Partisan Bias in Bipartisan Places? A Field Experiment Measuring Attitudes Toward the Presidential Alert In Real Time

Brian Guay*[1] and Jesse Lopez†[2]

[1,2]Department of Political Science, Duke University

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Abstract

An extensive literature examines how partisanship divides public opinion on hot-button political issues, but we know little about its potential to polarize attitudes about bipartisan issues. Recent work shows that while Americans hold strong preferences for bipartisanship, their attitudes toward bipartisan issues quickly become polarized when associated with partisan identities. While prior research has examined the effect of these associations in lab settings, tests outside of the lab are far more rare. In this research note we aim to provide such a test by leveraging a bipartisan issue that became associated with a partisan identities suddenly in 2018: the presidential alert. While the presidential alert—a product of bipartisan efforts to improve the government's capacity to send emergency communications in the wake of Hurricane Katrina—received little notice when it was passed into law, it gained widespread media attention during its inaugural test in 2018. We rapidly recruited a sample of U.S. adults immediately before the alert was sent, such that participants in our study received the alert on their phones while completing the survey. We exploited the timing of the alert to randomize whether respondents answered questions about the alert moments before or after receiving it. Across two experiments we find little evidence that associating the alert with the Trump administration had any polarizing effect on attitudes, even when explicitly associated with a partisan cue, suggesting that at least some bipartisan attitudes are not as easily polarized as prior work implies.

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*brian.guay@duke.edu, Corresponding author

†jesse.lopez@duke.edu

While a large body of work documents the growing partisan divide on hot-button political issues in the American public (Hetherington 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008), we know far less about how partisanship affects attitudes towards less salient bipartisan issues. Yet it is consensus on these issues that enables even divided governments to fulfill their most basic roles of providing goods and services to the public. Issues that Americans agree on are less visible in the media, but they are no less prevalent. As Kahan et al. (2017, pg. 3) note, "In any modern, liberal pluralistic democracy, the number of cases in which individuals of diverse identities polarize are swamped by the number in which they do not." Moreover, despite being polarized on issues like abortion and immigration, Americans appear to disdain overly partisan conflict on less salient consensus issues (Flynn and Harbridge 2016), punish excessive party loyalty (Carson et al. 2010), and reward bipartisanship that produces legislation (Paris 2017).

However, other recent work suggests that the increasingly partisan nature of politics threatens to polarize even the least partisan issues. Americans are more dismissive of policy proposals offered by the opposing party and their support for traditionally non-partisan democratic values wanes when the out-party gains power (Svolik 2018; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Bartels and Johnston, Forthcoming). Growing alignment between partisan and social identities produces animus and distrust across party lines (Huber and Malhotra 2017; Hetherington and Weiler 2018; Mason 2016; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012) and can motivate individuals to adopt positions as a means of expressively signaling their identity and worldview to others (Kahan et al. 2017; Johnston, Lavine, and Federico 2017). Kahan et al. (2017) find that even bipartisan policies aimed at a public health concern, such as Zika virus, can become polarized when associated with existing political identities and worldviews. Such influence is concerning, as an erosion of consensus issues threatens to create an environment in which the government lacks public support to provide even the most basic goods and services (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015).

It is possible, however, that recent empirical work has overstated the potential for asso-

ciations with partisan identities to polarize even the most consensus issues. In prior work, such associations are drawn suddenly in a lab setting—respondents are assigned to receive information creating an artificial association between a non-polarized issue with a political identity (e.g., Kahan et al. 2017). It may be that such associations induce demand effects or operate differently outside of the lab, and to our knowledge there has been no work examining how such processes occur outside of the lab. This is largely due to the difficulty of experimentally manipulating associations between issues and partisan identities that, in the real-world, develop gradually (Hillygus and Shields 2008) and cannot easily be assigned to a randomized subset of individuals.

In this study we provide such a test by leveraging a previously non-partisan issue that became associated with a partisan identity suddenly in 2018: the inaugural test of the presidential alert system. At 2:18pm ET on October 3rd, 2018 Americans' phones buzzed, vibrated, and displayed text notifications reading "Presidential Alert: THIS IS A TEST of the National Wireless Emergency Alert System. No action is needed." The presidential alert meets the two criteria laid out by Kahan et al. (2017) to measure measure the potential of bipartisan issues to become polarized: that public opinion toward the issue is both not presently polarized and has the potential to become polarized. The presidential alert was the product of a bipartisan endeavor to improve the government's emergency communication infrastructure in the aftermath of September 11 and Hurricane Katrina. Legislation creating the alert under the Bush administration in 2006 and updating it under the Obama administration in 2016 received nearly unanimous support in the House and Senate.[1] And while the initial legislation received scarce media attention, coverage preceding the alert's inaugural test depicted an intensely partisan reaction. Headlines warned of a barrage of text messages from Trump, calls to protest the alert lit up Twitter with hashtags encouraging Americans to shut off their phones or cancel their wireless plans, and critics even filed lawsuits to terminate the alert altogether. As The Atlantic synopsized in a headline on the day of the alert,

1. congress.gov/bill/109th-congress/house-bill/4954

"What should have been a routine, required national test of the Wireless Emergency Alerts system has become a crucible for public distrust"(Bogost 2018).

To understand how partisanship shaped reactions to the alert, we conducted a national survey experiment during the alert itself. Survey experiments measuring the effect of real-world events on attitudes are scarce due to the difficulty of both rapidly collecting a sufficiently large sample and timing the experiment to coincide with the event. In this study we address both of these challenges. First, we rapidly collected a large sample of U.S. adults in a narrow time interval preceding the alert by simultaneously recruiting online survey respondents from multiple panels. We then exploited the predetermined timing of the alert to randomize whether respondents answered questions related to the alert immediately before or after receiving it, enabling us to measure the extent to which receiving the alert affected attitudes differently across party lines. This design mimics the random assignment of partisan cues to issues that has been featured in lab studies while diminishing potential demand effects and using a naturally-occurring manipulation. Participants who received the alert before expressing attitudes toward it had a greater chance of associating the alert with the current administration than those who received the alert afterwards. In a second experiment included in the same real-time survey, respondents were randomly assigned to receive information explicitly associating the alert with either the Trump or Obama administration.

Design

To capture the public's immediate reaction to the alert in real-time, we required a sample of respondents to begin the survey during a brief time window immediately preceding the alert. We partnered with Lucid, which unlike most online survey firms that recruit respondents from a single panel, simultaneously made the survey available to respondents from multiple panels. This enabled us to rapidly collect a sample of 2,224 U.S. adults in the 25 minutes preceding the alert.[2] Recent research finds that samples drawn from Lucid closely match

2. This sample size reflects the number of respondents in our final analytical sample. Since compliance was dependent on 1) assignment of experimental condition, 2) when respondents completed certain question

the demographic and political characteristics of the U.S. population, replicate experimental findings, and feature a pool of respondents who are less professionalized and politically sophisticated than other non-probability panels (Coppock and McClellan 2019). Upon entering the survey, respondents were randomly assigned to participate in one of two separate experiments.

Experiment 1 was designed to assess whether receiving the presidential alert had any immediate effect on respondents' attitudes. While the alert was a bipartisan issue prior to its inaugural test, it is likely that receiving the alert (which began with "PRESIDENTIAL ALERT") established associations between the alert and the highly polarizing Trump administration. Because the ideal experimental design—manipulating which Americans actually received the alert—is impossible, we make a similar comparison by randomly assigning respondents to answer questions about the alert and privacy either moments before or after receiving the alert. After answering a common set of pre-treatment questions, respondents who were randomly assigned to the *pre-alert condition* answered a series of political attitude questions related to the alert, while respondents in the *post-alert condition* answered unrelated, non-political questions until the moment the alert was sent.[3]

We programmed the survey instrument to interact with the timing of the alert, such that approximately 30 seconds after the alert was sent respondents in the post-alert condition finished answering these unrelated questions and began answering questions related to the alert.[4] Excluding respondents who failed 2 or more of the 3 attention checks, there were

blocks, and 3) the timing of the alert, we recruited more individuals than this to ensure that the number of compliant cases in each condition was sufficiently large (i.e., we analyze respondents who answered the questions they were assigned to answer *when they were assigned to answer them*, rather than analyzing intent to treat (ITT) effects). See Appendix Section 3 for further discussion and Section 6.8 ITT and CACE estimates.

3. The unrelated non-political questions were designed to hold respondents' attention until the alert was sent without influencing their attitudes toward any of the attitude outcomes. The items comprise primarily of consumer behavior questions and are discussed further in the Appendix Sections 6.2 and 8.2.

4. We took several precautions to diminish demand effects. First, the survey invitation and consent form omitted any mention of the alert, instead advertising a survey "about yourself and your opinions and attitudes." Second, questions related to the alert were immediately preceded by political knowledge questions in all conditions, creating a brief buffer between the alert and questions about it. Third, the questions specifically asking about the alert were placed at the very end of a larger battery of questions about privacy and trust in government (we discuss these questions below).

392 respondents in the pre-alert condition and 547 respondents in the post-alert condition in Experiment 1 (See Appendix Section 2 for a detailed discussion of the attention checks). The attitude questions that respondents were randomly assigned to answer either before or after receiving the alert measured opinions about the alert specifically and privacy attitudes, since much of the media coverage preceding the alert focused on privacy violations. Respondents were asked whether "the government should have the ability to send alert messages to all cell phones in the U.S. in the case of a national threat or emergency," whether Americans should be able to opt-out of receiving such alerts, and whether they themselves would opt-out if given the opportunity. With regard to privacy, respondents were asked whether the need to be safe from national emergencies and disasters justifies giving up some privacy, how worried they are about the government monitoring their activities or invading their privacy, and how difficult it would be to increase phone privacy.[5]

It is possible that simply receiving the alert was not sufficient to associate the alert with President Trump. Therefore, we designed a second experiment within the same survey to assess whether directly associating the alert with either Democrats or Republicans influenced the same set of attitudes. All participants in Experiment 2 answered attitude questions after the alert (similar to respondents in the post-alert condition in Experiment 1), but were randomly assigned to receive information either emphasizing Trump's role in testing the alert (*Trump condition*), Obama's role in creating the alert (*Obama condition*), or neither (*Control condition*):

> On Wednesday, October 3, [The Trump Administration will test a system (Trump condition)/ there will be a test of a system created under the Obama Administration (Obama condition) / there will be a test of a system (Control condition)] that will allow the government to send a message to every cell phone in the U.S., using FEMA's mobile alert system. Even though the system was created to alert people about national emergencies, there has been concern that Americans have no way to opt out of the alert.

To conceal our intent of providing an informational treatment and mitigate demand effects,

5. Respondents also answered questions about trust in government and attitudes toward specific political parties and figures. We describe these items and include an analysis of them in Appendix Section 7.

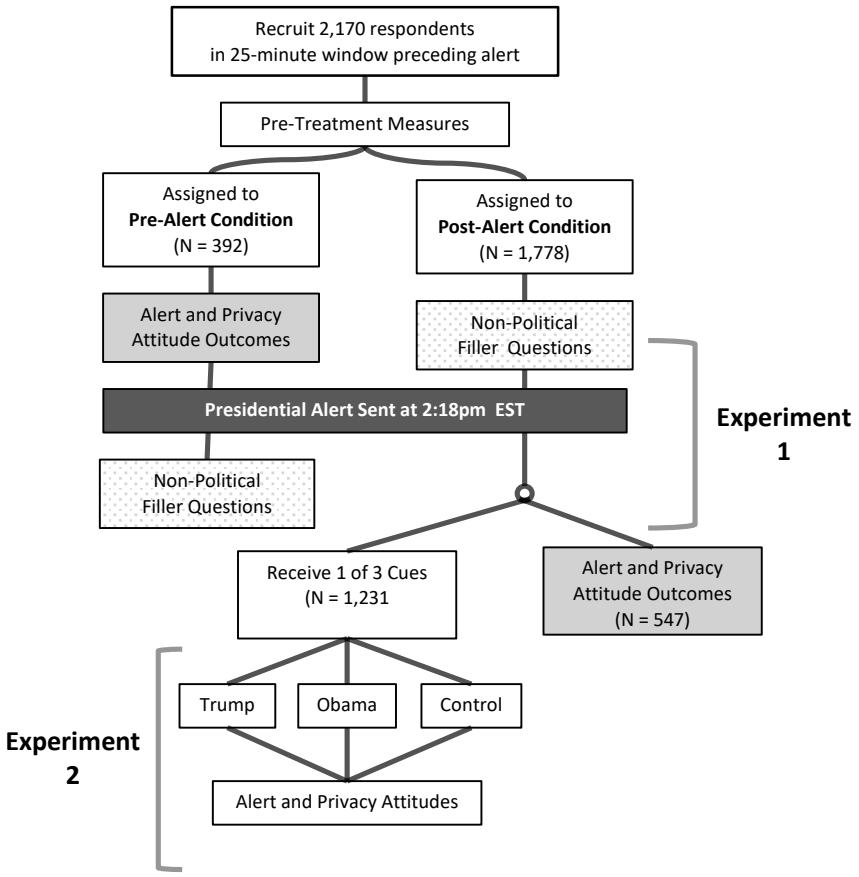

Figure 1: Study Design

Respondents recruited immediately before the alert are randomly assigned to participate in one of two experiments. In Experiment 1 respondents are randomly assigned to answer outcome attitude measures either moments before or after the alert was sent. In Experiment 2 respondents answer the same questions after the alert was sent, but are randomly assigned to receive information associating the alert with either Trump or Obama.

the information was provided in the form of a question asking whether respondents had heard of this information. Information provided in each condition was factually accurate, simply highlighting different aspects of the alert's origin. After excluding respondents who failed two or more of the attention checks, the analytical sample consists of 442 respondents in the control condition, 403 in the Obama condition, and 386 in the Trump condition. Figure 1 provides an overview of the experimental design.

Results

To what extent did partisanship influence the public's immediate reaction to the presidential alert? Figure 1 reports the mean difference in attitudes toward the alert and privacy between conditions in Experiment 1. Responses to the attitude questions were placed on the same scale, on whichm 0 indicates feeling the least concerned about the alert and privacy and 1 indicates feeling the most concerned, and then standardized to have a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. We report pre-post alert differences by party, considering Independents who lean toward a party as partisans.[6] While prior research suggests that associating bipartisan issues with partisan identities polarizes attitudes, we find little evidence that receiving the alert elicited a partisan reaction. In Experiment 1, differences between attitudes in the pre- and post-alert conditions are centered around and do not differ significantly from zero. In fact positive attitudes toward the government's ability to send an emergency alert trend upwards after the alert across parties, though these differences are not statistically significant.

One possible explanation for the lack of partisan reactions to the alert is that partisan media coverage of the alert had *already* polarized attitudes by the time the alert was sent. Indeed, as we show in Appendix Section 6.1., there is some evidence that respondents with prior knowledge of the alert were more polarized in their pre-alert attitudes. To test for the possibility of heterogeneous treatment effects across prior knowledge of the alert, we compared the difference in pre- and post-alert attitudes between respondents who reported having heard about the alert before they received it and those who heard about it for the first time upon receiving it.[7] Models including interactions between the treatment and prior awareness of the alert are included in the Appendix (Section 6.4), however we find no evidence that respondents who learned about the alert for the first time upon receiving it had a more partisan reaction to the alert.[8]

6. Considering leaning Independents as Independents does not change our results, see Appendix Section 6.3.

7. In Experiment 1, 47% of respondents had reported being aware of the alert prior to receiving it.

8. We also considered, but found no evidence of, heterogeneous treatment effects among the 62% of respondents who reported receiving the alert during the survey (Appendix Section 6.5).

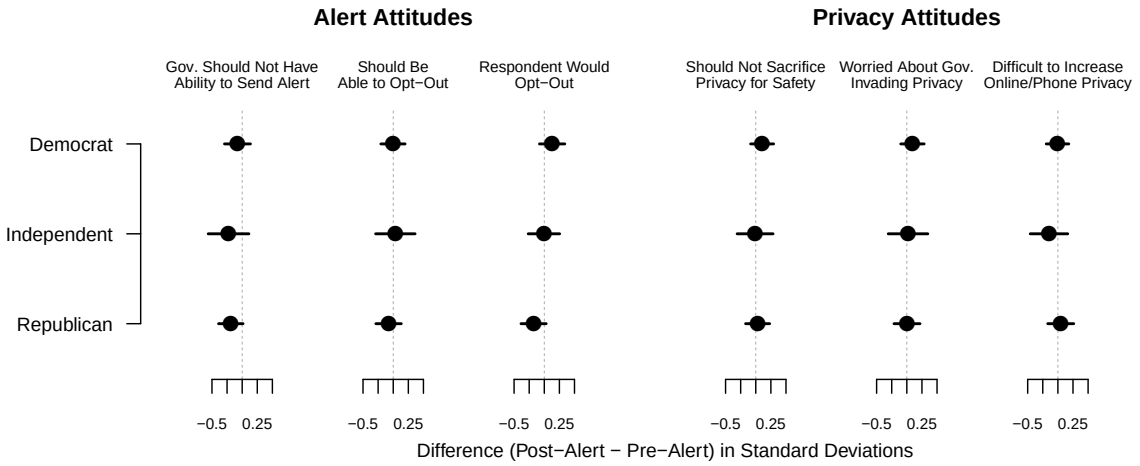

Figure 2: Difference Between Pre- and Post-Alert Attitudes (Experiment 1)

Mean attitude differences between experiment conditions in standard deviations. Each attitude measure was placed on a common scale from 0 (less concerned about alert and privacy) to 1 (more concerned), and then standardized to have a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. Independents who report leaning toward a political party are classified as partisans. Horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals. Differences with confidence intervals that do not contain zero are statistically significant at the p ¡ .05 level.

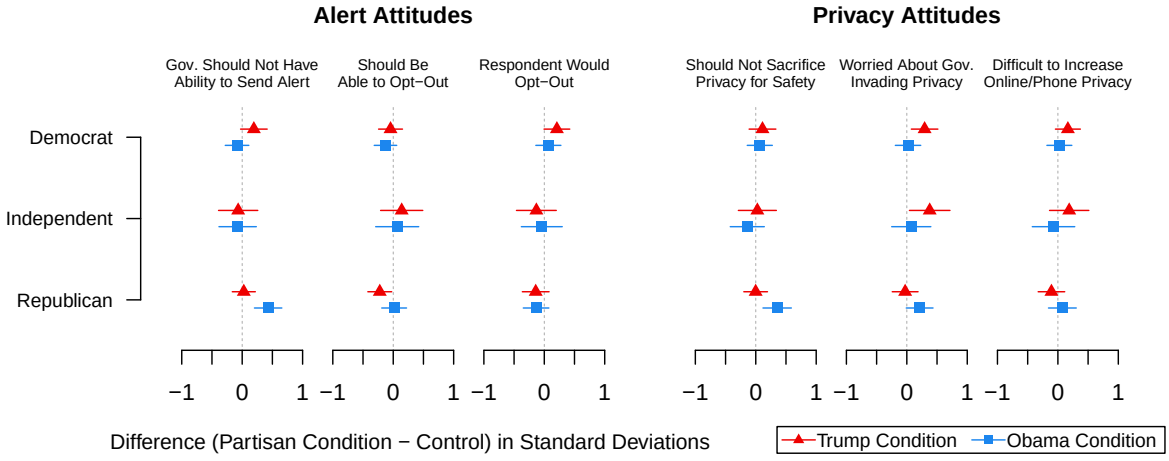

Figure 3: Effect of Party Cues on Attitudes (Experiment 2)

Average treatment effects of associating Trump or Obama with the alert (compared to the control group). Attitude measures were again placed on a common scale from 0 (less concerned about alert and privacy) to 1 (more concerned) and then standardized to have a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. Horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals. Differences with confidence intervals that do not contain zero are statistically significant at the p ¡ .05 level.

Our second experiment was designed to determine whether receiving partisan cues associating the alert with either Trump or Obama induced a partisan reaction. In other words, does exposure to the kind of partisan information contained in media coverage preceding the alert polarize attitudes? Figure 2 illustrates the differences in attitudes between the Trump and Obama conditions relative to the control ($Attitude_{Trump} - Attitude_{control}$, $Attitude_{Obama} - Attitude_{control}$) separately for respondents in each party. Overall, we find little evidence that these cues polarized attitudes toward the alert and privacy. Of the 36 treatment effects reported in Figure 3, only 5 are statistically significant (p ¡ .05).

For instance, the Obama cue increased Republican's opposition to the government having the ability to send the alert by .43 standard deviations and claim that privacy should not be sacrificed for safety by The largest effects were among Republicans who received the Obama cue, whose opposition to the government having the ability to send the alert was .43 standard deviations more than and more likely to indicate that privacy should not be sacrificed for safety (X vs. Y, p ¡ .05).

Republicans who received the Trump cue were less likely to say that people should be able to opt out (p ¡ .05), while Democrats (and Independents) who received the Trump cue appeared more worried about government invading privacy. However, even these effects are at most .5 standard deviation shift from the mean.[9] Overall, despite the explicit nature of the cues associating the alert with each political party, they had a surprisingly small effect on attitudes toward the alert and privacy.

Discussion

Americans are increasingly divided along partisan lines on everything from policy preferences to lifestyle choices. In this study we sought to understand the extent to which these partisan divisions can polarize even the most bipartisan issues. We designed an experiment that leveraged the timing of a real-world event that associated a previously bipartisan is-

9. For reference, lab studies have found that in-party cues can shift support for something as enduring as political values by up to 10 percentage points (e.g., Goren, Federico, and Kittilson 2009).

sue with the Trump administration. In Experiment 1 we randomly assigned respondents to report relevant political attitudes either moments before or after the test of the inaugural presidential alert. We find that attitudes toward the alert and privacy did not diverge across partisan lines in response to the alert.

It may be that, for some issues, attitudes only polarize after extensive exposure to divisive elite rhetoric (Zaller et al. 1992; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). The key feature of our design that enables us to measure real-time attitudes toward the alert also prevents us from assessing how elites may have influenced attitudes afterwards. While Experiment 2 explicitly associated the alert with partisan cues, it is possible that these cues are insufficient to polarize attitudes on a bipartisan issue like the alert. At the very least, this suggests that the policies aimed at public health and safety are unlikely to trigger immediate partisan reactions merely because they are implemented by the out-party. Yet it is possible that such reactions do polarize in the presence of more pronounced party divisions at the elite level.

The design implemented here–the rapid recruitment of a large sample of survey respondents and a survey instrument programmed to interact with the timing of a political event–enables the measurement of real-time changes in public opinion. Though the presidential alert was unique in it's precise timing and widespread reach, this design could be used by leveraging the approximate time of other political events, such as the the release of election results, debates, or the release of economic data (e.g., unemployment reports).

In all, while the media coverage and response on social media suggested that the alert would prompt partisan backlash, any immediate partisan division over the alert appeared minimal. Future work might evaluate whether these findings extend to other bipartisan policy areas, such as public health risks (e.g., vaping, nuclear energy), pandemics, disaster relief, and publicly-funded scientific research. Of course, the findings presented here by no means suggest that America's hyper-partisan environment is not cause for concern, but they do appear to place bounds on the influence partisanship has over the public's support for the most bipartisan issues and policies.

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