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Political Psychology, Vol. 44, No. 5, 2023
doi: 10.1111/pops.12868

The Most Important Election of Our Lifetime: Focalism and Political Participation

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This article argues that a psychological bias called "focalism" contributes to an overestimation of the differences between political candidates, which in turn increases participation and polarization. Focalism causes people to confuse the allocation of attention to things with the importance of those things. Because attention to politics typically centers on conflict, the result is an exaggeration of differences across the partisan divide. I test this intuition using an experimental design that provides all respondents with all the information they need to estimate how much Joe Biden and Donald Trump objectively disagreed on policy positions just before the 2020 election. I find that shifting attention—toward either those positions the candidates agreed or disagreed with each other on—influences beliefs about the differences between candidates. The effect exceeds that of identifying as a Democrat or as a Republican. Beyond those perceptions, focalism increases turnout intentions, perceptions of election importance, negative feelings towards the out-candidate, and affective polarization.

KEY WORDS: participation, polarization, focalism, cognitive bias

When the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association claimed that the 2018 midterm elections will "determine the future for your children and grandchildren," their justification for such a bold claim was the apparently enormous difference between Democrats and Republicans. Franklin Graham sought to convince people that these policy differences meant that the election would be the most important of their lifetimes—joining just about every presidential candidate going back to the 1800s.[1] Moreover, these political elites consistently succeed: A large majority of voters see any given election as among the most important they have ever experienced.[2] I argue that focalism, or the tendency to exaggerate the importance of what comes to mind, causes people to overestimate the differences between Democrats and Republicans. I find that this

[1] "Why This Is the Most Important Election of Our Lifetime," Decision Magazine, 2018. Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, John Kerry, Bill Clinton, Walter Mondale, Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, John F. Kennedy, and Harry Truman all said that theirs was the most important election of our lifetime. For more on the history of this campaign line, see: (The Washington Post) and (The Atlantic).

[2] USA Today/Suffolk University, August 2019; ABC News/Washington Post, July 2004; Democracy Corps Poll, 2004.

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psychological mechanism increases expectations for what candidates will deliver; these beliefs sustain participation, but they also increase affective polarization.

When people imagine the political consequences of elections, they are estimating the benefits they expect if their party wins relative to the disasters that the opposition would bring (commonly referred to as the expected party differential, or EPD).[3] To do that, people must draw inferences from easily observed information—for example, disagreement about policies or compelling campaign promises. Additionally, people must consider less prominent information—for example, that candidates take identical positions on many policies that receive less attention or the likelihood that robust opposition will block most major legislation. Despite the importance of evaluating low-salience information, failure to consider the full context when making judgments is the essence of a common psychological bias called "focalism," which Daniel Kahneman and Richard Thaler (2006) describe as: "Nothing in life matters quite as much as you think it does while you are thinking about it" (p. 229). In other words, when making choices people fail to compensate for the processes that shape attention. In practice, this means that differences tend to dominate when making these evaluations because as these authors write, evaluating the impact of a change "inevitably draws attention to the distinctive aspects of the change" (p. 229). The implication of such disproportionate attention is that when considering political choices people will anticipate greater differences in outcomes after elections than are likely to occur.

This article demonstrates that focalism drives high expectations for candidate differentials using a novel experimental approach. One week before the 2020 election, I provided about 2,000 respondents with unbiased information about the real policy positions taken by Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Respondents were compensated for objectively estimating how much the candidates disagreed with each other. Respondents made their estimates before and after treatments that always provided true, objective information about candidate divergence. But while providing respondents with identical information on average, these treatments varied the salience and thus attention allocated to policy disagreement between the candidates. This manipulation of focalism resulted in about a 15-percentage-point increase in perceived differences between the candidates.

In two classic accounts of the motivations for voter turnout, Downs (1957) and Olson (1965) argue that rational people will not participate in electoral politics, recognizing the near-certain irrelevance of a single vote and party convergence to the position of the median voter. But focalism provides one mechanism to join existing explanations for why people attribute such high stakes to elections—and, as a result, high levels of participation and polarization. This then has implications for why and how people get involved in politics: If people expect candidates to deliver large benefits, then it is rational to vote even with a trivial chance of changing the outcome (Edlin et al., 2016). Focalism can cause people to perceive large enough differences between the parties to help justify the time and effort to vote. In line with that and consistent with the idea that unrealistic expectations motivate participation, I find that misperceived policy divergence increases turnout intentions and perceived election importance.

Additionally, and in contrast to identity-centered explanations for overestimation but consistent with the logic of focalism, I find that the strength of partisan social identity has no effect on objective beliefs about candidate divergence. In other words, one's partisanship does not cloud their ability to quantify policy differences. This finding stands in contrast to identity-first explanations. For example, Achen and Bartels (2018) write that "it makes no sense to start from issue positions—they are generally derivative from something else. And that something else is

[3]These can be policy, emotional, and other-regarding, among others. See Edlin et al. (2016).

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identity" (p. 390).[4] But these results show that psychological processes independent of identity contribute to the perception of exaggerated policy differences between candidates. And in addition to motivating participation, I find that focalism increases affective polarization as well as negative feelings towards the out-candidate (for a Biden supporter, this would be Donald Trump, and vice versa).

To engage in prospective issue voting, citizens must form beliefs about how much candidates differ and how likely they are to enact the policies they support. The larger the policy differences, the more important the election is.[5] This article highlights the importance of mistaken beliefs about political choices on offer and documents one psychological mechanism contributing to where such beliefs come from. I test that mechanism in the context of a real election and find that focalism prevents people from integrating selection biases in information received into candidate evaluations and participatory decisions, raising the stakes of political outcomes.

Focalism and Political Implications

The essence of focalism is that people confuse the allocation of attention to things with the importance of those things. That is, people give greater evaluative weight to considerations that happen to receive more of their attention. Indeed, studies of "availability" suggest that what comes to mind may not always be what is most important, but rather what is most striking, vivid, or most recent (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Given the tendency to focus on what is striking, suppliers of information have financial incentives to select on information that may not be representative of the broader information pool. For example, news sources rarely offer headlines like "No terror attack in Afghanistan today" (Enke, 2020, p. 1363). In politics, what is most striking is often change or the potential for change, not continuity.

When one must make a decision, allocating attention to what is striking or could change makes sense. After all, when forced to make a choice, the differentiating features between the two options are the only ones that matter. If a person must vote and is only deciding between a Democrat or a Republican, it is only useful to know what differentiates candidates. However, if one wants to understand how important it is for a Democrat and not a Republican (or vice versa) to win the election, then one must consider any overlap between the candidates. People who want to fully understand their electoral choices must consider everything candidates agree on, alongside political differences. But focalism (the confusion of attention with importance) causes people to put too much weight on the political conflict they observe—and not enough on agreement across the partisan divide.

One classic example of focalism is that residents in California and Michigan both believe that living in California increases happiness due to its warmer climate, when in reality the residents of both states are equally happy (Schkade & Kahneman, 2016). In this example,

[4] Others, however, highlight the importance of ideology (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017); such policy-based divergence between political figures increases partisan hostility (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). Orr and Huber (2020) find that common measures of affective polarization are largely picking up on assumptions respondents make about perceived policy preferences.

[5] To be sure, the ramifications of winning or losing extend beyond the policy differences studied in this article. For example, presidents from opposing parties may appoint dramatically different Supreme Court justices or may respond differently to emerging crises. Exaggerated beliefs about issue positions due to focalism may benefit democracy by reminding voters that elections have important consequences, especially if voters might otherwise overlook important political differences.

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the prototypical differentiating feature—climate—is salient, meaning that when making a comparison, it is at the "top of the head" (Zaller & Feldman, 1992). When making comparisons, such as between these two states, people develop a mental representation of the effect of the selection of one of the alternatives on offer (Wilson & Gilbert, 2016, p. 354). Developing that representation tends to mean minimizing the importance of shared (or less striking) components and highlighting distinguishing features (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, p. 271). People fail to consider that the weather is only one of many aspects of a good life, and thus the less focal ones shared by both states—work, family, etc.—do not come to mind (Schkade & Kahneman, 2016). Despite this emphasis on differences, similarities between the states (like family and work) make up the majority of the determinants of overall well-being. As a consequence, people tend to overstate the importance of the decision to live in either of these two states to their overall well-being.

Consistent with Kahneman's example is the political arena: Elections center on differences (Przeworski et al., 1999, p. 30). Candidates highlight their disagreements, and the media reinforces this by centering attention on divergence. To compensate for the dominance of political conflict in information received, people must make inferences from the fact that they have not seen recent media coverage of issues candidates agree on. Those who do not follow political news must make similar inferences in any incidental conversations about politics. If people cannot compensate for the unrepresentative nature of political information received—and focalism suggests that they cannot—then they will overestimate the differences between candidates. In the climate example, someone who must move to California or Michigan must consider the weather when choosing between these states. But their full evaluation of the benefits of moving to either California or Michigan will be biased unless they adjust for the prominence of California's comfortable climate in their mental comparison. In politics, someone who fails to consider all of the points of agreement between Democrats and Republicans will develop a biased view of the importance of elections unless they can recognize and compensate for the omnipresence of political conflict. I argue that by ignoring the similarities between candidates, voters exaggerate differences and therefore are "constantly liv[ing] at a turning point" (Hofstadter, 1964).

Political scientists have not yet linked focalism to participation or polarization, but there is evidence that individuals overestimate the ideological extremity and political engagement of out-partisans (Westfall et al., 2015). Such perceptions amplify the dislike of the out-party (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2013). Existing explanations for the phenomenon include a lack of familiarity with out-partisans joined by media coverage that focuses on those most passionate about politics (Druckman et al., 2022, p. 5).[6] These findings demonstrate that people tend to underweight their agreement with many political opponents, but they do not link this pattern to focalism.

Experiments in psychology often attempt to negate the effects of focalism by prompting people to think through these selection biases. These studies tend to ask people to reflect on how much of their day-to-day life will remain constant after a major change. That design attempts to reduce overestimation by increasing attention to typically nonfocal considerations relating to objects under comparison. These studies find that bias declines when participants explicitly consider issues they had previously ignored (Kahneman et al., 2004). Similar designs find evidence for the concept influencing comparisons regarding wealth (Kahneman et al., 2006), public transportation (Pedersen et al., 2012), housing (Dunn et al., 2016), disability (Ubel et al., 2005),

[6] Additionally, past work argues that party brands cause people to overestimate the share of demographic group supporters of each political party (Ahler & Sood, 2018, p. 965). Many voters also overestimate their own knowledge of the candidates and parties (Anson, 2018).

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career success (Gilbert et al., 1998), dating (Schwarz, 2014), and even emotional responses to winning or losing elections (Norris et al., 2011).

In a previous experiment, I found a similar result in the context of the 2018 U.S. midterm elections. I asked respondents to write about how they would spend their time in the days and years after the election. Consistent with focalism-motivated political behavior, completing this exercise reduced anticipated political participation by about 6% among respondents who reported voting in past elections because of the importance of the election (Appendix S5 in the online supporting information). While this approach is suggestive of the significance of focalism, the methodology did not isolate political issues or facilitate comparisons between focalism and other explanations for electoral behavior. I build on this work with a novel approach that isolates the causal effect of focal policy disagreement.

I test several hypotheses concerning differences I expect to observe between experimental groups. The theoretical argument in this article is that confusing attention with importance causes people to overweight unrepresentative information about politics when developing perceptions of candidates. Beyond those perceptions, I expect focalism to cause people to focus too much on political conflict, increasing the stakes of participation while simultaneously increasing polarization. There is one preregistered hypothesis related to estimating candidate policy divergence and four about the implications for substantive political outcomes (along with one hypothesis that was not registered). The first hypothesis establishes the focalism mechanism, while the next five examine whether this mechanism influences political participation/polarization.[7] Both groups receive the same information overall but vary with respect to whether similarities or differences between candidates are focal.

H1 People receiving focal information on candidate differences (relative to candidate similarities) will report that Donald Trump and Joe Biden agree on fewer issues, even when the overall set of information provided is identical and respondents are given financial incentives to estimate the true share of candidate convergence.

H2 People receiving focal information on candidate differences (relative to candidate similarities) will:

H2a report higher subjective perceptions of candidate differences.

H2b intend to vote in the 2020 election at higher rates.

H2c believe that the 2020 election is more important.

H2d feel more negative toward the out-candidate.

H2e *(not preregistered)*: report higher levels of affective polarization.

Experimental Design

To test the focalism mechanism, I developed an experiment that held the universe of information constant in expectation but manipulated the apparent prominence of candidate convergence or divergence. I started with a set of 51 issues on which candidates agreed and disagreed. I then incentivized participants to report their beliefs about candidate positions within this set before and after treatments that made either convergence or divergence (meaning issue agreement or disagreement) focal. To do that, treatments gave respondents access to unbiased samples of 20 drawn from the full set of 51 issues. Critically, they could always infer exactly how many issues out of that sample of 20 the candidates agreed and disagreed

[7]See the online supporting information including the preregistration for the exact operationalization of these hypotheses to the experiment and for a formalization of these ideas.

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on. However, they were presented with different sets of these issues, such that the direct or focal presentation of candidate divergence within those unbiased samples was varied. In other words, treatments varied the number of issues that candidates agreed or disagreed on directly, but by definition, what people saw directly always conveyed full information about what was not seen. This is analogous, for example, to how a citizen might focus on information about candidate differences to make a choice about who to vote for, but then must adjust for this bias in information salience when forming candidate evaluations for those evaluations to reflect all aspects of the political choice on offer.

To maximize the external validity of the study, I ran the experiment one week before the 2020 election and used Joe Biden and Donald Trump as the candidates. To develop the set of issues, I used an independent nonpartisan source, *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The company runs ProCon.org, a website serving 20 million readers each year as well as 11,000 schools, 37 state governments, and 25 federal agencies. Britannica attributed "yes" or "no" stances on 51 politically important issues to Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Examples of convergence include both candidates agreeing that the United States should withdraw troops from the Middle East and that the United States should allow fracking. Examples of divergence include whether the United States should increase the minimum wage and whether Confederate statues should be taken down. Attribution sources include what the candidate "has said, written, done, or otherwise verifiably expressed about an issue." I treat these 51 positions as the set of issues upon which the candidates took an explicit stance. Biden and Trump disagreed on 69% of the issues. See the Appendix S2.1 in the online supporting information for the full list and exact presentation to respondents.[8]

The experimental procedure was as follows. Respondents answered standard political and partisan identity questions while passing two attention checks. Respondents were told that coming close to correctly estimating the share of issues candidates disagreed on within Britannica's population of 51 issues would maximize their chance of winning an Amazon gift card. The incentive scheme used the binarized scoring rule (Hossain & Okui, 2013).[9]

At this point the computer draws a unique random sample of 20 issues from the population of 51 for each respondent. In the hypothetical example (Figure 1), this random set of 20 included 8 agree issues and 12 disagree issues. The survey then splits respondents into the randomly assigned agree or disagree condition. Someone assigned to the agree condition will see all of the issues within the set of 20 that candidates took the same position on. In this example, the hypothetical respondent in Figure 1 is assigned to the agree condition, and their random draw of 20 issues included 8 where candidates took the same position and 12 where candidates took different positions. So this respondent directly sees all 8 agree issues. Since respondents know that every issue is either an agree or disagree issue and every sample must contain 20 issues, this person can conclude that there must then be 12 disagree issues within the set of 20 that they did not see. Had this person been assigned

[8]While there were other issues in the campaign as well as issues that Biden and Trump took vague positions on, Britannica's 51 issues represent a nonpartisan, officially sourced population to present to respondents without deception.

[9]The purpose of the binarized scoring rule was to minimize the importance of heterogeneity in risk preferences for belief reporting. Addressing that heterogeneity meant asking people to report their true belief about the proportion of candidate disagreement. The implementation was as follows: (1) People enter their estimate. (2) The computer draws a random number between 0 and 100. (3) If the computer draw is bigger than the square of the distance of their estimate from 31 (the true answer of how much candidates agreed), the computer gives the person an entry in the lottery. (4) If the computer draw is smaller than the square of the distance of their estimate from 31, the person does not get an entry. In practice, only respondents who reported between 22% and 40% could possibly earn an entry, and within that range the closer a respondent estimate is to 31, the more likely they were to receive a ticket. For more on eliciting beliefs in political science, see Leemann et al. (2021).

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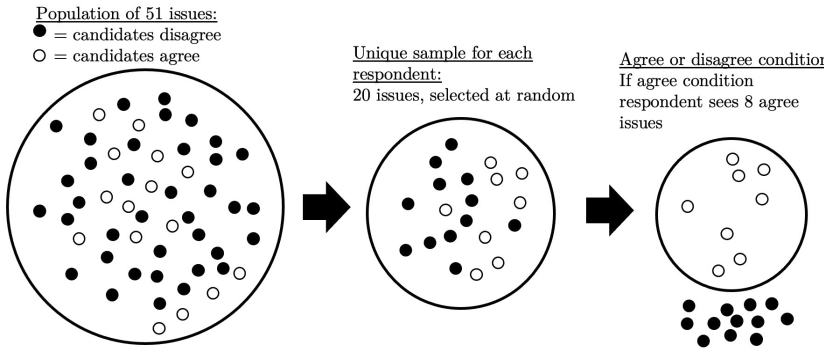

Figure 1. Example expected party differential sampling for a respondent in the agree condition whose random draw of 20 included 8 agree issues and 12 disagree issues.

to the disagree condition, they would have seen 12 disagree issues and could then have concluded that there must be 8 issues candidates take the same position on.

The key to this experiment is that both conditions provide all information necessary for estimating the true amount of disagreement within the sample. As a result of this design, sample means are identical in expectation across conditions.[10] Table 1 summarizes the information the experimental treatments provide. The mean across both conditions matches the true differential in Britannica's population of issues. Substantively identical means confirm that respondents who use salient and nonsalient information will report no difference in the EPD across treatment groups. If focalism does not influence candidate evaluations, then these treatments will have no effect on average.

After reading about their task, respondents provided an initial pretreatment estimate of candidate divergence (corresponding to H1) and then proceed through the experiment as described. Respondents answer all of these questions before and after treatments. In addition to the estimate of the EPD, I asked questions about subjective differences between the candidates (H2a), turnout intentions (H2b), feelings towards candidates and parties (H2d/H2e), and perceived election importance (H2c).[11]

I measured all dependent variables before and after treatment for two reasons. First, such designs increase precision in survey experiments without adding bias (Clifford et al., 2020). Second, this approach facilitates meaningful comparisons to important alternative explanations including partisanship and ideology. Such a comparison depends on setting the effects of partisanship, partisan identity, and ideology before treatment against the effect of focalism after

Table 1. Information provided to respondents on EPD in Britannica's Set of 51 Issues

	Minimum	Median	Mean	Maximum	# Respondents
Agree condition	45%	70%	68.1%	90%	966
Disagree condition	40%	70%	68.9%	95%	977

[10]The final randomization creates continuity, adding a randomly assigned minimum number of issues. The computer picks a number between 3 and 10 for each respondent. If there are less than that number of issues matching the respondents assigned condition within the draw of 20, then the computer shows random issues from the rest of the sample. In practice, this adds additional variation of salience but does not affect information received.

[11] The preanalysis plan includes the hypotheses, sampling methods, and other details as well as the Qualtrics file containing the survey implementation. See Data S1 for replication materials.

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treatment. The reason is that these treatments may prime policy considerations and confound a straightforward posttreatment comparison. Because of that, all dependent variables are coded to represent the change in responses after treatment.

The sample includes 1,943 Americans aged 18 and older recruited through Lucid's Theorem Platform on October 28, 2020, seven days before the 2020 election. Lucid registered more than 30 million unique respondent IDs platform-wide in that calendar year (Lucid 2021). The company determines unique respondents within each survey through a combination of IP address, a unique Lucid identification number, and a unique panel-identification number. Respondents were: 48% men, 75% white, 45% Democrat, and 40% Republican. The median respondent was 43 years old and had completed a Bachelor's degree. See the Appendix S1 in the online supporting information for more information on the sample and a comparison to Census/ANES demographics.

Results

I start with the effect of treatment on estimates of the expected party differential within Britannica's set of issues (H1, Figure 2).[12] Before treatment, people believed that Trump and Biden disagreed on 73% of the issues on average. The true share of disagreement in the set was 69%. Before receiving any information, respondents are then fairly accurate in their guess regarding Britannica's sample. Britannica's information represents an objective nonpartisan source, but it may itself overstate candidate disagreement by relying on issues that are themselves more contentious than a full accounting may include. After treatment, going from no salient disagreement between Trump and Biden to maximally salient disagreement increased the

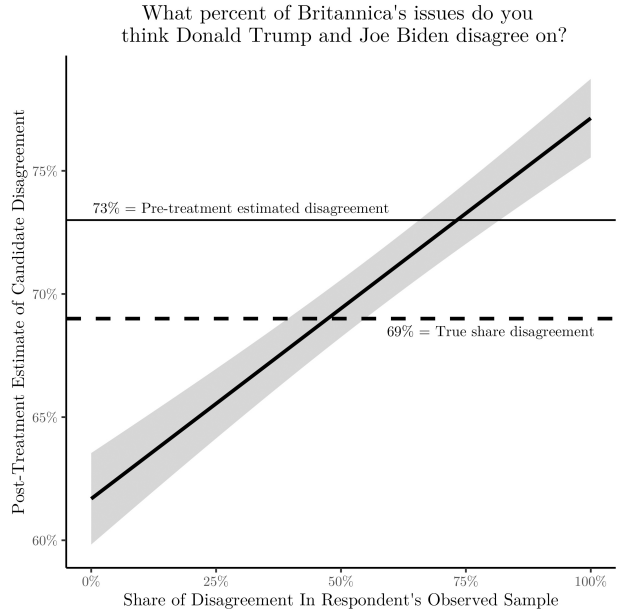

Figure 2. H1: Posttreatment estimated candidate disagreement as share of disagreement in respondent sample increases. Uncertainty reflects a 95% confidence interval drawn from a linear model.

[12]The figure is a linear model with posttreatment estimated candidate disagreement as the dependent variable and share of disagree issues seen as the only independent variable. See the Appendix S4.1 in the online supporting information for a Loess plot.

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average estimate of the total divergence between the candidates by about 15 percentage points. In other words, when the experiment raised the prominence of candidate divergence by directly showing the candidates disagreeing, people reported a party differential 15 percentage points larger than when the experiment directly showed the candidates agreeing, despite treatments always providing the same information in expectation.[13]

Next, I turn to raw data on perceptions of candidate differences (H2a, Figure 3). Of the respondents in the disagree condition, 66% claimed that the candidates were "extremely different" after treatment. By comparison, 39% of respondents in the agree condition said the same. Three times more respondents in the agree condition than the disagree condition claimed that the candidates were either "not different at all" or "a little different." The question omitted policy differences to ask about differences holistically and treatment only included policy information. Overall, respondents in the disagree condition claim the candidates are about 14% more different than those in the agree condition (Appendix S4.1 in the online supporting information).

Table 2 shows the effect of assignment to the disagree condition for the remaining four hypotheses. The main goal of the experimental manipulation was to measure the importance of focalism to perceptions of the expected party differential. These additional hypotheses intend to capture the effects of misperceived partisan divergence beyond the EPD. Each of these variables are on a −1 to 1 scale, with the lower and upper bounds representing the largest possible change

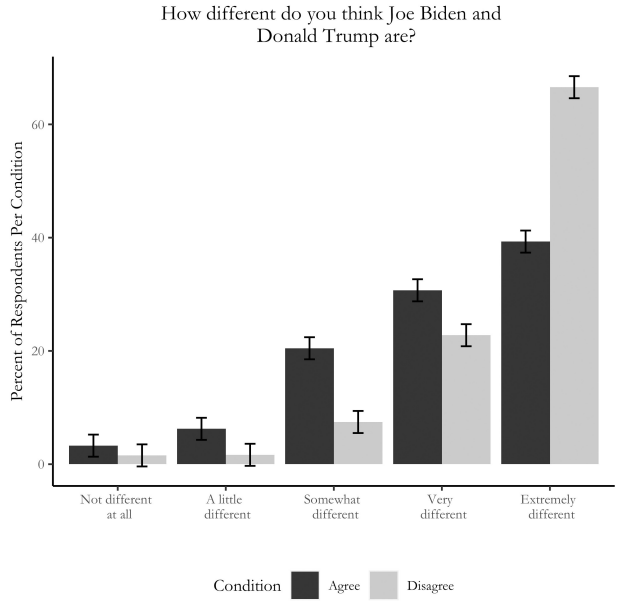

Figure 3. H2a: Posttreatment subjective candidate differences. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

[13]The graph uses share of disagreement in respondent samples to reflect the continuous treatment, and the results are substantively unchanged whether using continuous share of disagreement or binary assignment to the disagree condition (Appendix S4 in the online supporting information).

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Table 2. This table shows the remaining hypotheses, each outcome variable is coded from −1 to 1 and is the difference between pre- and posttreatment responses to identical survey items using a linear model with assignment to the Disagree Condition as the independent variable

	Dependent Variable			
	H2b:	H2c:	H2d:	H2e:
	Turnout	Election importance	Feelings toward the out-candidate	Affective polarization
Disagree condition	0.019**	0.012**	−0.012**	0.012***
	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.004)
Constant	−0.027***	−0.001	0.018***	−0.012***
	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Observations	1022	1942	1644	1641
R^2	0.004	0.002	0.003	0.005
Adjusted R^2	0.003	0.002	0.002	0.005

Note: Hypothesis 2b, turnout, asks respondents how likely they are to vote in the 2020 election. Hypothesis 2c, election importance, asks respondents "How important is the outcome of the 2020 election?" H2d, feelings toward the out-candidate, is the feeling thermometer for the candidate of the opposite party of the respondent (Joe Biden for Republicans and Donald Trump for Democrats). Hypothesis 2e, affective polarization, is the difference in feeling thermometer scores individuals report between their preferred party and the opposition.
*$p<.1$; **$p<.05$; ***$p<.01$.

after treatment. For example, a coefficient of −1 would mean that someone who said they were 100% planning to vote before treatment said that they were 0% planning to vote after treatment, or that the election was extremely important before treatment and not at all important after treatment. I find that assignment to the disagree condition significantly increased turnout intentions, subjective election importance, and affective polarization.[14] Treatment also resulted in more negative feelings towards the out-candidate. These results are all consistent with the theory, but the effect sizes are small.

Education is one variable which may confound the results, especially if those with the most years of schooling are most able to adjust their evaluations based on focal information. However, there is no statistically significant interaction between the amount of disagreement people saw and education. Those with the highest levels of education always perceive more disagreement between the candidates but respond to treatment similarly to those with the lowest levels of education (Appendix S4.1 in the online supporting information). There are no statistically significant imbalances across conditions (Appendix S4.4). Including controls for age, race, gender, partisanship, education, and ideology does not substantively change the results (Appendix S4.1). Using 10-fold validation to check for robustness, experimentally manipulated focalism bias alone explains about 9% of the variation in perceived objective and subjective differences between the candidates but about 1% of the variation for the other four hypotheses.

Comparison to Partisanship, Ideology, and Partisan Identity

Adding covariates facilitates a comparison between focalism and important alternative explanations, most importantly, partisanship and ideology. Figure 4 compares the effect of focalism to the effect of these variables on estimated party differentials. Identifying as a Democrat or

[14]Note that the turnout intentions question was only asked to respondents who claimed that they had not yet voted in the 2020 election (1,022 respondents).

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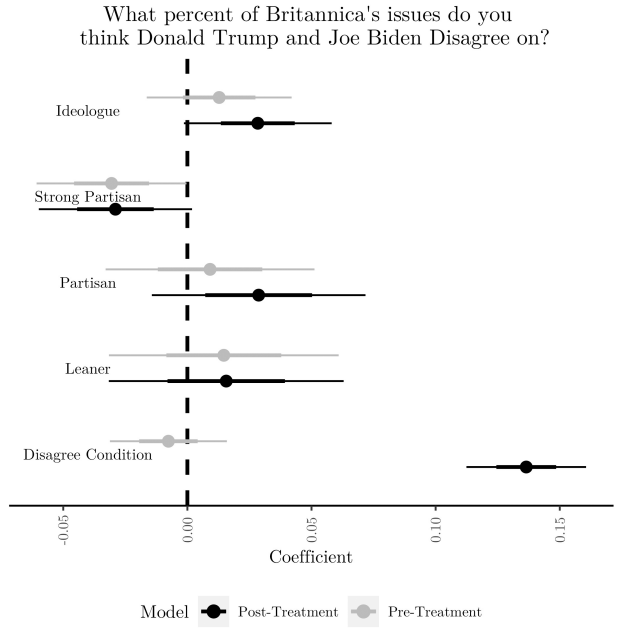

Figure 4. Pre- and posttreatment incentivized estimated candidate disagreement. Outer confidence intervals are two standard deviations, inner intervals are one standard deviation.

Republican and ideological placement had no effect on pre- or posttreatment estimates of how much Biden and Trump disagreed on policy in Britannica's set of 51 issues.

This is consistent with the incentive compatible design minimizing expressive responding (Bullock et al., 2015). Rewarding people to correctly estimate how much the candidates disagree leads to responses that do not correlate with partisanship or ideology. Further, the adjusted R-squared of this expected party differential model rises from 0.001 to 0.065 after treatment.

Figure 5 shows the results of regressions for the pre- and posttreatment measure of subjective candidate differences. The dependent variable, candidate differences, ranges from 0 (*not different at all*) to 1 (*extremely different*) in increments of 0.2. Partisan, leaner, and strong partisan are each indicator variables for whether a person identifies with a political party. The sum of these coefficients reflects the average difference between partisans and nonpartisans. Ideologue is an indicator for whether a person is a liberal or conservative.

After treatment, people in the disagree condition claimed that candidates were 15% more different than they did before treatment. Comparing the effect of treatment, partisanship, and ideology on perceived candidate differences suggests a meaningful role for focalism in such subjective candidate evaluations, even when set against these classic explanations for attitudes and behavior. To quantify the comparison, the adjusted R-squared of the model before treatment is 0.06, rising to 0.13 after experimental manipulation of focalism. See the Appendix S4.2 in the online supporting information for regression tables showing these results.

Assignment to the disagree condition, and consequent high exposure to policy divergence, produces a larger effect than partisan identification did before (and after) treatment. To make that claim, the comparison between the posttreatment effect of focalism and the pretreatment

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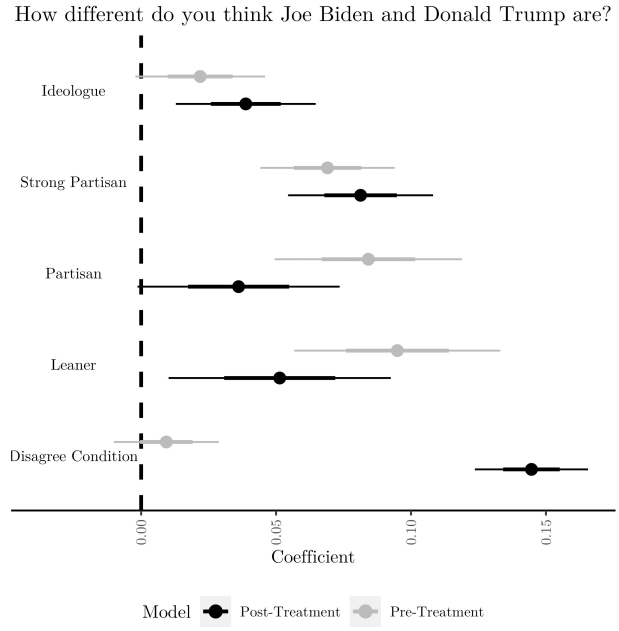

Figure 5. Pre- and posttreatment subjective candidate differences comparison to partisanship and ideology. Outer confidence intervals are two standard deviations, inner intervals are one standard deviation.

influence of partisanship and ideology is especially important. Treatments may have raised the relative importance of policy to people's overall evaluations of the candidates. But that hypothetical priming effect cannot have happened before treatment. The larger effect of focalism after treatment than partisanship and ideology produced before treatment suggests that bias caused by focalism can have a larger influence on beliefs about the expected party differential than stable identifiers.

Still, identification as a Democrat or Republican may not capture political affiliation as a social identity. Before treatment, I asked partisan and leaner survey participants (1,570 out of 1,943 respondents) four questions about partisan identity from Huddy et al. (2015). Table 3 replaces the indicators for partisanship and ideology with Huddy's four-item partisan identity scale (coded 0 to 1). Nonidentifiers code as 0. As with the traditional measures, I find no effect of partisan social identity on pre- or posttreatment incentivized estimates of candidate divergence. Even when measuring partisanship as a social identity, incentivizing people to report the true share of policy divergence between the candidates eliminates the effect of party loyalty among those most committed to their partisan identity.

In contrast to the noneffect of partisan identity on perceived objective candidate divergence, partisan identity significantly predicts subjective perceptions of how different the candidates are before and after treatment. Still, the effect of assignment to the disagree condition on subjective candidate differences is substantively similar to the effect of partisanship as a social identity. When asked how different Joe Biden and Donald Trump are one week before the 2020 election, going from refusal to identify with a political party to the highest level of partisan identification on the four-item identity scale increases perceived differences by 19%. In comparison, making

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Table 3. Comparison to partisan identity: pre- and posttreatment incentivized estimates of candidate disagreement (left) as well as pre- and posttreatment subjective candidate differences (right)

	Dependent Variable			
	Pretreatment	Posttreatment	Pretreatment	Posttreatment
	Objective	Objective	Subjective	Subjective
Disagree condition	−0.007	0.136***	0.006	0.142***
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.011)
Partisan identity	−0.029	−0.001	0.203***	0.191***
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.016)	(0.016)
Constant	0.749***	0.638***	0.741***	0.631***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Observations	1895	1943	1943	1943
R^2	0.002	0.065	0.081	0.136
Adjusted R^2	0.0005	0.064	0.080	0.135

Note: The dependent variable for the two linear models on the left is "What percent of Britannica's issues do you think Donald Trump and Joe Biden Disagree on?" The dependent variable for the two models on the right is "How different do you think Joe Biden and Donald Trump are?"
*$p<.1$; **$p<.05$; ***$p<.01$.

partisan divergence focal in the context of the survey experiment increases perceived differences by 14%. The share of the variation explained by the model nearly doubles after treatment.

Achen and Bartels (2018) argue that group identities mean that "party loyalty determines how [partisans] see the parties' issue positions–the exact opposite of how the folk theory and its derivatives, like the spatial theory of voting, imagine that voters behave" (p. 459). That perspective implies that political identity causes misperceptions. If that is true, then one would expect party identification to influence pretreatment beliefs about issue positions more than focalism influences those beliefs posttreatment. Before treatment people have not received any policy information, and so preexisting differences between partisan identifiers and independents reflect nonexperimentally influenced attitudes. This matters because partisan identity may drive exposure to sources that maximize the reported distribution of true candidate disagreement. The strongest partisans may select into the most biased media environments, such as the evangelical magazine referenced at the beginning of this article. If that were true, then identity would causally precede the effect of focalism-induced misperceptions and influence reported beliefs before treatment. But I find the opposite, with focalism producing larger effects on perceived objective candidate differentials than partisanship or partisan identity did before treatment.

Discussion

The theory in this article linked focalism to the expected party differential. The results of experimental testing are that focal policy divergence produces large increases in the expected party differential as well as subjective perceptions of Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Treatment effects extend to participation and polarization. But there several reasons why results within the context of this experiment may not generalize. First, the larger effect of focalism on party differentials than partisanship could result from the quantifiable measure of partisan divergence used in the experiment. That is, the large effects relative to partisanship in this study could result from people's inability to evaluate numeric information.

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But focalism-induced misperceptions demonstrably extend beyond quantitative measures of divergence. When asking people how different the candidates are using a standard 5-point scale, focalism still has a larger effect on responses than partisanship or ideology did before treatment.

A second design-related threat to generalizability is understanding. Respondents may have failed to understand that information they saw directly always included information about what they did not see. In other words, people may not have taken advantage of the fact that despite receiving superficially different samples, everyone always received information on exactly 20 randomly sampled issues. In the context of this study, respondents had to realize that when they received information about candidate disagreement, that information communicated more than just what they saw directly. This means that respondents needed to form expectations about nonfocal information and integrate it into their estimate. But making such a connection in the real world requires similar inferences as in the experiment. When people are watching the news, to compensate for focalism they must think about the selection mechanism in what stories the media choose to cover and adjust their overall evaluations by forming beliefs about nonfocal information. Understanding the importance of compensating for indirect information is easier in this experimental context. Indeed, the incentives and availability of unbiased information in the experiment attempted to create the most favorable conditions for people to notice and adjust for biases in information received.[15]

The final case for generalizability within the American context is that these results extend beyond candidate evaluations even one week before a highly polarized presidential election. Making policy divergence focal increased self-reported turnout intentions, perceived election importance, and affective polarization. While the effect sizes were small for these downstream hypotheses, the timing suggests a significant role for focalism in political participation. This design was primarily aimed at demonstrating the mechanism rather than estimating the total effect of focalism for these dependent variables. A virtue of this approach is that it was integrated into a real, high-profile political campaign. This adds external validity, but inevitably this comes at the expense of effect size, because citizens have (often strong) preexisting attitudes towards the relevant objects/candidates. Political experiments typically do not produce changes in attitudes or anticipated behavior just before elections (Kalla & Broockman, 2018, p. 149). Given that, running the experiment just one week before the election when attitudes towards the candidates were largely fixed suggests that the significant effects for each hypothesis understate the importance of focalism for political participation. In other words, the effects I estimate are not estimates of the total effect of focalism over an entire election, but rather the effect of a marginal change in focalism-induced, perceived candidate differences in the midst of an ongoing election.

Conclusion

In this article, I started with a psychological bias that causes people to overweight the differences between objects under comparison. I argued that when the surrounding political environment

[15]Another design-related issue is the possibility of demand effects. That is, when respondents learn about disagreement, they may infer that the purpose of the study is to convince people that the candidates are extremely different, and they may change their responses based on this inference. However, financial incentives to accurately estimate the share of candidate disagreement should reduce the chance that people will respond in support of assumed hypotheses. Moreover, there is little evidence for demand effects in political science (Mummolo & Peterson, 2019) and economics experiments (de Quidt et al., 2018). A related concern is that experimental respondents may want to maintain consistency in their responses to identical questions just a few minutes apart. If respondents behave this way, that biases the results towards null findings.

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emphasizes candidate divergence, people will overestimate expected party differentials. I then examined the mechanism driving overestimation of the differences between candidates, a general psychological bias that causes people to overweight the differences between objects under comparison. Experimental evidence demonstrated that differential beliefs about candidate policy preferences result from focalism, which increases participation and polarization.

Angus Campbell (1962) writes that the major motivation for voter behavior is "the size of the differential which the electorate thinks likely to result from the choice of one or the other of the alternatives open to it" (p. 208). Campbell's reference to the difference between political candidates reminds us that despite the irrelevance of a single vote, the choices on offer still matter. His use of the phrase "thinks likely" raises the possibility that voters overestimate how different those choices are. Sociologist Jennifer Silva interviewed 108 people in a small town in Pennsylvania during the years leading up to the 2016 election. Two-thirds of those interviewees abstained from voting. According to Silva, a common claim about politics was: "Look at what's happened in my lifetime, it doesn't really matter who's been president" (p. 35). These are the citizens who believe that parties converge to the position of the median voter and then abstain. But most people disagree with Silva's Downsian interviewees. On a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 means that it makes no difference who is in power and 5 means that it makes a big difference, more than 75% of people respond with a 3 or higher (ANES).

In my argument, focalism causes people to expect large benefits of political participation. Similar work argues that people overestimate the chance their vote will determine the outcome of elections, reporting percentage chances of breaking a tie as high as 20% (Gerber et al., 2017, p. 2). But those authors found that expected closeness alone has no effect on turnout. The empirical irrelevance of perceived pivotality suggests that "voters compute the expected benefit of voting (perhaps incorrectly), and then adjust turnout and voting behavior" (Gerber et al., 2017, p. 4). This article joins with that result to develop and test a mechanism through which people overestimate expected benefits.

The downstream implications of this study center on partisanship and citizens' perceptions of the political parties. Foundational accounts of participation argue that partisanship serves as a framework for thinking about politics because people believe that parties stand for significantly different platforms and base their vote on that belief (Schattschneider, 1942). If Schattschneider is correct, then a large expected party differential is central to partisan identity itself, as well as to participation. That intuition and these results align with recent work reorienting partisan loyalty toward policy preferences (Fowler, 2020). Future research will benefit from testing the degree to which partisan loyalties result from misperceptions of party differences.

One aspect of focalism beyond the scope of this article centers on temporal discounting. Research on affective forecasting, that is predictions of the effects of future change on well-being, highlights the importance of the concept (Norris et al., 2011; Wilson & Gilbert, 2016). People tend to expect that future changes will be more consequential than past changes have been. Applied to the electoral context, this overestimation of the effects of future change contributes to the tendency to see every election as the most important of our lifetime: Even people who recognize the limited impact of past changes on overall well-being are unable to put future change into perspective (Loewenstein & Shane, 1997). But it is possible that focalism would work differently in a less-polarized system. For example, less general attention to political campaigns may mean that people perceive less differences between parties than there is as a result of infrequent media coverage. Outside the electoral context, and applied to revolutions, many people in many countries have optimistically expected that institutional change will produce fundamental changes in governance. But often such apparently drastic reforms leave de facto political outcomes unchanged (Hale, 2013).

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It may seem that focalism implies people should disengage from partisan politics and look for unbiased information about candidate positions. After all, Mill (1812) is right when he claims that: "The time is not yet come when a calm and impartial person can intermeddle with advantage in the questions and contests of the day." The calm and impartial person stays home, and motivated individuals get involved. Focalism causes us to think that politics is so important that we participate even in the absence of individual incentives to do so. Democracy depends on this participation. Leszek Kolakowski (1964) writes, "Had such tempting mirages not appeared, the exhausted caravan would inevitably have perished in the sandstorm, bereft of hope" (p. 127, translated in Hirschman, 1967, p. 29).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Chris Johnston, John Aldrich, Sunshine Hillygus, Steve Vaisey, Mike Munger, Arvind Krishnamurthy, Charles Nathan, Jason Todd, and the members of the Kenan Institute for Ethics's Worldview Lab for their help with this project. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2021 Harvard Experiments Conference and the 2021 meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Curtis Bram, Duke University, 140 Science Dr. Durham, NC 27708. E-mail: curtis.bram@duke.edu

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Appendix S1. Description of Data and Sampling

Appendix S2. Experimental Materials

Appendix S2.1. List of Britannica's Issues

Appendix S2.2. Survey Items

Appendix S3. Model and Link to Experiment

Appendix S4. Main Results Regression Tables

Appendix S4.1. Additional Analysis

Appendix S4.1.1. Loess Plot

Appendix S4.1.2. No Interaction between Education and Share Disagreement

Appendix S4.1.3. Interactions between Partisanship, Ideology, and Treatment

Appendix S4.2. Regression Tables for Figures 4 and 5 from Main Text

Appendix S4.3. SEM Analysis

Appendix S4.4. Balance Check

Appendix S5. 2018 Focalism Experiment

Data S1. Replication Data

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