not incentivize good governance. A central finding in the study of American political behavior is that party identification strongly shapes how citizens confront the political world. Attachments to parties—whether they are formed via psychological bonds or considered analysis—significantly influence who Americans vote for and how they construct attitudes on public policy issues (Campbell et al. 1960; Fiorina 1981). Recent scholarship has argued that party labels can serve as useful heuristics that help cognitively-constrained citizens deal with a complex political world (e.g. Popkin 1994; Jackman and Sniderman 2002). While this may be the case when people are selecting among candidates or evaluating public policies, party labels may not serve much use when people are retrospectively assessing the performance of incumbents. Whereas knowing simply that a particular health care policy is sponsored by Republicans may make Democratic citizens suspicious and unsupportive,

knowing that an incumbent politician is a Republican says little about his or her competence or integrity in handling a particular event. In other words, party labels do not provide meaningful information about what actually happened after a disastrous event takes place. Instead, they may distort people's perceptions and hinder proper blame attribution. As Campbell et al. (1960) write: "Identification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation" (133). This "perceptual screen" may prevent people from processing relevant information. Yet, democratic accountability requires that people blame co-partisans when they are culpable, and do not simply rally around the party flag. Key (1966) argues that switching away from longstanding partisan attachments is a central feature of a "responsible electorate": "Voters are not fools...Some Democratic voters of one election turned Republican at the next; others stood pat" (7).

In addition to party labels, citizens may make use of diagnostic information in constructing their blame attributions. Kuklinski et al. (2001) define information as diagnostic if it "conveys the central considerations relevant to a decision or judgment task" (412). In other words, diagnostic information helps people make "diagnoses" as to what happened during an event and who is to blame. Beginning with seminal work by Kramer (1971), Fiorina (1981) and Kinder and Kiewiet (1981), scores of studies have found evidence for "economic voting" both in the United States and internationally, using both individual-level and aggregate data. Voters tend to reelect incumbents who have been stewards of healthy economies, and vote them out if times have been bad. This evidence suggests that people do tend to retrospectively judge politicians using diagnostic information such as unemployment, inflation, and economic growth rates.

However, recent studies by political scientists and economists have argued that voters may not always optimally construct attributions. Achen and Bartels (2002) find that voters

punish incumbents for a host of natural disasters beyond their control—shark attacks, floods, droughts, and pandemics. Additionally, the authors (2004) find that economic retrospective voters have short memories. Economic conditions in the last quarter of an administration are much more powerful predictors of U.S. presidential election results than economic performance over the course of the entire administration (see also Bartels 2008). Wolfers (2009) offers more mixed evidence, finding that “quasi-rational” voters are able to separate out national and state economic conditions in voting for governors, but punish state executives for events beyond their control such as natural resource shocks. Finally, Healy and Malhotra (2009) argue that voters reward incumbents for disaster relief spending but not disaster prevention spending, thereby distorting the incentives of public officials to under-invest in infrastructure. The thrust of these recent studies is summarized by Achen and Bartels (2004): “Citizens cannot perform sensible retrospective judgments at election time... voters are often arbitrary and nearly always myopic.” In other words, voters may make uninformed attributions by either incorporating biasing information (e.g., party labels or stochastic events) or by failing to incorporate relevant, diagnostic information (e.g. the full record of economic performance). Social psychologists have long recognized that people may make errors in attributional judgments, although outside of the political domain. They have uncovered a host of biases in the laboratory, such as the fundamental attribution error, causal oversimplification, and the group-serving bias, among others.

In this paper, we assess whether citizens’ blame attributions are primarily driven by partisan rationalization, or if they are able to use diagnostic information to mitigate the effect of party labels. Indeed, much of the existing literature in American political behavior has forwarded the supreme importance of party identification, but rarely examines its limits. Studying the

potential fragility of party attachments is particularly interesting in the domain of blame attribution following government failure, where party labels do not provide diagnostic information that profoundly assists citizens in making informed decisions. Whereas recent studies examining the irrationality of voter attributions have mainly relied on aggregate-level data, we conduct three individual-level experiments dealing with peoples' reactions to the two most salient disasters (and examples of government failure) in this decade: the poor preparation and response to Hurricane Katrina and the failure to foresee and prevent the attacks on September 11th. Through three independent studies using nationally representative samples, we explore the extent to which party affiliation drove citizens' attributions of government following these disasters, and more importantly, the limits of partisan rationalization via the use of diagnostic information.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section examines several theoretical perspectives on blame attribution and diagnostic information processing, serving to motivate the empirical analyses. The following section describes the literature on blame attribution in politics, and how the studies described here advance our understanding of it. After providing an overview of the three experimental studies, each are presented individually. The final section coalesces the findings, discussing their implication for the study of retrospection and democratic accountability.

### **Theoretical Overview**

Theories of how people make attributions have been a core element of social psychology. This research agenda has explored the ways in which people explain the behaviors of others or themselves (i.e., how people determine what causes events). Generally, people make two types

of attributions: (1) external attributions, in which causality is assigned to outside factors beyond one's control; and (2) internal attributions, in which causality is assigned to factors and characteristics of individuals. The bulk of this research has examined how people make judgments regarding cause and effect in their everyday lives (e.g. why someone failed a test), and not how people blame and credit more distant figures such as government actors in the political domain. Nevertheless, the wealth of findings in the psychology laboratory may be informative for the study of how citizens blame government when it fails to do its job properly.

Early research on attribution (Jones and Davis 1965; Kelley 1971) posited that people were "naïve scientists," and made decisions regarding cause and effect rationally by observing and compiling evidence. However, when such theories were tested in the laboratory, a host of cognitive biases emerged. For the purposes of the study of partisan rationalization and blame attribution, the *group-serving bias* (Taylor and Doria 1981) is the most relevant. People tend to make internal attributions for positive outcomes enjoyed by one's own group and external attributions for negative outcomes (e.g. Taylor and Jaggi 1974; Fletcher and Ward 1988). With respect to out-groups, the reverse pattern holds. For instance, athletes tend to blame their team's losses on external factors (e.g. referees) and wins on internal factors (e.g. preparation); the reverse attributions are made with respect to opponents (Taylor and Doria 1981). Similar findings have been replicated using traditionally powerful group attachments such as race and ethnicity (Taylor and Jaggi 1974) as well as with seemingly innocuous groups such as people who share the same birthday or Social Security number (Tajfel 1970; Brewer 1979). Considering that citizens have strong psychological attachments to political parties (Campbell et al. 1960), we would expect the *group-serving bias* to have a significant effect on blame attribution in politics. After widespread government failure, Republican/Democratic citizens may attribute blame to

Democratic/Republican officials, consistent with group identifications.

Theories of “motivated reasoning” from political psychology (e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006; Lodge and Taber 2005; Taber, Lodge, and Glathar 2001) also suggest that partisanship may bias citizens’ attributions. In making political judgments, citizens are motivated to pursue two goals: making accurate judgments and defending prior, partisan attitudes. Because sociopolitical judgments activate “hot cognitions”—or emotionally powerful attitudes that arouse associations before reasoned judgment can take place—partisan goals often trump accuracy concerns in political decision making. For instance, Taber and Lodge (2006) find that people’s attitudes on gun control and affirmative action polarize further when exposed to both pro and con arguments. People tend to seek out and accept evidence that confirms their priors, and are skeptical of evidence that goes against them. In the context of blame attribution, citizens are motivated to make accurate judgments about who was responsible, but these attributions can also be biased by partisanship. People may selectively absorb information that is congruent with their partisan leaning, and be skeptical of information that contradicts it (i.e., evidence showing that co-partisans were responsible for the mistakes that occurred).

Hence, psychological approaches suggest that citizens may construct blame attributions from longstanding partisan attachments, either because they are subject to the group-serving bias or because they are engaging in motivated reasoning. Both of these phenomena are means by which individuals reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957).

In addition to psychology, legal research may also be instructive in understanding how voters make attributions in the political domain (see also Peffley 1984). Similar to how jurors are required to make judgments regarding guilt and innocence, as well as cause and effect, voters need to determine which officials are responsible for the negative outcome following

government failure. Based on a series of experiments in which subjects acted as jurors in simulated trials, Pennington and Hastie (1986) and Hastie, Penrod, and Pennington (1983) developed what is known as the “story model.” According to the authors, when jurors are faced with complex decisions in trials, they pick out key elements and construct stories in order to ascertain guilt and innocence.

The key result of their research for this analysis is that people make much more accurate judgments if the facts of a trial are told *in order*, as they would be in a linear plotline. However, because competing attorneys in actual trials attempt to confuse jurors and evidence is presented out of sequence, the ability to construct stories breaks down. Consequently, jurors are much more prone in these circumstances to rely on irrelevant cues such as the defendant’s race, gender, or social status. Similar to a courtroom, in the political area, competing political elites attempt to persuade voters, and these appeals are mediated by media coverage. Information is not presented wholly and in order. Consequently, when making attributions, citizens may find it difficult to construct stories and instead may rely on cues such as party affiliations.

Although these theoretical perspectives tackle the issue of blame attribution from different angles, they do have commonalities. Fundamentally, although people seek to make accurate judgments, these tasks may be cognitively demanding and often are made in a politically charged and emotional atmosphere. Consequently, attributions about what actually happened after an event may be biased by partisan rationalization. Citizens may rely on these longstanding attachments in deciding who is responsible. Considering the powerful role of party in previous studies of vote and policy choice, such a prediction is seemingly unsurprising, but normatively troubling since democratic accountability requires that retrospective voters punish co-partisans when they make mistakes. Otherwise, government does not have incentives to be

competent, responsive, and honest. The experiments described below are designed not only to find evidence of partisan rationalization in blame attributions, but more importantly to explore its limits. Perhaps citizens are able to mitigate the effect of party when assigning blame.

### **Literature**

The relationship between government performance and electoral outcomes—commonly known as “retrospective voting”—is one of the most closely studied topics in American political behavior. Key (1966) argued that the electorate is “responsible,” in that some citizens often vote against longstanding party attachments to reward and punish incumbents based on their performance, a claim for which there is evidence in the economic domain at both the aggregate (Kramer 1971) and individual (Fiorina 1981) levels. Voters have been found not only to take into account their personal economic circumstances (Markus 1988) but also the status of the nation as a whole (Kinder and Kiewit 1979, 1981). These findings have been replicated and explored in myriad contexts, including comparatively (Lewis-Beck 1988; Powell and Whitten 1993), in the American states (Stein 1990; Atkeson and Partin 1995; Wolfers 2009), and among various subgroups of the population (Gomez and Wilson 2001).

Recent empirical research has explored retrospective voting in non-economic domains. Achen and Bartels (2002) find that voters punish incumbents in response to droughts, floods, and other natural disasters. Grose and Oppenheimer (2007) and Karol and Miguel (2007) observed that military deaths harm incumbents’ reelection prospects. And Berry and Howell (2007) found that citizens vote against incumbent school board members in response to falling test scores, but only when the media make education issues salient in voters’ minds.

Despite the wealth of studies exploring the relationship between performance outcomes

and election results, few have explicitly explored blame attribution directly. However, this is the crucial link between outcomes and voting. Citizens must first attribute responsibility for an event to an official before the official is rewarded or punished. Unpacking the black box of attribution is important because it is the psychological “adhesive” that allows individuals to connect events to actors (Rudolph 2003a; Schlenker et al. 1994). Peffley (1984) and Peffley and Williams (1985) first modeled the attributional process explicitly, finding that the relationship between economic conditions and vote choice was strongest among those citizens who attributed those conditions to the incumbent’s performance (see also Abramowitz et al. 1988; Stein 1990; Kinder et al. 1983). Iyengar (1989, 1991) found that causal and resolution responsibility attributions affect attitudes on poverty, racial inequality, crime, and terrorism. For instance, people who blame individuals themselves rather than society at large for poverty are less likely to support welfare programs (see also Nelson 1999).

Several recent research agendas have also leveraged the central role of attributions in retrospective voting. Gomez and Wilson (2001, 2003) argue that political sophisticates are more likely to understand complex economic processes and apportion blame across multiple political institutions. A series of papers by Rudolph (2003a, 2003b, 2006) argue that both individual-level (e.g. partisanship) and contextual factors (e.g. divided government) influence attributions of economic performance. Finally, in examining the role of attributions in a federalist system, Arceneaux (2006) found that citizens do make meaningful distinctions among different levels in assessing performance, but that these attitudes only translate into vote choice for those issues that are highly accessible. Additionally, citizens’ views of the responsibilities of local, state, and national government meaningfully affect attitudes on which levels of government should have policymaking influence (Arceneaux 2005).

Several literatures in political behavior have demonstrated that party identification affects how citizens formulate attitudes and make political decisions. Individuals vote overwhelmingly for candidates of their own party (Campbell et al. 1960) and base their own issue positions on perceptions of their party's stands on those issues (Jacoby 1988; Layman and Carsey 2002). Many experimental studies have demonstrated that party identification provides a heuristic cue for individuals when evaluating political candidates and policy positions (Cohen 2003; Goren 2002; Kam 2005; Rahn 1993; Skitka and Robideau 1997). Such party cues also affect individual perceptions of the political world (Bartels 2002). Finally, Peffley and Williams (1985), Tyler (1982), and Rudolph (2003a, 2003b, 2006) all find that partisan biases affect responsibility attribution for economic performance.

Indeed, one of the major foci of research in public opinion is that partisanship is the main explanatory variable of individual political decision-making. However, few studies have explicitly explored the limits of partisan rationalization. This paper analyzes the extent to which individuals are able to detach themselves from longstanding partisan leanings and incorporate diagnostic information. This question is particularly important in the domain of blame attribution after government failure as partisan cues may provide little information as to the causal sequence of events involved with negative outcomes.

The studies that constitute this paper have several characteristics that allow us to answer questions on partisan rationalization and blame attribution that have not been addressed by previous research. First, this paper explores how citizens balance multiple sources of information in constructing their attributions—both in the form of partisan cues and germane diagnostic information. Second, this paper examines attribution of responsibility outside the domain of economic performance, which is the focus of most every other study on the subject. A non-

economic domain such as natural disaster management is especially important to analyze because, as compared to a long-term and complex phenomenon such as the economy, the event can be isolated temporally and government officials may have greater control over the situation (Alesina et al. 1993). Third, the extant literature is largely comprised of observational studies that have identified correlations between various predictors and attributional judgments. In this study, we conduct experiments to isolate the causal effects of information on attitudes regarding blame. Fourth, previous experimental research has examined synthetic political situations using subjects of college undergraduates. Our results have enhanced external validity because September 11th and Hurricane Katrina were actual events involving real officials, and our subject population is comprised of a random sample of the American population.

### **Overview of Studies**

The first study assessed the degree to which citizens blamed three administrative officials for the security lapses that preceded the terrorist attacks of September 11th. As discussed below, we truthfully manipulated whether each official was identified as a Democrat or a Republican. All officials were provided with their official titles. Although we expected citizens to blame an official more when he was associated with the opposing party, we explored whether citizens were able to use the office titles as diagnostic information in order to increase blame of relevant officials (the CIA and FBI directors) relative to irrelevant officials (the Federal Reserve Chairman).

Building on the first study, the second study explored blame attribution in a new domain: the government's management of Hurricane Katrina. In this study, we asked citizens to ascertain the relative blameworthiness of seven officials involved with the disaster. We manipulated the

presence or absence of two types of information: the officials' party affiliations and their office titles. Although we did not manipulate the labels themselves (as in Study 1), we were able to observe whether exogenously-provided diagnostic information in the form of the office titles mitigated partisan rationalization induced by the presence of the party labels.

The third study examined a somewhat different but related question in the context of Hurricane Katrina: Is partisan rationalization so powerful that it affects people's perceptions of the randomness of events? In one condition, we asked respondents to apportion blame among four officials involved in the disaster, along with "Mother Nature." In the second condition, we also provided information on the party identifications of the officials. We analyzed whether people's blame of "Mother Nature" (i.e., our proxy of their perception of the randomness of the event) changed when partisan information was provided. If so, then it suggests that a form of irrationality induced by biasing information.

### **Study 1: The September 11th Experiment**

#### ***Design***

Using an Internet-based survey experiment, the first study sought to ascertain how Americans attributed blame in response to the terrorist attacks on September 11th, a major lapse of intelligence and national security that warranted federal investigations and commissions. At the outset of the survey, respondents were told: "We would like to ask you a few questions about your thoughts and opinions on the September 11th terrorist attacks." To measure the primary dependent variable, we asked respondents: "How much is [OFFICIAL X] to blame for making American vulnerable to the attacks on September 11th?" with the response options: "a great deal," "a lot," "a moderate amount," "a little," and "not at all." We asked three version of this

question to each respondent, replacing “[OFFICIAL X]” with the office title and name of three officials: CIA Director George Tenet, FBI Director Louis Freeh, and Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the CIA and FBI directors had a significant role in managing foreign and domestic intelligence, respectively, whereas the Federal Reserve chairman had essentially nothing to do with the September 11th attacks a steward of American monetary policy.

For each of the three questions, respondents were assigned to one of three manipulations. In the control condition, the question appeared as above. In the second condition, the official was identified as being appointed by a Republican administration: “How much is CIA Director George Tenet, a Republican appointee, to blame for making American vulnerable to the attacks on September 11th?” In the third condition, the official was identified as being appointed by a Democratic administration: “How much is CIA Director George Tenet, a Democratic appointee, to blame for making American vulnerable to the attacks on September 11th?” For each respondent, manipulations for the three officials were independent.

Note that for all three officials, the information presented is accurate. Tenet, Freeh, and Greenspan were all appointed by both Republican and Democratic presidents. Hence, this design simultaneously accomplishes multiple objectives: (1) we manipulated the party labels of the officials in order to assess the causal impact of partisan cues; (2) we used a real-world scenario; and (3) we used no deception or false information.

### ***Hypotheses***

Our experimental design allows us to answer three major questions. First, in assessing blame, do citizens rely upon partisan attachments? Second, what are the limits of partisan rationalization? Are people able to utilize the diagnostic information contained in the office titles

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<sup>1</sup> The order in which these three questions were asked was randomized across respondents. Additionally, the order in which the response options were provided was randomized.

to mitigate the impact of partisan cues, or are people as likely to construct their blame attributions based on party for Tenet, a relevant official, as they are for Greenspan, an irrelevant official? Finally, we explore if the ability to use diagnostic information is only concentrated amongst the most sophisticated individuals, or if it is a quality of the general population.

### *Data*

The experiment was conducted by Knowledge Networks (KN) between February 3 and February 11, 2007.<sup>2</sup> Some 1429 panelists were randomly drawn from the KN panel; 1015 responded to the invitation, yielding a final stage completion rate of 71.0 percent. The cumulative response rate, as reported by KN, was 11.4 percent. KN selects households using random-digit dialing (RDD) and provides them with free hardware and Internet access. Hence, the sample is nationally representative of the adult U.S. population, enhancing the ecological validity of the findings as compared to studies that have relied on volunteer participants in Internet surveys, or samples of college undergraduates and local residents.

### *Methods*

We estimated the following ordered logistic regression model for each official, indexed by each respondent,  $i$ :

$$\text{logit}(B_{ij}) = \alpha_j + \beta_1 I_i + \beta_2 R_i + \beta_3 D_i + \beta_4 (I_i \times R_i) + \beta_5 (I_i \times D_i) + \gamma \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where  $B_{ij}$  represents the level of blame towards the official on the five-point scale for points  $j = 1, \dots, 5$ ,  $I_i$  is a dummy variable representing whether the individual respondent  $i$  is a Republican,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Note that the study was conducted more than five years after the attacks took place. This enhances the external validity of the findings as citizens often cast votes years after a critical event as taken place, but must reconstruct blame attributions on Election Day.

<sup>3</sup> Party identification was measured on a seven-point scale with branched questions, the standard approach used by the American National Election Studies (ANES). Respondents were first asked, "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as" (response choices: "Republican," "Democrat," "Independent," "Another party," "No preference"). Republicans/Democrats were then asked "Would you call yourself a" (response choices: "Strong Republican/Democrat," "Not very strong Republican/Democrat"). All others were asked the follow-up question: "Do you think of yourself as closer to the" (response choices: "Republican Party," "Democratic Party").

$R_i$  and  $D_i$  are dummy variables representing whether the respondent was assigned to the “Republican” and “Democratic” conditions, respectively,  $\mathbf{x}_i$  is a vector of demographic controls (age, education, race, gender),<sup>4</sup> and  $\varepsilon_i$  represents stochastic error that is distributed double-exponential.

$\beta_2$  represents the difference in blame of the official between Democratic respondents in the “Republican” condition and Democratic respondents in the control condition, which we would expect to be positive if these respondents construct their blame assessments based on partisan rationalization. Since  $\beta_2 + \beta_4$  represents the analogous effect among Republican respondents,  $\beta_4$  itself represents the level of polarization that arises in response to the party cues, or the difference in the treatment effects between Republican and Democratic respondents.  $\beta_3$ ,  $\beta_3 + \beta_5$ , and  $\beta_5$  represent analogous quantities for the “Democratic” condition.

The main test involves comparing the level of partisan polarization in the “Republican” condition to the level of polarization in the “Democratic” condition. In other words, how much does the gap in blame of George Tenet, for example, between Democratic and Republican respondents increase when Tenet is labeled a “Republican” official as compared to being labeled a “Democratic” official? This quantity, represented by  $\beta_5 - \beta_4$ , tells us the degree to which citizens engage in partisan rationalization in constructing attributions after government failure.

## ***Results***

Before presenting the main results, we report the results of randomization checks to assess whether the manipulations were successful. As shown in Online Appendix A, there were no statistically significant differences in the distributions of several demographic and political

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Respondents who refused to answer this question were coded as true independents. All Republicans and all Democrats (including leaners) were pooled together by party; all pure independents (who only constituted 6.7% of the sample) were dropped from the analyses.

<sup>4</sup> Because this is a randomized experiment, including demographics in the model specification is unnecessary for estimating an unbiased treatment effect but can make estimates more efficient.

variables across conditions for each of the three manipulations.

Before presenting estimates from the model represented by equation (1), we present descriptive statistics that describe the main results. First, it is important to note that the respondents believed that CIA Director Tenet was the most blameworthy, followed by FBI Director Freeh, and Federal Reserve Chairman Greenspan being least blameworthy. In the control group, 31.4% of respondents said Tenet deserved either “a great deal” or “a lot” of blame (compared with 34.0% who thought that he deserved either “a little” or “not at all.” On the other hand, 25.9% of respondents assigned Freeh one of the top two response options (and 39.5% one of the bottom two). With respect to Greenspan, only 10.1% blamed him “a great deal” or “a lot” whereas 67.8% blamed him “a little” or “not at all”. Hence, consistent with expectations, in the absence of any party cues, respondents did not believe that the Federal Reserve chairman had any responsibility for preventing the September 11th attacks, whereas they thought that Tenet was most blameworthy, and Freeh was slightly less blameworthy.

Figure 1 presents the partisan differences in the blame ratings of the three officials, or the average blame rating of Democratic respondents minus the average blame rating of Republican respondents. The first, solid white bar for each of the officials represents the partisan divide in the control group. On average, Democrats blame all three officials more than Republican officials in the absence of any party labels, perhaps reflecting Republicans’ greater belief that the terrorist themselves were the only ones to blame for the attacks coupled with Democrats’ greater distrust of the Republican-controlled executive branch. The second and third bars present the partisan divide in the “Democratic appointee” and “Republican appointee” conditions, respectively. For Tenet, note that the partisan divide is lower in the “Democratic appointee” condition as compared to the control group, the result of Democrats blaming Tenet less once he

is identified as a fellow Democrat. Conversely, the partisan divide is higher in the “Republican appointee” versus the control group, due to Democrats increasing their blame of Tenet and Republicans blaming him less. The fourth bar—the difference between the third and second bars—is the key quantity of interest: How does the partisan divide change when Tenet is referred to as “a Democratic appointee” compared to being referred to as “a Republican appointee”?

The level of partisan rationalization is highest for Tenet, the domain-relevant official, and virtually non-existent for Greenspan, the irrelevant official. Switching Tenet’s label from “Democrat” to “Republican” increases the partisan divide in blame attribution by about .85 points, or 21.3% of the total length of the scale, a substantively large amount. On the other hand, switching Freeh’s label increases the partisan divide by only .28 points and switching Greenspan’s label results in a tiny .05-point increase. What conclusions can we draw from these results? Citizens do significantly rely upon their longstanding partisan attachments in constructing blame attributions, consistent with previous studies showing the powerful force of party in other aspects of political behavior. However, there are important limits to partisan rationalization. People do not use party cues when the official in question is irrelevant to the domain of interest, and are able to use office titles as diagnostic information in assessing an official’s level of responsibility. The monotonicity of the findings is striking. The order of blameworthiness in the control group was Tenet, Freeh, and Greenspan. This was also the rank order of the sizes of the difference in the treatment effects of the party cue.

The patterns illustrated in the descriptive statistics are statistically significant as well. Table 1 presents the parameter estimates from the ordered logistic regression model represented by equation (1). As shown in the first column, the partisan divide in blame attribution of Tenet increased when switching his label from “a Democratic appointee” to “a Republican appointee.”

The difference, representing the level of partisan rationalization, is highly statistically significant ( $\beta_5 - \beta_4 = 1.25, p < .001$ ). We can also interpret this estimate substantively using predicted probabilities, varying values for the partisanship and treatment dummies and holding the demographic covariates at their medians. In the “Democratic appointee” condition, the predicted probability of Democratic respondents assigning Tenet “a great deal” or “a lot” of blame is 25.3%, compared to Republican respondents with 23.7%, a difference of 1.6%. In the “Republican appointee” condition, this difference increases by over 15 times to 24.1%. The predicted probability of Democratic respondents increases to 38.1% now that Tenet is identified as a Republican, and the predicted probability of Republican respondents decreases to 14.0%. Hence, when the official is domain relevant, citizens utilize party labels in order to construct their assessments of blame.

However, these effects diminish as the official becomes increasingly irrelevant. As shown in the second column of Table 1, the increase in the partisan divide in blame as a result of switching Freeh’s label is again positive but now only marginally statistically significant ( $\beta_5 - \beta_4 = .89, p = .09$ ). Substantively, the partisan difference in the predicted probabilities of assigning Freeh “a great deal” or “a lot” of blame increases from 4.2% in the “Democratic appointee” condition to 12.9% in the “Republican appointee condition,” a difference of only 8.7 percentage points. Finally, as shown in the third column in Table 1, switching Greenspan’s label does not significantly affect the divide between Republican and Democratic respondents ( $\beta_5 - \beta_4 = -.13, p = .70$ ). Moreover, the partisan difference in the predicted probabilities changes by a miniscule .006 percentage points. Hence, there exists evidence of partisan rationalization in blame attribution following government failure, but *only* when the official is relevant to the domain at hand.

Finally, we find that these results are not concentrated among the most sophisticated respondents. We employ two dichotomous measures of sophistication: (1) whether an individual had obtained education beyond high school; and (2) whether September 11th was “extremely personally important” to the individual.<sup>5</sup> With respect to the latter, Krosnick (1988, 1989) has found that people exhibit more reliable and sophisticated attitudes on an issue if that issue is personally important to them. For all three officials, switching the label from “Democratic appointee” to “Republican appointee” increases partisan polarization in blame attribution by about the same amount among low education vs. high education respondents (Tenet: .80 points vs. .88 points; Freeh: .40 vs. .19; Greenspan: .12 vs. -.01). In the first three columns of Online Appendix B, we present three-way interactive models showing that these three differences are statistically insignificant (Tenet:  $p=.57$ ; Freeh:  $p=.63$ ; Greenspan:  $p=.96$ ). As shown in the second three columns of Online Appendix B, we obtain similarly insignificant differences between individuals for whom September 11th was personally important vs. personally unimportant (Tenet:  $p=.95$ ; Freeh:  $p=.44$ ; Greenspan:  $p=.11$ ). Thus, for both politically sophisticated and unsophisticated citizens, diagnostic information moderates the effects of partisan bias on blame attribution.

## **Study 2: The Hurricane Katrina Experiment**

### ***Design***

Building on the results of Study 1, we conducted a survey experiment dealing with seven political officials involved in the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina in the city of

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<sup>5</sup> We bifurcated these variables at different cut points and obtained similar results, both in terms of statistical significance and substantive meaning. Personal importance was measured with the following item: “How personally important to you are the events of September 11th?” (response options: “extremely important,” “very important,” “moderately important,” “slightly important,” “not important at all”).

New Orleans.<sup>6</sup> Although politicians had no control over the storm itself, the failure to develop and mobilize infrastructure and to respond efficiently to the disaster likely led to unnecessary death and destruction.

Each respondent was asked to *rank* seven public officials in order of how much they should be blamed for the property damage and loss of life caused by Hurricane Katrina in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. The public officials available for the respondents to rank were Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco (Democrat), Federal Emergency Management Agency Director Michael Brown (Republican), President George W. Bush (Republican), Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff (Republican), New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin (Democrat), Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu (Democrat), and Louisiana Senator David Vitter (Republican).<sup>7</sup>

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four experimental groups, which differ along two dimensions with respect to the information contained in the response options: whether each public official in the ranking list is associated with his/her office title, and whether the official is given a party affiliation. These two dimensions constitute the four experimental groups. The control group only received the list of seven proper names without any additional information (e.g. “Kathleen Blanco”). Group 2, the “party cues” condition, received the list of proper names with each official’s partisan affiliation (e.g. “Kathleen Blanco (Democrat)”). Group 3, the “office cues” condition, received the list of proper names with each official’s job title (e.g. “Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco”). Group 4, the “both cues” condition, received

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<sup>6</sup> A more detailed description and analysis of this study can be found in [AUTHOR CITE].

<sup>7</sup> Respondents were asked; “Who do you think should be blamed the most for the loss of life and property damage in New Orleans that was caused by Hurricane Katrina?,” followed by the list of seven officials. After selecting an official, respondents were then asked: “Who do you think should be blamed the second most for the loss of life...” A series of six questions was asked until respondents had ranked all seven officials. Only 9.1% of respondents did not fully complete the task. Non-response was not correlated with any demographic or political variables.

the list of proper names with each official's partisan affiliation *and* job title (e.g. "Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco (Democrat)"). For all respondents, the order of the names on each list of officials was randomized.

Note that this design has both strengths and weaknesses as compared to Study 1. We are able to directly manipulate the presence of diagnostic information (in the form of the office titles) in Study 2 and assess whether it mitigates partisan rationalization induced by the party cues. However, we only manipulate the presence and absence of the cues as opposed to the content of the cues, because doing so would involve presenting incorrect information to respondents.

### ***Hypotheses***

Compared to the control group, we expect that Republicans/Democrats should be more likely to blame Democratic/Republican officials when provided with party cues. Because party identification of officials should not reveal much substantive information regarding officials' capacities to respond to natural catastrophes, individual use of party cues in this policy context can be considered a biased heuristic. Unlike party cues, the office cues provide information that is policy relevant and content-rich, since individuals may have prior beliefs about which offices and levels of government should be most responsible for preparing for and responding to disasters. Although we cannot predict with certainty which offices people will view as more blameworthy, we can use the "both cues" condition to assess whether people relied more on the office titles or the party labels to assign blame. If the effect of the combined condition is similar to the party/office cue in isolation, then we conclude that party/office cues dominated. On the other hand, if the coefficient estimate for the "both cues" condition is in between the estimates of the other two conditions, then we conclude that "mixing" occurred. The formal tests of the

hypotheses are described in the next section.

### ***Data***

The experiment was conducted by Knowledge Networks (KN) between May 26 and February 31, 2006. Some 584 panelists were randomly drawn from the KN panel; 397 responded to the invitation, yielding a final stage completion rate of 68.5 percent. The cumulative response rate, as reported by KN, was 11.5 percent.

### ***Methods***

Because the data we are analyzing were generated by asking respondents to rank a set of items, we employ the rank-ordered logit model, also known as the “exploded logit” model (Allison and Christakis 1994; Beggs, Cardell, and Hausman 1981; Chapman and Staelin 1982). Interested readers can consult the original articles for methodological details; we describe here the intuition behind the model as well as a basic formal presentation.

The rank-ordered logit model is a generalization of conditional/multinomial logit models, which are used to model discrete choices of individuals selecting among a group of unordered items. These models help explain how the characteristics of the *choosers* and the *items* affect the likelihood of the items being selected. The process of ranking is an aggregation of these individual choices. For instance, when individuals are ranking a set of seven items, their selection of the item to be ranked first is equivalent to selecting one item from the seven. Their selection of the item to be ranked second is equivalent to selecting one item from the remaining six, and so on. Here the items are the individual political officials. Hence, ranked data can be statistically modeled by combining together a set of conditional logit models to create the rank-ordered logit model.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The rank-ordered logit model is especially appropriate for analyzing these data because the ranking task mirrors the behavioral assumptions underlying the model. As explained above, respondents first chose the most

Formally, we assume that the data are derived from a random utility model where  $BR_{ij}$  represents the latent blame respondent  $i$  has for official  $j$  (out of  $J$  officials). We observe  $Y_{ij}$ , which is the blame ranking respondent  $i$  assigns to official  $j$ .<sup>9</sup> Although  $BR_{ij}$  is unobserved, we assume that respondent  $i$  ranks official  $j$  more blameworthy than official  $k$  if  $BR_{ij} > BR_{ik}$ . Each  $BR_{ij}$  is modeled as having a systematic component ( $\mu_{ij}$ ) and a random component ( $\varepsilon_{ij}$ ):

$$BR_{ij} = \beta_1 R_j + \beta_2 (R_j \times I_i) + \beta_3 (R_j \times P_i) + \beta_4 (R_j \times I_i \times P_i) + \beta_5 (R_j \times O_i) + \beta_6 (R_j \times I_i \times O_i) + \beta_7 (R_j \times B_i) + \beta_8 (R_j \times I_i \times B_i) + \gamma(R_j \mathbf{x}_i) + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (2)$$

where  $R_j$  is a dummy variable representing whether the official  $j$  is a Republican,  $I_i$  is a dummy variable representing whether the individual respondent  $i$  is a Republican,<sup>10</sup>  $P_i$  is the treatment dummy for the “party cue” condition,  $O_i$  is the treatment dummy for the “office cue” condition,  $B_i$  is the treatment dummy for “both cues” condition,  $\mathbf{x}_i$  is a vector of demographic controls, and  $\varepsilon_i$  represents stochastic error that is distributed double-exponential.<sup>11</sup> The condition dummies are indexed by respondent because the treatment was administered at the individual level and does not vary by official. Conversely,  $R_j$  is indexed by official because their party affiliations are the same for each respondent.

$\beta_3$  and  $\beta_3 + \beta_4$  represent the likelihood of Democrats and Republicans, respectively, in the “party cue” condition ranking a Republican official as more blameworthy than a Democratic official, as compared to the control group. Hence,  $\beta_4$  indicates how much the partisan divide in terms of blame increased due to the effect of the party cue.  $\beta_6$  represents the analogous estimate

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blameworthy official, and then sequentially selected officials they believed to be less and less blameworthy until the ranking task was completed.

<sup>9</sup> For the regression analyses, we coded blame to lie between 1 (least blame) and 7 (most blame). However, the rank-ordered logit model is not invariant to a reversal in the coding of the rankings. Consequently, we re-estimated all models with a reversed coding of blame, and the results were statistically and substantively similar to those reported.

<sup>10</sup> Independents (7.1% of sample) were excluded.

<sup>11</sup> We do not include the constituent terms  $I_i$ ,  $P_i$ ,  $O_i$ , and  $B_i$  because they do not vary across choices within individuals.

for the office cue. Comparing the effect of receiving both cues ( $\beta_8$ ) to each cue in isolation allows us to ascertain which piece of information dominated in the attribution process. In other words, to what extent does information about official responsibilities dilute partisan bias? Formally, we compare the treatment effects of the office and party cues against the effect of receiving both cues via Wald chi-square tests testing two null hypotheses regarding linear combinations of the coefficients from equation (2):

$$H_0: \beta_8 - \beta_4 = 0 \quad (3)$$

$$H_0: \beta_8 - \beta_6 = 0 \quad (4)$$

By comparing the “both cues” group to the “party cues” group, equation (3) tests whether the addition of the office cue to the party cue significantly affects blame attribution. If it does not, then we conclude that the party cue dominates. Similarly, equation (4) informs us of office cue domination. Hence, failing to reject (3) and rejecting (4) provides evidence for party cue domination. On the other hand, rejecting (3) and failing to reject (4) provides evidence for office cue domination. Rejecting *both* null hypotheses would offer support of a “mixing” effect, meaning neither condition dominates. Finally, if we fail to reject both null hypotheses (most likely due to wide confidence intervals around the point estimates of the coefficients), then the results are inconclusive and we cannot determine if there was cue domination or mixing.

### ***Results***

As in Study 1, randomization was successful (see Online Appendix C).

Before presenting parameter estimates from the rank-ordered logit model, we present descriptive statistics to illustrate the main results. In Figure 2, on the y-axis is the difference in the average ranking of the four Republican officials between Democratic and Republican

respondents.<sup>12</sup> As shown in the first and second bars, the party cue induces increased polarization between partisans by about .64 blame ranks (.79 in the control group vs. 1.43 in the party cue condition). However, the level of polarization among respondents in the “both cues” condition (1.12 ranks) is in between the party (1.43 ranks) and office cue (.76 ranks) conditions, suggesting a mixing of partisan rationalization and the use of diagnostic information. When given diagnostic information on top of party labels, citizens are able to reduce the degree to which their blame attributions are constructed based on longstanding partisan attachments.

Consistent with these descriptive statistics, the rank-ordered logit model reveals that the party and office cues had similarly sized yet competing influences on blame attribution. As shown in the first column of Table 2, the party cue caused Democratic respondents to blame Republican officials more ( $\beta_3 = .56, p=.005$ ) whereas it caused Republican respondents to blame Republican officials less ( $\beta_3 + \beta_4 = -.38, p=.08$ ). Further, compared to the baseline divide between partisans in the control group, the party cue induced greater polarization ( $\beta_4 = -.94, p=.001$ ). In substantive terms, the level of partisan polarization was 2.56 times higher in terms of the odds in the “party cue” condition.<sup>13</sup> However, when the office cue was included along with the party cue, the level of polarization significantly decreased ( $\beta_8 - \beta_4 = .53, p=.08$ ). The increase in the odds in the “both cues” condition was 1.52 times. In other words, individuals were able to incorporate diagnostic information—albeit minimal in amount and content—about the officials’ roles and responsibilities to mitigate partisan bias. The party cue also significantly affected attributional judgments when placed on top of the office cue in isolation ( $\beta_8 - \beta_6 = -.60, p=.04$ ), meaning that we reject the null hypotheses expressed in both equations (3) and (4) and

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<sup>12</sup> Because ranks are constant sum, the average blame ranking of Republican and Democratic officials is perfectly negatively correlated.

<sup>13</sup>  $\exp(\beta_4)$  represents the increase in the difference in the odds of ranking Republican officials above Democratic officials between Republican and Democratic respondents. Accordingly,  $\exp(-\beta_4)$  represents the difference in partisan polarization between the “party cue” condition and the control group.

consequently observe “mixing.”

As an additional test, we examine how citizens blamed Senators Landrieu and Vitter, because in this case the office title is held fixed but the partisan label is varied. Thus, comparing these two officials represents the cleanest test in the experimental design. Our dependent variable of interest is the difference in blame ranking between Landrieu and Vitter, which we expect to be higher for Republican respondents as compared to Democratic respondents. The difference between Republican and Democratic respondents in the control group is .64 ranks. The partisan difference in the Landrieu-Vitter blame gap dramatically rises to 2.19 ranks in the “party cue” condition. Conversely, in the “office cue” condition, there is almost no difference between Republican and Democratic respondents (.03 ranks). In other words, when people are told that Landrieu and Vitter are senators—and therefore did not have much responsibility in on-the-ground management after Katrina’s landfall—partisan divisions go away and the blame of both politicians decreases. In the “both cues” condition, the partisan gap is 1.04 ranks, which is again evidence of “cue mixing.” Thus, people do not completely discount partisan information, but polarization decreases in the presence of minimal amounts of diagnostic information. In Online Appendix D, we present regression model estimates that confirm that these differences are statistically significant.

As in Study 1, we find that information use does not vary by levels of political sophistication. Highly-educated individuals exhibited evidence of “cue mixing” with partisan polarization in the average blame ranking of Republicans decreasing in the presence of office cues (control: .67 ranks; party cue: 1.46 ranks; both cues: 1.12 ranks). A similar pattern was observed among those with a high school diploma or less (control: .94 ranks; party cue: 1.43 ranks; both cues: 1.12 ranks). A ranked-ordered logit model testing the interaction between

education and treatment effects confirms that this difference is not statistically significant (see first column of Online Appendix E). In comparing people for whom Hurricane Katrina was personally important<sup>14</sup> to those for whom it was not, we again found no statistically significant difference in information use between groups (see second column of Online Appendix E).

### **Study 3: The Mother Nature Experiment**

#### ***Design***

In the third study, we move away from exploring how individuals assess the blameworthiness of political actors, and instead examine how partisan rationalization affects people's interpretation of the events themselves. We again use the case of Hurricane Katrina. It could be argued that the strength of the storm was so great that excessive death and destruction would have taken place even in the presence of a perfect government response. Accordingly, we asked respondents to attribute blame to five "objects": the four public officials that received the most blame in Study 2 (Blanco, Brown, Bush, Nagin), as well as "Mother Nature" (which we use to proxy how much of the problems of Hurricane Katrina was attributable to random causes beyond anyone's control). Respondents were asked: "For all the loss of life and property damage in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, please indicate the percentage of total blame attributable to the following people or things. Your percentages should add up to 100%" and then provided the list of four officials plus "Mother Nature."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Personal importance was measured with the following question: "How personally important to you were the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina?" ("extremely important," "very important," "moderately important," "slightly important," "not important at all"). Respondents answering "extremely important" and "very important" were coded as those for whom Katrina was highly personally important.

<sup>15</sup> In this study, we did not use the ranking approach because we aimed to allow respondents to more flexibly report how much they thought the loss of life and property damage was to random causes. We informed respondents when their responses did not sum to 100. Only 2.4% of respondents did not complete the task.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the control group, only the office titles and names of the officials were provided (e.g. “Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco”). In the “party cue” condition, respondents were also told the official’s party identification (e.g. “Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco (Democrat).” In both conditions, “Mother Nature” was not provided with either an office title or party affiliation. If people are sensibly assessing cause and effect when making political attributions, then providing party labels should not alter people’s perceptions of the randomness of an event. Hence, a significant difference between the control group and the “party cue” group would not be evidence of a rational assessment of the events surrounding Katrina.

### ***Hypotheses***

Therefore, if partisan rationalization affects people’s assessments of the stochasticness of Hurricane Katrina, then we should observe a difference in how much blame is attributed to “Mother Nature” between the two experimental conditions. We can also assess whether the treatment effect is moderated by education.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Data***

The experiment was conducted by Knowledge Networks (KN) between May 1 and May 8, 2007. Some 1427 panelists were randomly drawn from the KN panel; 1000 responded to the invitation, yielding a final stage completion rate of 70.8 percent. The cumulative response rate, as reported by KN, was 27.2 percent. The study described here involved a randomly-selected subset of 510 respondents.

### ***Methods***

In this study, we are interested in predicting whether people’s determination of the extent to which a negative outcome is due to random forces (i.e. how much blame is attributed to

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<sup>16</sup> Personal importance was not measured in this study.

“Mother Nature”) changes in the presence of partisan rationalization. Accordingly, we estimate the following ordinary least squares (OLS)<sup>17</sup> regression model:

$$B_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 I_i + \beta_2 P_i + \gamma \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

where  $i$  indexes respondents,  $B_i$  represents the percentage of blame attributed to “Mother Nature,”  $I_i$  is a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent is a Republican,<sup>18</sup>  $P_i$  is a dummy variable representing whether the respondent was assigned to the “party cue” condition, and  $\mathbf{x}_i$  is a vector of demographic controls, and  $\varepsilon_i$  represents stochastic error that is distributed normal.  $\beta_2$  represents the effect of the party labels on people’s assessment of the randomness of the event. To assess whether education moderates the effect, we also estimated the following model:

$$B_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 I_i + \beta_2 P_i + \beta_3 E_i + \beta_4 (P_i \times E_i) + \gamma \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (4)$$

where  $E_i$  is a dummy variable indicating respondents with more than a high school education. In this model,  $\beta_2$  represents the treatment effect among low-educated respondents,  $\beta_2 + \beta_4$  represents the treatment effect among high-educated respondents, and  $\beta_4$  represents the difference in the treatment effects between the two education groups.

## **Results**

In the full sample, providing party labels did not affect respondents’ assessment of the blameworthiness of “Mother Nature.” As shown on the left side of Figure 3, members of the control group and “party cue” group attributed 50.4% and 52.3% of the blame to “Mother Nature,” a substantively negligible difference. As shown in the first column of Table 3, the treatment effect is not statistically significant ( $\beta_2 = 2.10, p=.50$ ). Moreover, the treatment effect did not vary by party identification (see second column of Table 3). Although Republicans did

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<sup>17</sup> Since the blame percentages for the five objects sum to 100 by construction (and therefore are not independent), we also estimated a seemingly-unrelated regression model (Tomz et al. 2002). We obtained similar results to those reported here both in terms of statistical significance and substantive meaning.

<sup>18</sup> Independents (5.3% of the sample) were excluded.

ascribe more blame to “Mother Nature” than Democrats, the interaction term “Republican Respondent x Party Cue” is statistically and substantively insignificant ( $\beta_5 = 1.23, p=.84$ ).

However, respondents with less than a high school education were significantly more likely to believe that the problems that arose in the aftermath of Katrina were the result of random forces when given partisan information. As illustrated in Figure 3, the treatment effect among low-education respondents was large and positive (9.55 percentage points) whereas the treatment effect among high-education respondents was much smaller (-3.50 percentage points). As shown in the third column of Table 3, the party cues significantly increased the blame of “Mother Nature” among low-education respondents ( $\beta_2 = 9.62, p=.05$ ), but did not have a significant effect among high-education respondents ( $\beta_2 + \beta_4 = -2.90, p=.47$ ). Further, the difference between educational groups was statistically significant ( $\beta_4 = -12.52, p=.05$ ).

Overall, citizens appear to be sensibly judging cause-and-effect in the case of Hurricane Katrina. Partisan rationalization does not seem to affect people’s assessments of the randomness of events, which should be unaffected by the presence of partisan information. However, there does exist heterogeneity. Less-sophisticated individuals are more affected by party labels, and less likely to make reasoned attributional judgments in the political domain.

## Discussion

Studying the intermediate psychological step of blame attribution is important to better understanding how citizens engage in retrospective voting. The psychological literature on group-serving bias as well as the extensive political science literature on partisanship would make it seem that partisan attachments are immensely powerful predictors of blame attribution. However, such behavior would contradict Key’s (1966) conception of democratic accountability,

in which citizens reward incumbents of the opposite party for good performance and punish co-partisans for poor performance.

Our three experimental studies—exploring the public’s attitudes towards two major catastrophes in recent American history—have found evidence of partisan rationalization in how citizens blame politicians in the wake of negative outcomes. However, there are important limits to rationalization, suggesting that the electorate is more “responsible” than previously believed. People are not influenced by party labels if the official is not relevant to the domain at hand. They are able to process diagnostic information about the roles and responsibilities of the elected officials to mitigate partisan bias. Additionally, when presented diagnostic information along with party cues, partisan rationalization decreases. Lastly, providing people party cues does not affect their perceptions of the randomness of a catastrophic event in their assessment of cause and effect. Except for Study 3, we found that these limits to partisan rationalization exist among both the politically sophisticated and unsophisticated.

Previous research has argued that people’s use of heuristics in the form of endorsements and cues is a rational means for constrained citizens to minimize information costs (Popkin 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). While this may be the case for policy evaluation and candidate choice, normative conceptions of accountability require that partisan-tinted glasses do not unduly influence voters in their roles as jurors in the political domain as they determine guilt and innocence for what actually occurred. Surprisingly, in all three studies, we found that partisan information is actually quite fragile. This seems to be more in accord with our understanding of recent political events, with Independents and Republicans abandoning the Bush Administration for its role in a series of negative events including Hurricane Katrina, the Iraq War, and the global collapse of the financial markets (Green 2007).

In addition to addressing questions about the limits of partisan bias with respect to blame attribution, this paper also raises new ones to be addressed by future research. For instance, future experimental designs can more closely capture real-world communication. Since our three studies were cross-sectional, information was presented to respondents at the same time. Longitudinal studies can vary the timing of how people receive information. Further, whereas experimental studies exogenously provide information to respondents, in the real world people endogenously select into information based on their priors. Future research can study this selection process more explicitly. Additionally, in this paper, the information was provided by a presumably neutral source (the researcher). Subsequent studies can vary the sources of partisan cues and diagnostic information. For instance, political elites often compete via the media to avoid blame when mistakes are made (e.g. McGraw 1990, 1991). Because many of the officials studied in this paper did not have to stand for reelection themselves, we did not examine vote choice as a dependent variable. Future scholarship can connect blame attribution to electoral consequences. In addition to better understanding how retrospective voting affects the fortunes of politicians, subsequent research can also explore the public welfare consequences of proper (and improper) blame attribution.

Seminal works of political behavior established partisan attachments as important variables in explaining how people see and react to the world. However, much less research has explored the conditions under which people discard these attachments to hold politicians accountable for their actions. By experimentally varying *multiple* pieces of information, we have found that party cues are actually quite fragile in their ability to induce partisan polarization in the wake of negative outcomes. Given that people readily use diagnostic information when it is available, we have found evidence pointing to a “responsible electorate.”

**Table 1: Results of Study 1, The September 11th Experiment**

	<u>Tenet</u>	<u>Freeh</u>	<u>Greenspan</u>
$\beta_1$ : Republican Respondent	-.32 (.22)	-.88 <sup>***</sup> (.21)	-.53 <sup>*</sup> (.23)
$\beta_2$ : “Republican Appointee” Condition	.32 (.21)	.00 (.21)	-.09 (.21)
$\beta_3$ : “Democratic Appointee” Condition	-.28 (.21)	-.25 (.20)	-.16 (.22)
$\beta_4$ : Republican Respondent x “Republican Appointee” Condition	-1.01 <sup>**</sup> (.30)	.12 (.29)	.15 (.31)
$\beta_5$ : Republican Respondent x “Democratic Appointee” Condition	.24 (.30)	.63 <sup>*</sup> (.29)	.02 (.33)
$\gamma_1$ : Age	.64 <sup>*</sup> (.26)	.78 <sup>**</sup> (.27)	-1.01 <sup>***</sup> (.28)
$\gamma_2$ : Education	-.07 (.18)	-.16 (.18)	-1.63 <sup>***</sup> (.20)
$\gamma_3$ : White	-.23 (.15)	-.26 <sup>+</sup> (.15)	-.33 <sup>*</sup> (.16)
$\gamma_4$ : Male	.17 (.12)	.13 (.12)	-.74 <sup>***</sup> (.13)
$\tau_1$	-2.07	-2.14	-2.06
$\tau_2$	-.72	-.77	-1.25
$\tau_3$	.80	.86	.14
$\tau_4$	2.25	2.34	1.26
$H_0: \beta_5 - \beta_4$	1.25 <sup>***</sup>	.89 <sup>+</sup>	-.13
Wald $\chi^2(9)$	60.58 <sup>***</sup>	50.80 <sup>***</sup>	143.85 <sup>***</sup>
N	914	913	912

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; +  $p < .10$  (two-tailed)

Note: Ordered logistic regressions predicting blame of government officials on five-point scale.

**Table 2: Results of Study 2, The Hurricane Katrina Experiment**

$\beta_1$ : Rep. Official	.88 <sup>***</sup> (.20)
$\beta_2$ : Rep. Official x Rep. Respondent	-.97 <sup>***</sup> (.20)
$\beta_3$ : Rep. Official x Party Cue	.56 <sup>**</sup> (.20)
$\beta_4$ : Rep. Official x Rep. Respondent x Party Cue	-.94 <sup>**</sup> (.30)
$\beta_5$ : Rep. Official x Office Cue	-.38 <sup>*</sup> (.18)
$\beta_6$ : Rep. Official x Rep. Respondent x Office Cue	.19 (.29)
$\beta_7$ : Rep. Official x Both Cues	.05 (.19)
$\beta_8$ : Rep. Official x Rep. Respondent x Both Cues	-.42 (.29)
$\gamma_1$ : Rep. Official x Age	-.27 (.22)
$\gamma_2$ : Rep. Official x Education	-.24 (.16)
$\gamma_3$ : Rep. Official x White	-.04 (.12)
$\gamma_4$ : Rep. Official x Male	.01 (.10)
$H_0: \beta_8 - \beta_4$	.53 <sup>+</sup>
$H_0: \beta_8 - \beta_6$	-.60 <sup>*</sup>
N	2380
Log Likelihood	-2806.93
LR $\chi^2(12)$	183.25 <sup>***</sup>

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; +  $p < .10$  (two-tailed)

Note: Rank-ordered logistic regression predicting blame of government officials.

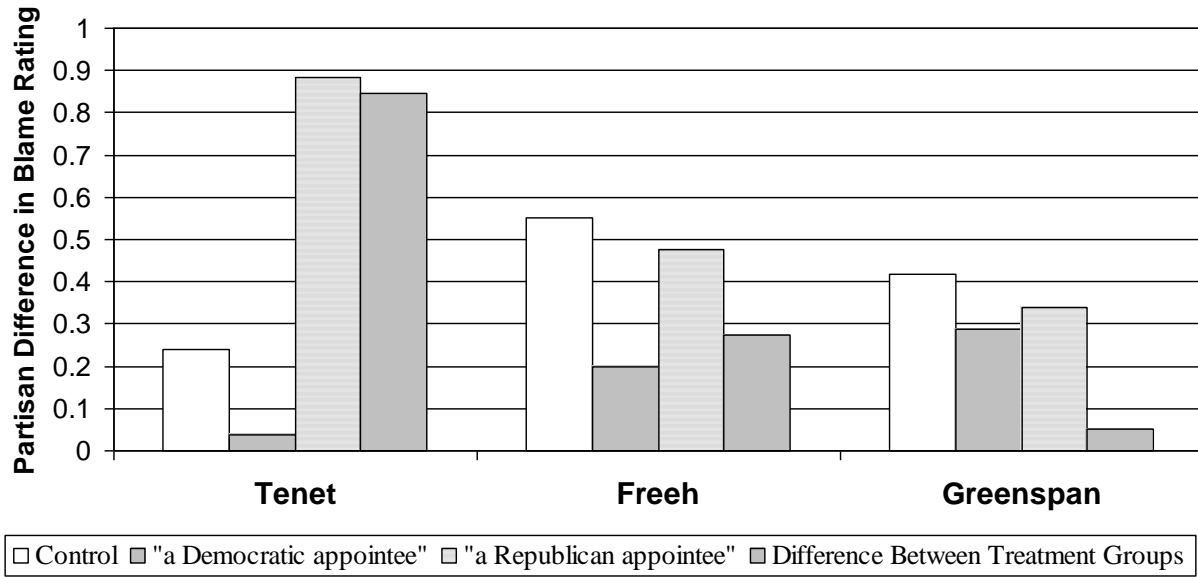
**Table 3: Results of Study 3, The Mother Nature Experiment**

$\beta_1$ : Republican Respondent	7.23* (3.27)	6.63 (4.48)	7.60* (3.27)
$\beta_2$ : Party Cue	2.10 (3.09)	1.49 (4.35)	9.62* (4.88)
$\beta_3$ : High Education	1.73 (3.23)	1.70 (3.23)	7.95+ (4.48)
$\beta_4$ : High Education x Party Cue	—	—	-12.52* (6.29)
$\beta_5$ : Republican Respondent x Party Cue	—	1.23 (6.21)	—
$\gamma_1$ : Age	-21.42** (7.15)	-21.36** (7.16)	-21.35** (7.13)
$\gamma_2$ : White	13.50*** (3.71)	13.47*** (3.72)	13.22*** (3.70)
$\gamma_3$ : Male	2.38 (3.11)	2.44 (3.13)	2.26 (3.10)
Constant	42.94*** (4.76)	43.22*** (4.98)	39.22*** (5.10)
N	473	473	473
R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.07	.08

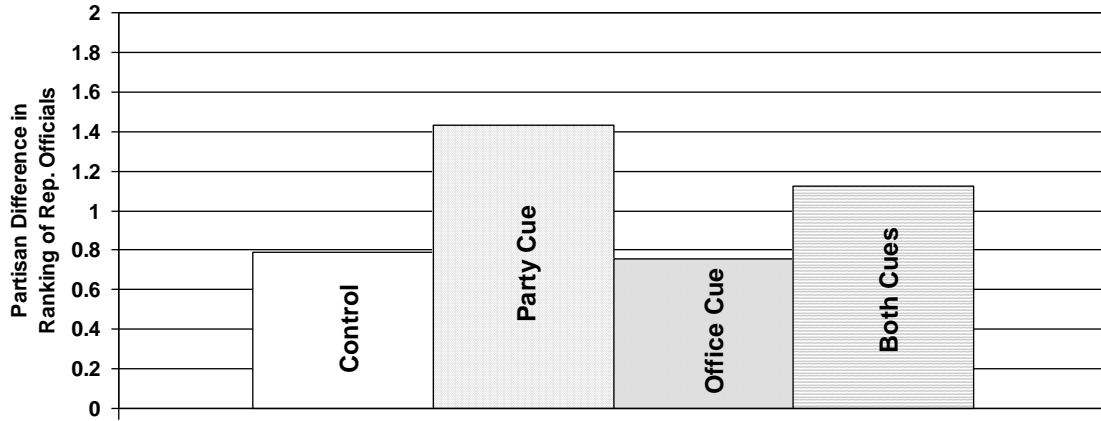
\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; + $p < .10$  (two-tailed)

Note: OLS regressions predicting percentage of blame attributed to “Mother Nature.”

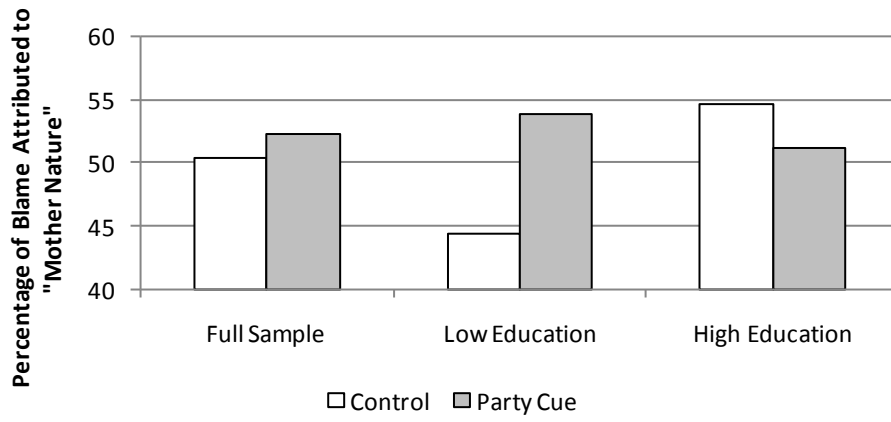
Figure 1: Results of Study 1, The September 11th Experiment



**Figure 2: Results of Study 2, The Hurricane Katrina Experiment**



**Figure 3: Results of Study 3, The Mother Nature Experiment**



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