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Elite cues and public polarization on transgender rights

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ABSTRACT

This study adds to the emerging literature explaining public opinion toward transgender rights by demonstrating the importance of elite cues for such an opinion. Data from two cross-sectional surveys conducted in 2015 and 2016 measure public opinion on several policies affecting transgender people. Consistent with Zaller [1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press], the results indicate “polarization effects” whereby the most politically aware citizens followed increasingly divided elite cues along ideological lines. The future trajectory of public opinion on transgender rights would thus seem to depend significantly on the behavior of elites.

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Introduction

In March 2016, North Carolina rushed to the front of the growing political battle over LGBT rights by passing House Bill 2 (HB2). Although it included multiple provisions, HB2 gained most attention as a “bathroom bill” due to its requirement that transgender people use the public restrooms that match the sex assigned on their birth certificate. The bill provoked fierce ideological debate, with conservative groups praising the Republican legislators who passed the bill, and Democrats and liberal groups threatening boycotts and lawsuits over its passage.

Both sides frequently claimed that public opinion supported their position. For example, Republican Governor Pat McCrory said that the anti-discrimination ordinance overturned by HB2 “defies common sense and basic community norms” (Brown, Blandford, and Knute 2016). Liberals also claimed the support of the public. Addressing a rally, 2016 Democratic Vice-Presidential nominee Tim Kaine said that North Carolinians opposed to the law “have stood up in a major way. And you said, this is not who we are. This is not who North Carolina is. These are not our values” (Johnson 2016). Likewise, State Rep. Chris Sgro argued that “discrimination in any form is not representative of North Carolina values” (Krueger 2016).

As transgender rights have risen on the public agenda, scholarship has increasingly turned to explaining public opinion on the topic. Recent research suggests that attitudes towards transgender people and their rights are strongly driven by individuals’ core

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values and life experiences, and the way issues are framed. Respondents who hold higher levels of authoritarianism, more disgust sensitivity, less egalitarian attitudes, more conservative ideologies, and greater religiosity view transgender people less warmly and are less likely to support their rights (Norton and Herek 2013; Jones et al. 2017; Lewis et al. 2017; Miller et al. 2017). Exposure to images of transgender people in survey experiments (Flores et al. 2017), interpersonal contact with LGBT people in everyday life (Lewis et al. 2017), and information about the issue (Flores, 2015) may reduce discomfort with transgender people and increase support for their rights. Furthermore, the issues under discussion and how they are framed help shape public attitudes (Tadlock 2014; Harrison and Michelson 2017a), with greater support for civil rights issues than for issues that concern how transgender people represent gender and gender roles with their bodies (Miller et al. 2017).

Despite the increasingly prominent conflict over transgender rights among ideological leaders and activists, however, we know relatively little about the role their messages play in shaping public opinion about the topic. The present study uses Zaller's (1992) theory of elite cues and public opinion formation – particularly his concept of polarization effects – to illuminate how the roles of political awareness and ideology in shaping opinion have evolved with the growing debate about transgender rights. We begin by reviewing the role that elite cues play in shaping public opinion.

Elite cues and public opinion

One of the most consistent findings from 70 years of survey research is that the average citizen's knowledge of, and attention to, politics is low (Converse 1964, 2000). Given the costs of becoming more informed, citizens frequently rely on political elites to guide their policy attitudes (Downs 1957) – what Popkin (1991) describes as “low-information rationality.” In this “top-down” view of public opinion, elite discourse plays a major role in shaping mass attitudes (for an application to LGBT politics, see Harrison and Michelson 2017b; Lewis et al. 2017).

The current era of elite polarization may make such cues particularly influential. Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013), for example, show that citizens are more likely to follow their party's cues on issues when elites are more polarized. Likewise, Levendusky (2010) argues that greater polarization clarifies issues for voters and increases their propensity to align their views consistently. When elites send clear and polarized cues, the public appears to follow.

Central to this dynamic is the premise that citizens vary in their propensity to receive and accept such messages (Zaller 1992). Those who pay greater attention to politics – what Zaller dubs “habitual political awareness” – are more likely to be exposed to political debate and thus *receive* persuasive messages from elites. Whether an individual *accepts* the message depends on how its source aligns with their ideological predispositions. Crucially, political awareness moderates this relationship too: more aware individuals are more likely to have the contextual information needed to distinguish between sources of messages. While highly aware citizens are likely to receive messages from elites and accurately distinguish between liberals and conservatives in deciding whose cues to follow, individuals who are less aware either never receive the cues or uncritically accept messages regardless of their source.

The shape of public opinion on a given issue, according to Zaller, thus depends on the pattern of elite cues and the intensity of their message. When liberal and conservative elites are united in their messages, more politically aware individuals are particularly likely to adhere to the elite position regardless of their ideology (a “mainstream effect”). When elites disagree along ideological lines, then more politically aware individuals are particularly likely to accept messages from the elites whose values match theirs, yielding a “polarization effect” between more aware liberals and conservatives. The intensity of the communication flow influences which citizens are likely to receive and accept these messages (Zaller 1996). In less-intense message environments, only the most aware are likely to receive elite cues. As intensity increases, even relatively less aware citizens are exposed to these messages. Lacking the source information to distinguish between cues that align with their predispositions and those that do not, however, they “are blown about by whatever current of information manages to develop the greatest intensity” (Zaller 1992, 311).

Polarization effects consistent with Zaller’s RAS model have been documented on a variety of issues and in diverse contexts (e.g., Zaller 1992, 1994, 1996; Butzer and Marquis 2003). For example, Brewer (2007) finds that elite polarization over LGB rights in the early 2000s resulted in mass polarization – but predominantly among the most politically aware. The key tests are regression models predicting support for same-sex marriage and civil unions that interact education (a proxy for awareness) and ideology. The significant interaction terms in these models indicate that the greater the respondent’s education, the more likely they were to stake out divergent positions on these issues that reflected the cues from their side’s elites (Brewer 2007, Chap. 4). Whereas liberals and conservatives with low levels of education held similar attitudes, highly educated liberals expressed the greatest support for LGB rights and highly educated conservatives the least support.

In this research note, we assess whether public opinion on transgender rights has followed a similar pattern. We begin by showing that elite messages about transgender rights became more intense and the ideological cues more polarized over the 2014–2016 period.

Elite messages on transgender rights, 2014–2016

North Carolina’s HB2 represented a peak in attention to transgender rights in public discourse that has been growing in recent years. Figure 1 shows the number of news stories on transgender issues per month, as measured by a Lexis-Nexis search for the terms “transgender” or “transsexual”¹ in several major newspapers.² We attempted to assess the number of stories in the top 20 newspapers by circulation in the U.S. Lexis-Nexis only had access to 13 of the 20, and so we rely on them here.³ Figure 1 shows rising levels of news coverage, with newspapers publishing roughly twice as many stories in 2016 than they did in 2014. On average, there were 77.7 more stories per month in the third quarter of 2016 than in the first quarter of 2014 (the first and last quarters of the period under study), with a bootstrapped 95% confidence interval of [40.5, 115.1].

Along with the overall increase in attention to transgender rights, this time period saw an increasingly clear divide between liberal and conservative elites on the issue.⁴ Before 2015, much of the policymaking and lobbying on the issue occurred “behind the scenes” and in private (Stolberg et al. 2016). That began to change in mid-2015 when the U.S. Justice Department sided with transgender student Gavin Grimm in his

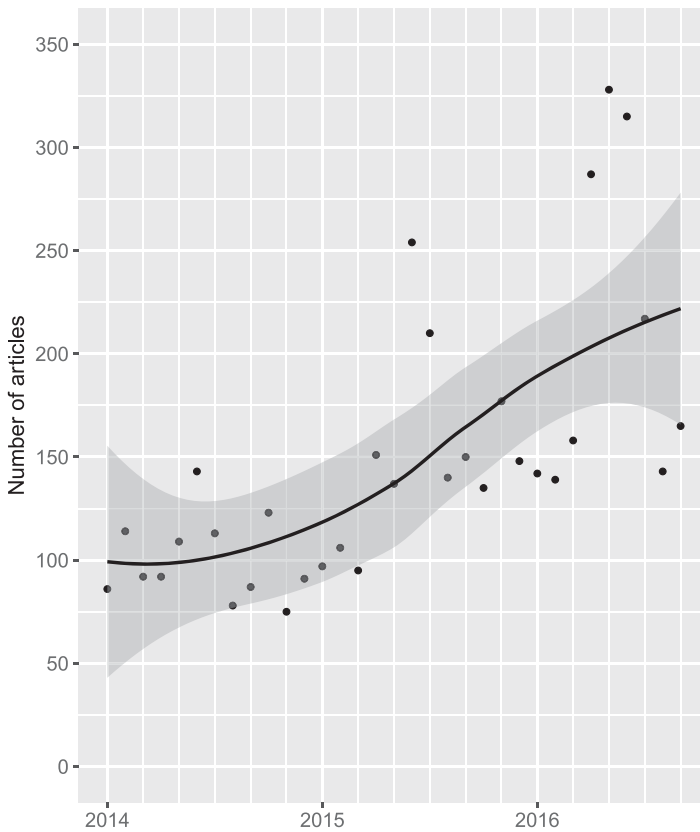


Figure 1. Number of news stories about transgender issues by month, 2014–2016. Source: Lexis-Nexis.

Note: Number of news stories containing the term “transgender” or “transsexual” by month, for sample of major newspapers: *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Post*, *Denver Post*, *New York Daily News*, *NewsDay*, *Orange County Register*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Tampa Bay Times*, and *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. January 2014–September 2016. Locally weighted regression line with 95% confidence intervals superimposed.

lawsuit against the Gloucester County, Va., school system, and its bathroom policy (Shapiro 2015). This relatively low-key action – filing a statement of interest in a District Court case – nonetheless highlighted the two issues increasingly central to the debate over transgender rights: bathroom usage and school policy for transgender students (Human Rights Campaign 2016). It also marked the beginning of an increasingly polarized elite discourse on transgender issues.

By November 2015, a fiercely contested ballot proposition over Houston’s Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) pitted a conservative coalition of religious groups and state Republicans against a liberal coalition including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Human Rights Campaign (HRC), and local Democrats (Ura 2015). Opponents seized upon the gender identity protections included in the ordinance, dubbing it the “bathroom ordinance” and, in the words of Republican Lt. Governor Dan Patrick, claimed that “[i]t was about allowing men to enter women’s restrooms and locker rooms – defying common sense and common decency” (Ura 2015). Voters overturned the ordinance at the ballot by a wide margin.

What HRC describes as a “wave” of anti-transgender legislation followed at the state level, with efforts to restrict access to sex-segregated spaces such as public bathrooms, school locker rooms, and changing facilities on the basis of sex assigned at birth. The debate over HB2 divided sharply along ideological lines, with the ACLU and Lambda Legal filing a suit against North Carolina in court (Charlotte Observer 2016). News coverage made the ideological divide clear: for example, a *Washington Post* headline read “Liberal groups sue North Carolina over transgender bathroom law” (Chockshi 2016). Attorney General Loretta Lynch brought high-profile civil rights charges against the state, further amplifying the dividing lines on the issue and prompting countersuits from Republican leaders (Blinder, Perez-Pena, and Lichtblau 2016).

The elite divide on transgender rights became even clearer when the Obama administration issued a directive telling all public school districts to protect transgender students against discrimination and to allow them to use the bathrooms that match their gender identity (Davis and Apuzzo 2016). Conservative officials in more than 20 states launched lawsuits against the administration’s directive. News reports of the dispute made clear the ideological dividing lines: *USA Today’s* headline read “White House faces conservative backlash to transgender bathroom guidance” and quoted Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant as saying the directive was the “most outrageous example yet of the Obama administration forcing its liberal agenda on states that roundly reject it” (Korte 2016).

This qualitative narrative is supported by a quantitative content analysis of a sample of the news stories from the Lexis-Nexis search used in Figure 1. We randomly sampled 5% of the news stories from each month between January 2014 and September 2016 ($N = 247$). For each story, we coded whether source information about a message on transgender rights was present or not. We coded whether the article linked liberals with pro-transgender rights, conservatives with anti-transgender rights, liberals with anti-transgender rights, and conservatives with pro-transgender rights.⁵ We coded the article as giving a “liberal” cue if the story specifically identified a speaker or position as “liberal” or “Democrat[ic]”, or involved an interest group such as the ACLU, Common Cause, or the HRC. We coded an article as giving a “conservative” cue if it identified a speaker or position as “conservative” or “Republican”, or involved a conservative interest group such as Focus on the Family or the National Organization for Marriage. When elected officials were quoted directly, without being identified as liberals or conservatives in any way, we did not count this as an ideological cue, with three exceptions: mentions of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and/or Donald Trump did not need to be accompanied by modifiers such as “liberal” or “Democrat” to send an ideological message.⁶

Figure 2 shows the percentage of sampled news stories in each month that included one of two types of cues. “Consistent” cues are where the news article linked liberals with a pro-transgender rights stance and/or conservatives with an anti-transgender stance. “Inconsistent” cues are where the article linked liberals with an anti-transgender stance and/or conservatives with a pro-transgender stance.

Figure 2 shows that consistent elite cues became more common (and inconsistent cues less common) as time progressed. In early 2014, news stories about transgender issues were about as likely to include consistent elite cues as inconsistent ones. By late 2016, news articles were much more likely to link liberals to support for transgender rights and conservatives to the opposition than they had been previously. Likewise, the media

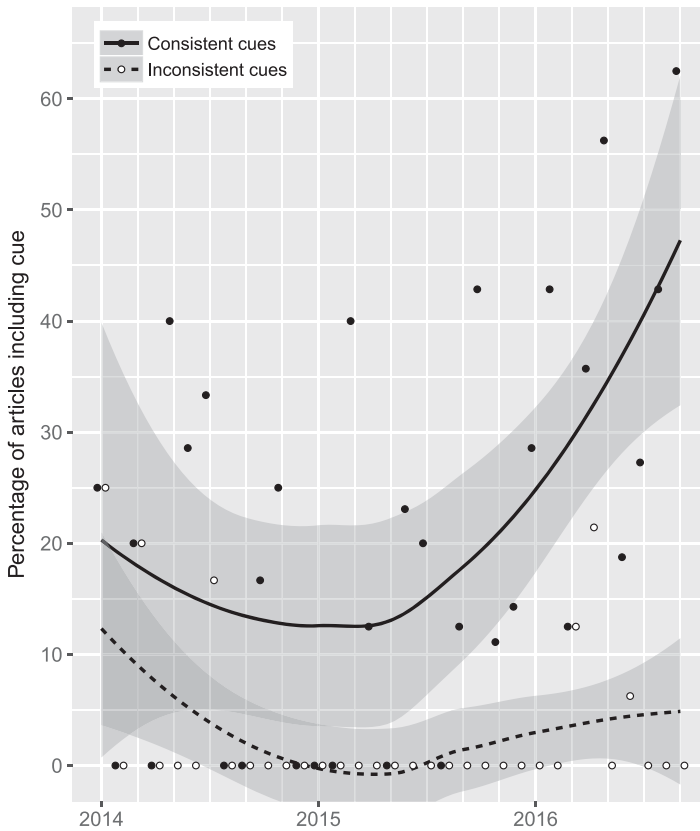


Figure 2. Percentage of sampled news stories about transgender issues that included consistent or inconsistent elite cues by month, 2014–2016.

Note: A “consistent” cue is one where the news story linked liberals with a pro-transgender rights stance and/or conservatives with an anti-transgender stance. An “inconsistent” cue is one where the story linked liberals with an anti-transgender stance and/or conservatives with a pro-transgender stance. January 2014–September 2016. Lines represent locally weighted regression with 95% confidence intervals. LOESS lines are weighted according to the total number of articles about transgender issues that month; points on the figure have been jittered slightly to ease legibility.

were less likely to feature liberal elites that opposed transgender rights or conservative elites that supported them as time went on.

In a short time period from 2014 to 2016, the debate over transgender rights thus went from a low-profile conversation among insiders to one in which the ideological dividing lines were clearly drawn for a public audience. In 2015, even attentive citizens should have been unlikely to receive ideologically consistent cues from following news about the debate. Thus, we would not expect to see significant differences based on political awareness among citizens with the same political predispositions. By 2016, however, transgender rights were covered much more frequently in the media and those stories were more likely to include polarized cues from elites. Individuals should have been more likely to receive messages about these issues. As such, we would expect to see greater polarization between liberals and conservatives in the public – particularly among the most aware, who would be most likely to receive these elite messages and most likely to distinguish between them based on cueing information. Among the least aware, however, we would expect the

increased intensity of communication to lead to greater adoption of conflicting considerations as they incorporated both liberal and conservative elites' cues.

Data

The data for this study came from two nationally representative surveys, both conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI). The first was fielded from November 11 to 17, 2015, and surveyed 901 U.S. adults by landline (451) and cell phone (450, including 274 without a landline phone). The second was fielded from July 7 to 13, 2016, and surveyed 900 U.S. adults by landline (450) and cell phone (450, including 253 without a landline phone). Response rates for the landline and cellular samples were 7% and 6% in 2015, and 4% and 5% in 2016 (calculated using AAPOR RR3). These are low in historical perspective but comparable to typical rates for recent national surveys conducted by major polling organizations (e.g. Pew Research Center 2012). Throughout the analysis, the data were weighted with survey weights provided by PSRAI.⁷

Support for transgender rights was measured with three survey items.⁸ In both the 2015 and 2016 surveys, respondents were asked for their views on “requiring public buildings like courthouses to have gender-neutral restrooms for patrons to use” and “laws that protect transgender students from discrimination in schools.”⁹ Response options were strongly oppose (coded as 1); oppose (2); favor (3); and strongly favor (4). As shown in Table 1, support for gender-neutral bathrooms remained largely constant: in 2015, 54.1% of respondents favored or strongly favored such requirements; in 2016, 52.2% did. Support for anti-discrimination laws protecting transgender students, in contrast, dropped significantly, from 73.2% in 2015 to 63.0% in 2016.

In 2016, respondents were also asked for their views on “laws that require people to use restrooms that match the sex listed on their original birth certificate.” The response options were the same as on the other items, but were reverse coded so that higher values consistently represented greater support for transgender rights. Public support for allowing transgender people to use the bathroom matching their gender identity was lower than any of the other items, at 42.1%.¹⁰ Although we do not have a measure of public opinion on this issue in 2015, we included it in our analysis to explore the polarization of opinion on the topic following the wave of elite debate.

Our key independent variables measured respondents' political awareness and predispositions. The surveys did not include questions about factual political knowledge, which Zaller (1992) recommends as a measure of awareness. Instead, we combined two items: interest in politics, which ranges from “not at all interested” (1) to “extremely interested” (4); and education, which ranges from less than high school (1) to a post-graduate or professional degree (5). In the absence of suitable political knowledge questions, previous work recommends combining these items: see Zaller (1994, 204) and Zaller (1996, 68–69). The two variables were rescaled to range between 0 and 1, and then averaged together.¹¹ Respondents' ideology served as the key prior predisposition, coded from 1 (very liberal) to 5 (very conservative).¹²

The models included controls for two other predispositions that previous work shows are strongly related to an opinion on transgender issues (Flores, 2015; Norton and Herek 2013).¹³ Respondents' religiosity was measured with an item asking respondents how religious they considered themselves to be, ranging from “not at all religious” (1) to “very

Table 1. Public opinion on transgender rights, 2015–2016.

	2015		2016		
	Gender-neutral bathrooms	Student protections	Gender-neutral bathrooms	Student protections	Bathroom access
Strongly favor	17.4	32.2	22.5	36.7	27.5
Favor	36.7	41.0	29.7	26.3	14.6
Oppose	27.4	14.8	17.1	14.9	24.7
Strongly oppose	18.5	12.0	30.7	22.1	33.2
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
<i>N</i>	837	857	829	785	814

religious” (4). Party identification ranged from “Strong Democrat” (1) to “Strong Republican” (7). We also controlled for several demographic characteristics that have been shown to influence the opinion on these questions. Age was measured in decades, and indicator variables for female, black, and Hispanic respondents reflected gender and racial/ethnic identities.¹⁴

Results

The data are taken from two cross-sectional surveys, not panel surveys. As such, we cannot track changes over time in the same individuals’ opinions on these issues. Instead, we compared the magnitude of any polarization effects in the two datasets. The key test for this effect is the interaction between political awareness and ideology. A significant interaction term would indicate that the differences between liberals and conservatives increase with political awareness – i.e., that polarization is greatest among those most likely to receive and accept cues from ideologically congruent elites.

We begin with the 2015 survey, which measured support for gender-neutral bathrooms in public buildings and protections for transgender students. The OLS regression models in the first two columns of [Table 2](#) show no significant interaction effects. While conservatives were less supportive than liberals on both issues (as shown by coefficients of -0.26 (standard error = 0.10) and -0.18 (0.09)), this gap in support did not vary with political awareness. The coefficients for the interaction terms did not reach standard levels of statistical significance in either case: 0.07 (0.15) and -0.06 (0.13). As expected given the lack of clear ideological cues from elites in 2015, there was no evidence that greater political awareness was associated with greater polarization among the public.

The 2016 survey measured support for these same two policies. Unlike in 2015, the 2016 data showed significant polarization effects as we would expect given the clearer elite cues in this year (interaction term coefficients of -0.53 (0.17) and -0.44 (0.21)).¹⁵

To visualize these interaction effects, [Figure 3](#) plots the predicted level of support for each policy item in each of the years by ideology and political awareness (as a reminder, the bathroom access question was only included in the 2016 survey and so we cannot compare public opinion in 2015 on this issue). We show predicted support for liberal and conservative respondents, across the full range of political awareness.

[Figure 3\(a\)](#) shows predicted support for gender-neutral bathrooms in 2015. As indicated by the results in [Table 2](#), support did *not* vary with political awareness. Less aware liberals were as likely to support the policy as highly aware liberals (with predicted

Table 2. Linear regression models predicting support for transgender rights, 2015 and 2016.

	2015		2016		
	Gender-neutral bathrooms	Student protections	Gender-neutral bathrooms	Student protections	Bathroom access
Intercept	4.03 (0.38)***	3.96 (0.33)***	2.47 (0.45)***	3.33 (0.50)***	2.09 (0.52)***
Ideology	-0.26 (0.10)*	-0.18 (0.09)*	0.12 (0.12)	0.07 (0.13)	0.14 (0.14)
Political awareness	-0.34 (0.52)	0.50 (0.43)	1.74 (0.56)**	1.88 (0.65)**	1.87 (0.66)**
Ideology × awareness	0.07 (0.15)	-0.06 (0.13)	-0.53 (0.17)**	-0.44 (0.21)*	-0.56 (0.19)**
Party ID	-0.10 (0.02)***	-0.05 (0.02)*	-0.08 (0.03)*	-0.12 (0.03)***	-0.11 (0.04)**
Religiosity	-0.12 (0.05)**	-0.09 (0.04)*	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.10 (0.06)†
Age (decades)	-0.26 (0.24)	-0.81 (0.24)***	-0.57 (0.29)†	-1.25 (0.29)***	0.67 (0.31)*
Hispanic	-0.19 (0.14)	-0.10 (0.14)	0.30 (0.19)	-0.00 (0.18)	0.05 (0.21)
Black	-0.02 (0.13)	-0.04 (0.14)	0.26 (0.18)	-0.23 (0.17)	-0.38 (0.20)†
Female	0.39 (0.08)***	0.37 (0.08)***	0.28 (0.10)**	0.20 (0.10)*	0.30 (0.11)**
McFadden's pseudo- R^2	.24	.22	.20	.25	.20
F statistic	22.92	20.45	18.07	24.86	21.36
N	721	740	709	682	703

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.1$.

scores of 3.17 [95% confidence intervals = 2.61, 3.73] and 2.90 [2.55, 3.24] on the 1–4 scale, respectively). Likewise, the least aware and most aware conservatives were indistinguishable in their views in 2015 (predicted scores of 2.12 [1.74, 2.50] and 2.14 [1.85, 2.44], respectively). While liberals and conservatives held different views on the issue in 2015, we did not see differences based on political awareness as a polarization effect would imply.

In 2016, public opinion was polarized by ideology and awareness, as shown in Figure 3 (c). Among the least politically aware, liberals and conservatives held statistically indistinguishable views: less aware liberals had a predicted score of 2.10 [1.51, 2.61] on the 1–4 scale, less aware conservatives a score of 2.53 [1.99, 3.11]. Among the most politically aware, however, attitudes were strongly polarized. Highly aware liberals were very supportive (3.29 [2.95, 3.63]), highly aware conservatives very opposed (1.62 [1.30, 1.97]). As predicted by Zaller's theory, polarization among elites on the issue in 2016 was mirrored by public polarization – but only among those politically aware enough to have received and accepted the “correct” cues.

A similar relationship emerged when examining support for student protections in 2015 and 2016 (Figure 3(b) and (d)). In 2015, political awareness did not affect respondents' views: the least aware and most aware liberals were predicted to hold highly similar views (3.13 [2.71, 3.60] versus 3.56 [3.30, 3.82]), as were the least aware and most aware conservatives (2.42 [2.02, 2.82] versus 2.60 [2.32, 2.88]). In 2016, we saw greater evidence of polarization. Among the least politically aware, liberals and conservatives were predicted to hold similar views on the issue (2.28 [1.67, 2.87] and 2.57 [1.95, 3.18], respectively). Among the most aware, however, liberals and conservatives diverged significantly, with predicted scores of 3.73 [3.29, 4.12] and 2.24 [1.81, 2.65], respectively. Again, we saw strong evidence of a polarization effect, with more politically aware individuals being most likely to align themselves with the stances of ideologically similar elites.

Perhaps more surprising was the reduction in consistency between ideology and position on transgender issues among the less aware between 2015 and 2016. Recall that Zaller's model expects attitudes to vary as a function of political awareness,

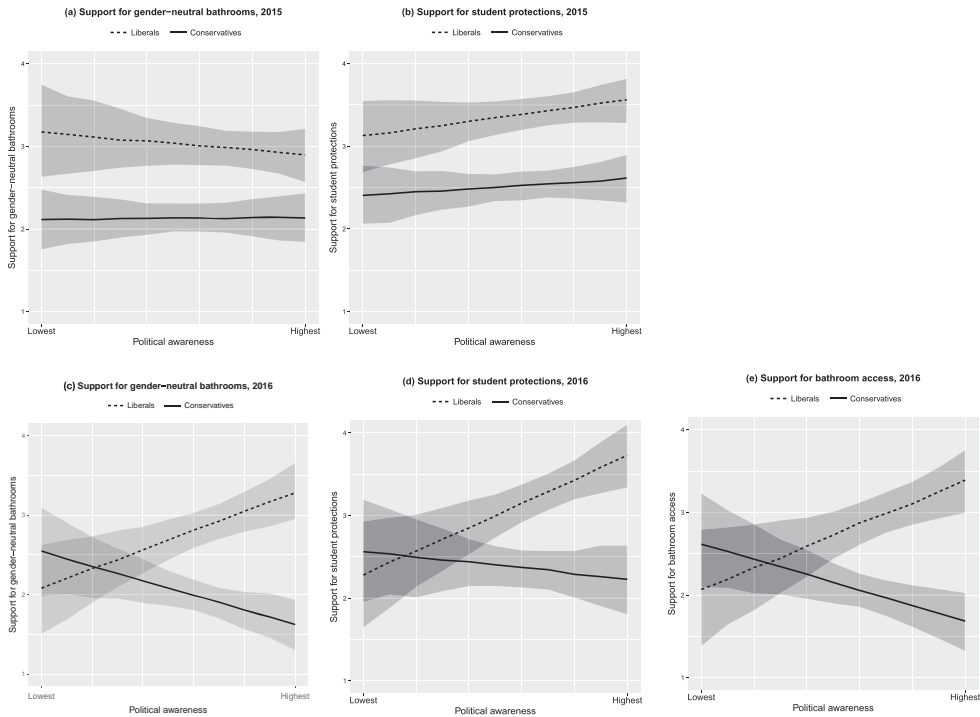


Figure 3. Predicted support for transgender rights in 2015 and 2016, by political awareness and ideology.

Note: Predicted values simulated from models in Table 2 with 95% confidence intervals. For each simulation, all other numeric values are held to their mean in that year’s survey; black, Hispanic, and female are set to zero.

pre dispositions, and the intensity of communication flows. The increased intensity of elite messages in 2016 could have led even the less aware to receive more persuasive messages about the subject. Unlike their more aware counterparts, however, these individuals would be less likely to distinguish between liberal and conservative sources, and more likely to accept conflicting considerations on the issue. Thus, we would expect reduced consistency among the less aware as the conversation became louder, and increased consistency among the most aware who were exposed to the polarized elite cues.

As a final test of Zaller’s theory, we examined support for access to bathrooms matching a person’s gender identity, one of the flashpoints of the debate over transgender rights in 2016. The interaction term in the final column of Table 2 indicates a similar polarization effect (a coefficient of -0.56 (0.19)), confirmed by the simulated results in Figure 3(e). Among the least aware, liberals and conservatives were predicted to hold indistinguishable views (the predicted difference between them on the four-point scale was -0.52 [$-1.61, 0.46$]). Among the most aware, however, ideologues differed strongly, with liberals predicted to be 1.70 points [$1.04, 2.43$] more supportive of the policy than conservatives. Again, the divergent cues from ideological elites were reflected in polarization among the most politically aware.

Cues from elites were clearly not the only source of citizens’ attitudes on transgender issues. Consistent with previous research, the results suggest that Democrats, women,

the more secular, and younger individuals were all more supportive of transgender rights. What our new analysis demonstrates is that the pattern of elite messaging on these issues had a strong impact as well. The absence of clear elite cues in 2015 was reflected in a lack of polarization among the electorate – something that had changed dramatically by 2016 as ideological elites made their differences clear.

Conclusions

The politics of transgender rights has changed dramatically in recent years, with greater attention from the media and more clarity from liberal and conservative elites about their positions on the issues. The results in this study show the impact that the increasingly ideological debate at the elite level has had on mass opinion. Consistent with Zaller's theory, we show that liberal and conservative voters were more polarized in 2016 than in 2015 – and that this polarization is concentrated among those most likely to be aware of the elite cues in the first place. In addition to the values and demographic characteristics of voters that shape attitudes toward transgender rights, we thus document the importance of elite debates on such issues.

These conclusions are of course limited in important ways. First, we rely on two cross-sectional surveys rather than panel data, meaning that we cannot measure directly changes in voters' attitudes in response to elite messaging. Nonetheless, there is a significant change in the relationship between ideology and awareness over this time period, consistent with both theory and empirical studies of polarization effects (Zaller 1992, 1994, 1996; Butzer and Marquis 2003).

Second, the 2015 survey included only two items measuring support for transgender rights (on gender-neutral restrooms and student protections), with support for access to bathrooms matching one's gender identity not assessed until 2016. As such, we cannot say definitively that public opinion on all transgender rights issues became polarized in the wake of elite debate. It is possible that attitudes toward bathroom access in 2015 were polarized along ideological and awareness lines as they were in 2016. At the elite level, however, bathroom access did not emerge as a high-profile issue until after the 2015 survey had been fielded. Only two of the 2015 articles coded for [Figure 2](#) involved bathroom bills and associated issues; in the first nine months of 2016, that number climbed to 23. There is little evidence that elite debate was focused on bathroom access prior to 2016, and so little reason to expect public opinion to have polarized in that year.

Third, the surveys lack what Zaller identifies as ideal measures of political awareness, factual questions about politics, and we instead rely on a proxy derived from education and interest in politics. However, the latter measures are strong predictors of factual political knowledge (Delli-Carpini and Keeter 1996) and follow Zaller's standard technique for measuring awareness in the absence of such knowledge measures (e.g., Zaller 1994, 204; Zaller 1996, 68–69).

Fourth, the analysis presented here focuses on the national level. The contours and consequences of elite cues about transgender rights may vary substantially across states and localities within the US (as well as across nations), providing potential leverage for future research.

In line with Zaller's "top-down" understanding of public opinion, the future trajectory of public opinion on transgender rights would seem to depend significantly on the

behavior of elites. If political elites continue to send ideologically polarized messages in the future, then we would expect to see increasing polarization among the mass public. If, on the other hand, shifts among elites result in greater moderation or even ideological convergence, then we may expect to see a “mainstream” effect whereby greater consensus on transgender rights is achieved among the public.

Notes

1. The latter term is no longer recommended in the AP or Reuters style guide, but earlier editions included it as an acceptable synonym. In order to fully capture the universe of relevant stories, we search for both terms. Consistent with the findings in Tadlock (2014), “transsexual” appears to have faded out of use over the time period and primarily appears only in the early portion of the news stories.
2. Wildcards were not used in the search. An exploratory analysis that also used the search terms “trans man/men”, “trans woman/women”, “trans person/people”, and “gender identity” did not uncover additional news articles missed by the initial search.
3. We do not claim that these represent all stories on transgender issues published in this time period – rather, just that the number of stories has increased over time in these outlets, a trend likely mirrored in other news sources. We end with the third quarter of 2016 since this is when our second survey (described below) was fielded.
4. We focus here on whether elites were aligning themselves with or against transgender rights, and not the specific arguments they were making to justify their positions. Debates over transgender rights can be framed to link to multiple different values (Tadlock 2014) and initial research suggests that these frames can affect public support (Harrison and Michelson 2017a), making this a fruitful area for further study.
5. We also looked for “neutral” positions on transgender issues for both sides, but did not find any such cues in these stories. It is possible for one article to include more than one of these cues; a story might include a pro-transgender rights liberal cue and an anti-transgender rights conservative cue, for example.
6. The first author coded all 247 news articles. The second author coded a random sample of 25% of the articles ($N = 58$) according to the same coding scheme. Reliability was extremely high, with agreement ranging between 97% and 100% depending on the variable.
7. These weights are calculated in two stages. The first corrects for different selection probabilities in the stratified sampling design due to the number of adults in each household and the respondent’s telephone usage. The second balances sample demographics to known population parameters (sex, age, education, race, Hispanic origin, and region) to correct for potential non-response bias.
8. Cases with missing values are dropped from the analyses.
9. In mid-2015, debates about bathroom use largely concerned whether public spaces should be required to have gender-neutral restrooms, not about whether transgender people should be required to use the bathroom matching the sex they were assigned at birth (*New York Times* 2017). As such, the 2015 survey only asked about requiring gender-neutral restrooms; the 2016 survey asked about both aspects of bathroom use debates.
10. This is consistent with Miller et al.’s (2017) finding that policies involving “body-centric” considerations receive less support amongst the public.
11. Cronbach’s alpha for the two items is .37 in 2015 and .36 in 2016. Robustness checks presented in the supplemental materials show that models using either item individually or with an interaction between them produce the same substantive results.
12. Partisan identity is also frequently used as a measure of voters’ political predispositions. The elite discourse around transgender rights has primarily involved interest groups (Tadlock 2014) rather than the parties. As such, we use ideology as the central predisposition here. As we would expect given the strong correlation between ideology and party ID (.47 in

the 2015 survey, .52 in 2016), robustness checks using (a) party identity in place of ideology and (b) an averaged index of the two predispositions revealed substantively similar results; these are presented in the supplemental materials.

13. Other predispositions such as authoritarianism and disgust sensitivity, that have been shown to influence support for transgender rights (Miller et al. 2017), were not measured in these surveys. Interpersonal contact with transgender people was asked in the 2015 survey but not the 2016 survey and so is not included in these models.
14. We also estimated models that controlled for household income. These revealed the same substantive results as presented here, but with smaller *N*s due to the large amount of non-response on the income questions.
15. Additional analysis in the supplemental materials presents models that pool the two surveys and interact ideology, awareness, and the year of the survey. The results show a significant interaction among the three, with a coefficient of $-.53$ (.21) for gender-neutral bathrooms, and $-.45$ (.22) for student protections. This provides further evidence that the relationship among ideology, awareness, and opinion was different in the two years.

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Appendix: Survey question wording

All of the questions were asked in both the 2015 and 2016 surveys, with the exception of support for bathroom access, which was asked in the 2016 survey only.

Support for student protections: "Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose laws that protect transgender students from discrimination in schools?"

Support for gender-neutral bathrooms: "Please tell me how strongly you favor or oppose each of the following ... Requiring public buildings like courthouses to have gender-neutral restrooms for patrons to use. Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose this?"

Support for bathroom access: "Please tell me how strongly you favor or oppose each of the following ... Laws that require people to use restrooms that match the sex listed on their original birth certificate. Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose this?"

Interest in politics: "Generally speaking, how interested are you in what is going on with politics and public affairs – very interested, somewhat interested, not too interested, or not at all interested?"

Education: "What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?"

Ideology: "In general, would you describe your political views as very conservative, somewhat conservative, moderate, somewhat liberal, or very liberal?"

Party ID: "In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?"

If Democrat/Republican: "Would you call yourself a strong [Democrat/Republican] or not a very strong [Democrat/Republican]?"

If Independent: "As of today, do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?"

Religiosity: "How religious do you consider yourself to be – very religious, somewhat religious, not too religious, or not at all religious?"

Age: "What is your age?"

Hispanic: "Are you, yourself, of Hispanic or Latino origin, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban or some other Spanish background?"

Race: "What is your race? Are you white, black, Asian, or some other race?"