Partisan Motivated Reasoning in Election Forecasts

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(WORKING PAPER. DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.) Partisans often maintain self-affirming perceptions of political and economic reality. However, less is known about how partisans form and justify political forecasts. The present study examines how accuracy goals and partisan motivations combined to influence partisans’ electoral forecasts during the 2016 United States Presidential election campaign. In experimental tests, I demonstrate that increased cognitive engagement can lead partisans to prioritize accuracy goals which diminish the congeniality of their predictions. However, results also show that these disconfirming forecasts are largely supported by affect-driven justifications rather than relevant information about the campaign. Partisans often use the emotional state of regret as a psychological safeguard, allowing them to report disconfirming beliefs while serving their directional goals. In a concluding section, I argue that this process helps public opinion-based forecasting methods maintain their remarkable accuracy in a polarized political environment.

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In recent years, a growing literature on partisan motivated reasoning has shown that many Americans are unreliable reporters of objective reality (e.g., Bartels 2002; Bisgaard 2015; Evans and Andersen 2006; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2011). To efficiently process the deluge of political content available to them, partisan identifiers often learn about the world around them in a fundamentally biased fashion (e.g., Kahan 2013; Kunda 1990). Motivated reasoning occurs when partisan favor congenial information, which confirms their preexisting beliefs, over disconfirming information, which contradicts the way they believe the world ought to be. This process invokes “wishful thinking,” in which partisans convince themselves that conditions are congenial even when the preponderance of evidence suggests a different interpretation (Babad 1997; Meffert et al. 2011).

This paper contributes to our understanding of the limits of the motivated reasoning phenomenon. While many existing studies of motivated reasoning have examined biases in citizens’ perceptions of current conditions, we know less about how partisan cheerleading shapes political judgments more broadly. Political expectations are a relatively understudied class of motivated perceptions (but see e.g., Babad 1997; Blais and Bodet 2006; Meffert et al. 2011; Mutz 1998). Rather than reporting their perceptions of measurable indicators such as the unemployment rate or the size of the national debt, political forecasts ask citizens to reflect on an uncertain future political outcome.

One important measure of political expectations is the increasingly-popular citizen forecast (Lewis-Beck 2005; Lewis-Beck and Skalaban 1989; Lewis-Beck and Tien 1999; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2011; Meffert et al. 2011; Murr 2011). Unlike questions tapping vote intention, citizen forecasting measures ask respondents which candidate they think will be most likely to win the election—respondents’ own preferences notwithstanding. One surprising property of citizen forecasts is their high degree of accuracy when aggregated; many tests have shown these measures to substantially outperform other types of election forecasts (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2011). Given the impressive array of studies documenting partisan motivated reasoning across a wide variety of citizen perceptions, it should come as no surprise that earlier work on elec-

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2Citizens are known to differ substantially in the probability of producing a correct electoral forecast, for reasons other than partisanship (Lewis-Beck and Skalaban 1989; Lewis-Beck and Tien 1999; Murr 2015). Several studies have sought to examine the comparative accuracy of prediction markets and polls (Erikson and Wlezien 2008; Rothschild 2009). Modern forecasters, in response to this literature, have developed sophisticated ways of ‘debiasing’ polls to produce forecasts that parallel the accuracy of ‘debiased’ prediction markets. Some respondents lacking in political awareness and knowledge are especially likely to be inaccurate, threatening the overall utility of aggregate forecasts in very close elections.

3Prediction markets also rely on perceptual questions to produce highly-accurate forecasts (e.g., Leigh and Wolfers 2006; Tziralis and Tatsiopoulou 2012; Wolfers and Zitzewitz 2004).
toral forecasts has shown that partisanship strongly conditions these perceptions as well (e.g., Murr 2011). At the microlevel, then, we are faced with a puzzle: how can directionally-motivated samples, consisting largely of partisan “wishful thinkers,” accurately forecast elections?

I argue that in tandem with the “miracle” of aggregation supported by Condorcet’s jury theorem (Murr 2015), the answer to this question is rooted in the psychological dynamics of motivated reasoning and cognition. Below, I develop a theory which deepens our understanding of wishful thinking in partisans’ electoral expectations. I argue that directional motivated reasoning is rivaled by accuracy motivations in the minds of partisans, such that increased cognition leads to a high rate of disconfirming forecasts among partisans when a preferred candidate is trailing in the race. Competing directional and accuracy goals need not necessarily lead to conflicting forecasts, as expressions of regret give partisans an avenue to engage in cheerleading even when making disconfirming predictions. Regretful emotional valence allows many strong partisans to make uncomfortable, but unbiased, election forecasts.

To test these expectations I rely on survey experimental methods. I measure partisans’ propensity to report congenial and disconfirming election forecasts under experimental conditions designed to manipulate the strength of accuracy motivations. In addition, I employ a content analytical strategy to classify the justifications partisans provide for their electoral forecasts. Results show that disconfirming forecasts are often supported by a large amount of regretful emotional content, and only rarely refer to sources of information like polls and news stories. The use of regret increases as partisans increasingly prioritize accuracy motivations. In a concluding section, I argue that this process allows samples of partisan respondents to make meaningful predictions despite a polarized political context.

**Knowing and Cheerleading**

Recent research on motivated reasoning continues to uncover evidence that partisans’ perceptions of current conditions and future expectations are frequently polarized (e.g., Bisgaard 2015; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Meffert et al. 2011; Murr 2015; Leeper and Slothuus 2014). In addition, the recent discovery of widespread partisan “cheerleading” on surveys (also known as “motivated responding”) suggests that citizen forecasts are likely to be strongly influenced by partisan motivations. In the realm of economic judgments,
partisans have been found to use their survey participation as an excuse to report preferred-world perceptions as seemingly true or credible beliefs, in part because these individuals understand that economic performance is a salient metric on which an incumbent president should be judged (Bullock et al. 2015; Khanna and Sood 2017; Miller et al. 2012; Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015). In comparison, citizen forecasts reflect a much more direct appraisal of the positive or negative characteristics of partisan in- and outgroups (Rahn 1993; Tajfel and Turner 1979). It is likely that partisan respondents will be eager to provide survey scientists with a highly partisan-congenial view of the state of an election featuring partisan candidates, regardless of any contradictory information they may possess. Even if partisans do have an accurate understanding of the state of the race, the incentives for “cheerleading” behavior mean that partisan biases may be even stronger in election forecasts than in other contexts.

Several existing studies have revealed the partisan-motivated nature of election forecasts across a variety of contexts. Blais and coauthors point out that wishful thinking affects partisans’ perceptions, such that favored parties often receive upward-biased estimates of expected vote share in elections (e.g., Blais and Bodet 2006). Meffert et al. (2011) also examine the effects of wishful thinking on forecasts of coalition and party success in Austria and Germany. The authors argue that despite strong wishful thinking effects when it comes to evaluations of preferred parties’ chances, many citizens are capable of sophisticated strategic voting considerations. And Lewis-Beck and Skalaban (1989) show in cross-sectional analyses of U.S. Presidential elections from 1956-1984 that partisanship is one of the strongest predictors of forecast accuracy. Americans are much more likely to favor their preferred candidate’s chances over the chances of an opponent.

Despite these microlevel findings, aggregate election forecasts are highly accurate. Most existing explanations for this phenomenon assume a “miracle” of aggregation, in which the wisdom of crowds is likely to prevail when data from large-N samples are collected (Erikson and Wlezien 2008; Ganser and Riordan 2015; Graefe 2014). Murr (2015) connects this phenomenon to Condorcet’s jury theorem (Condorcet 1875), which shows that large-scale public opinion-based forecasts can substantially outperform vote-intention based forecasts as long as the average respondent has a greater likelihood of being correct than being incorrect.

However, the strength of wishful thinking poses a challenge to this logic, especially in close elections where forecasting is increasingly difficult. If partisans were to universally engage in directional motivated
reasoning when responding to surveys, aggregate forecasts would mostly reflect the proportion of partisans (and leaning partisans) in samples. This view squares with recent literature on democratic citizenship, which argues that motivated reasoning renders “election outcomes as mostly just erratic reflections of the current balance of partisan loyalties in a given political system” (Achen and Bartels 2016, 16). In order to understand how partisans can nevertheless contribute to accurate aggregate forecasts, we must probe the psychological mechanisms driving election forecasting.

_Election Forecasting as Goal-Oriented Behavior_ 

When reporting their perceptions on surveys, partisans possess multiple goals. Only some of these goals are relevant to the preservation of partisan-congenial beliefs: _accuracy motivations_ constitute an additional set of considerations held by partisan survey respondents (e.g., Leeper and Slothuus 2014). Respondents seek to preserve their self-esteem by reporting accurate judgments which are reflective of their expertise, in part because expertise is socially desirable (Kunda 1990; Leeper and Slothuus 2014; Nir 2011; Redlawsk 2002). These perceptions may conflict with the “preferred world state” of partisans, though the importance of accuracy relative to directional reasoning is likely dependent upon context (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Bullock et al. 2015). “There is little reason to believe that individuals always feel the same motivations,” write Leeper and Slothuus (2014, 20), “or that the value obtained by a particular goal-striving activity cannot be substituted by striving toward that goal in a different way or toward a different goal entirely.” Put another way, partisans are simultaneously influenced by accuracy and the desire to cheerlead; their eventual forecast, however, could be the product of one or both of these needs as the context warrants.

Political scientists have recently corroborated this assertion by experimentally manipulating the incentives for pursuing accuracy motivations. When incentivized to provide objectively correct reports of economic indicators, subjects in Prior et al.’s (2015) study substantially reduced their rate of partisan-congenial responses in order to receive a higher payout (see also Khanna and Sood 2017). These findings suggest that partisans may possess a relatively accurate understanding of the current state of the economy, but when responding to survey questions, they often report a partisan-preferred interpretation of economic facts instead.
Similarly, the context in which partisans respond to election forecasting questions is likely to influence the strength of directional motivated reasoning relative to accuracy motivations. Several existing studies have demonstrated that there exist conditions under which accuracy motivations come to prevail over other goal-seeking behavior (e.g., Bolsen and Druckman 2015; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Redlawsk 2002; Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017). However, it is currently unclear whether, and to what extent, accuracy motivations yield disconfirming election forecasts among partisans. Below, I advance a theory of goal-oriented forecasting which argues that partisans simultaneously engage in directional and accuracy goal-seeking. The result is a paradoxical pattern: some partisans can report disconfirming, psychologically dissonant perceptions in a way that satisfies partisan motivations.

*Satisficing and Accuracy Motivations*

Recent work in the field of motivated reasoning has investigated whether directional goal-seeking requires the expenditure of greater cognitive effort relative to accuracy motivations. Some scholars argue that respondents with high Need for Cognition (those who seek out complexity) are most likely to act as “classical rationalists,” pursuing accuracy goals above all else (e.g., Nir 2011; Taber and Lodge 2006). Kunda (1990) similarly argues that accuracy motivations require individuals to weigh a more exhaustive set of considerations in order to arrive at a judgment relative to other motivations. Schaffner and Roche (2016) show that arriving at disconfirming perceptions requires more effort than simple memory recall because individuals will engage in a more careful refutation of considerations which conflict with the partisan preferred-world state (see also Druckman 2012). However, partisan motivated perceptions are also thought to be effortful. “Deciding to produce an inaccurate response,” argue Schaffner and Roche (2016, 88), “takes more effort (time) than simply recalling the information requested.”

I argue that in the case of forecasts, an increase in cognitive effort is likely to reveal the presence of strong accuracy motivations among partisans. This is because congenial forecasting is more likely when respondents engage in satisficing. To make accurate forecasts, individuals must weigh available evidence in memory to make their forecast. In a partisan-motivated response, respondents engaging in satisficing
will no longer “carefully interpret the meaning of each question, search their memories extensively for all relevant information, integrate that information carefully… and report summary judgments in ways that convey their meaning” (Krosnick 1991, 214). In a weak form of satisficing, respondents may engage in low-effort information retrieval. They will invoke just a few (likely congenial) considerations as a result of this haphazard memory search. In even stronger forms of satisficing, respondents might not perform information retrieval at all, instead conjuring a pure “preferred world” response that relies entirely on wishful thinking (Parker-Stephen 2013; Lodge and Taber 2013).\footnote{Satisficing is not the only conceptual framework used in the literature to explain diminished effort among survey respondents, but it is perhaps the most common (Redlawsk and Lau 2013).} Partisans’ responses will therefore deviate from informed assessments of the candidates’ current chances of victory, even if some partisans possess quality information about the campaign.

One technique to reduce satisficing, first developed by Tetlock (1983) and later implemented by Lerner and Tetlock (1999), is to caution respondents that they will need to explain their judgments to an audience after giving an initial response (see also Tetlock and Kim 1987). Fear of social judgment causes respondents to increase attentiveness, leading to a more thorough memory search.\footnote{Tetlock’s (1983) original experiment held subjects accountable for their position by asking them to elaborate further on their arguments about a judicial decision, warning the subjects that they would need to justify their positions to a group of peers (see also Chaiken 1980).} A second method is to implore respondents to provide their best effort for the sake of science (e.g., Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015). Both methods are expected to reveal the presence of accuracy motivations.

In an online survey setting, we do not possess the ability to motivate partisans using peer pressure, as in Tetlock’s (1983) design. However, asking respondents to provide written justifications may similarly reduce satisficing by encouraging effortful reflection. Since the response is being recorded as part of the survey task, partisans may be sensitive to the fact that their written statements will be scrutinized by researchers. Respondents may experience a heightened awareness of audience, a pivotal aspect of the writing process which has been found to produce more thoughtful and reflective writing due to increased levels of metacognition (Ede and Lunsford 1984; Kroll 1984; Magnifico 2010). If partisans’ directional goals are rivaled by accuracy motivations, increased cognition should lead to diminished rates of congenial forecasts when those goals conflict.

These expectations are summarized by H1 and H2 below:

\[\text{H1} \quad \text{H2}\]
• H1 (Disconfirming Forecasts): *When a partisan’s favored candidate is trailing in an election, increased cognitive investment is expected to decrease the likelihood of making a congenial electoral forecast.*

• H2 (Congenial Forecasts): *When a partisan’s favored candidate is leading in an election, increased cognitive investment is expected to have no effect on the likelihood of making a congenial electoral forecast.*

These expectations rest upon the assumption, following Prior et al. (2015) and Bullock et al. (2015), that partisans possess a reserve of information about the electoral chances of the candidates which they fail to tap when engaging in satisficing. It is possible, akin to the results found by Tversky and Kahneman (1973), that partisans will resist the cognitive investment task. A null result could also indicate that partisans are highly resistant to admitting predictions of success for the out-party, perhaps due to the emotional displeasure it would invoke among those with high levels of affective polarization (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Regardless of the specific pathway, if H1 finds support, individuals exposed to a cognitive investment task will be more likely to pursue accuracy as an objective of forecasting than those who are not exposed. Such a pattern would allow for a more detailed investigation of the ways in which partisans support accuracy-driven forecasts.

Below, I propose a set of expectations pertaining to this investigation.

**Regret Supports Disconfirming Forecasts**

Partisans are naturally uncomfortable when they admit to themselves that their preferred world state conflicts with reality. Disconfirming judgments are threatening to partisans’ self-esteem, leading them to experience cognitive dissonance (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004). I theorize that nevertheless, partisans will be willing to make disconfirming predictions thanks to a reliance upon affective, and not fact-based, justifications for their forecasts. Partisans will justify disconfirming forecasts by invoking considerations which, counterintuitively, *do not* incorporate a greater amount of evidence from useful indicators of electoral success, such as pre-election polls or recent campaign communications and events. Instead, partisans will assuage their cognitive dissonance by regretfully blaming the vulnerability of their favored candidate on external forces.

Regret is a valuable negative emotional state: it is known to be a powerful driver of decision-making, and
it is looked upon as more socially desirable than other negative emotions (Coricelli, Dolan, and Sirigu 2007; Saffrey, Summerville, and Roese 2008). Partisans making disconfirming forecasts are therefore especially likely to turn to regret as an emotion that helps them to retain the logical consistency of their partisan-congenial worldview. Partisans are unlikely to leverage relevant information like current polling reports to support their disconfirming predictions—such information would support the idea that the preferred candidate is inferior to the opponent. Instead, regretful justifications hint that the preferred candidate is losing because of unjust or undesirable forces beyond the preferred candidate’s control. The partisan can therefore continue to assign stereotypically-positive in-group characteristics to the preferred candidate (Rahn 1993).

Regret recovers the validity of the preferred world state, as partisans negatively construe the characteristics of rival politicians—and the political process in general—in order to explain why their preferred candidate will lose. As opposed to motivated responding, which biases factual perceptions, motivated justifications allow partisans to cheerlead in service of disconfirming expectations (Anson 2016).

- H3 (Regret): When accuracy goals are incentivized, disconfirming forecasts are more likely to contain regretful sentiment than in other conditions.

- H4 (Information): When accuracy goals are incentivized, disconfirming forecasts are no more or less likely to contain references to polls, news reports, or campaign events than in other conditions.

These expectations bear consequences for extant theories of partisan motivated reasoning and responding. Khanna and Sood (2017) have recently shown that partisan cheerleading operates a bit like “whack-a-mole”: when monetarily incentivizing partisans to reduce their cheerleading behavior in response to a factual learning task, partisans become more likely to give the correct response. However, this causes partisans to decrease their judgments of the credibility of the report (the “mole” of partisan bias reappears in these credibility judgments after having been “whacked” in the earlier item by the monetary incentive). The authors argue that this phenomenon is a result of disconfirmation bias, in which respondents are likely to spend a greater amount of time scrutinizing and refuting the evidence for disconfirming claims (Taber and Lodge 2006).

However, unstated in this theory is the notion that respondents will seek a way to maintain the logical consistency of the preferred world state when given the chance. Finding support for such a pattern would help to explain why many committed partisans are willing to admit their candidate is losing the election, a
tendency which helps to explain how committed partisans can contribute to high-quality aggregate election forecasts.

**Research Design**

While several existing studies have studied bias in predictive markets experimentally (e.g., Forsythe et al. 1992; Hanson, Oprea, and Porter 2006), no study has examined partisan bias in survey-based electoral predictions from an experimental perspective. In August of 2016, I reached a sample of 1,503 respondents through Amazon MTurk (hereafter Study 1), with the intention of exposing randomly-assigned groups to specialized forecasting questions. Then, from late October to early November, 2016, I reached a second sample of online respondents (N = 1,046) through a qBus omnibus survey administered by Qualtrics Inc. (hereafter Study 2). qBus provided a national sample of respondents selected from actively managed market research panels. Respondent selection ensured representativeness on the basis of Census estimates of age, gender, ethnicity, household income, and region. Panels of respondents answered questions included on the omnibus from a series of investigators (often market researchers and other professional groups). qBus panelists’ demographic information is collected in advance, and includes standard measures of partisanship and other political variables.

In the MTurk sample, workers were instructed to complete a set of demographic questions tapping standard measures of age, gender, race, income, and basic political attributes like party identification and ideology (see the Supplementary Information, hereafter SI, for question wording). Next, a task designed to clear working memory was employed, in which subjects were asked to rank a list of physical objects from largest to smallest. The experimental treatments were then administered. In both studies, partisan groups include “leaners”; results are robust to the inclusion or exclusion of these respondents in partisan groups.

Subjects in both experiments responded to one of three conditions, two of which were designed to influence the degree of cognitive investment in the survey response. These conditions included an appeal to science

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6MTurk samples, while initially met with skepticism by many political scientists, are remarkable in their attention levels. They consistently outperform student samples and other convenience samples in their likelihood of recreating treatment effects relative to national samples (Krupnikov and Levine 2014).

7In total, four different content modules were presented to qBus respondents; these modules were presented in random order.

8See http://www.qualtrics.com/online-sample/omnibus/ for more information.

9The present study was the only module included on the qBus to tap political considerations. Partisanship question wording was derived from the American National Election Study questionnaire. See the SI for full question wording.
treatment (T1), a writing-based cognitive engagement treatment (T2), and a control condition (C) which presented subjects with forecast question wording that is identical to the language most recently used by the American National Election Studies (American National Election Studies 2016). The treatments are summarized in Table 1 below.

[Table 1 about here.]

In the control condition (the rightmost column of Table 1), we see a standard operationalization of citizen electoral forecasts. The question asks respondents who they think will win the Presidential election, alongside appeals to objectivity. Following Prior, Sood, and Khanna (2015), for purposes of comparison to the other conditions, subjects in this condition were also exposed to a brief preamble stating that they were about to be asked a question with right and wrong answers. In all conditions, respondents were encouraged to respond if they did not initially answer, but were not forced.

In Treatment 1, a short vignette urges the participant to provide responses which are “accurate” and reflective of the “full extent” of their knowledge about the question.\(^{10}\) This appeal also includes a bolded reference to “academic research”. Afterwards, treated subjects were prompted with the same forecasting question given to the control condition.

In Treatment 2, the short vignette makes no appeal to science, instead cautioning respondents that they will be expected to explain in writing why they have arrived at their response. On the same page of the survey, below the forecasting question, a text box was visible, alongside a statement which prompted respondents to provide an explanation for their response. In this way, randomly-assigned respondents in the Treatment 2 condition were immediately aware that they would need to respond in writing after making their forecast, and could adjust their prediction accordingly. To facilitate comparisons, in Study 2, written responses were also collected for respondents in other conditions—but only after they had clicked through to the next page of the survey (respondents could not return to revise their predictions). Click tracking was also performed to assuage concerns that partisans were gaining additional information in the T2 condition by simply “Googling the answer” (Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015).\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\)This question wording strongly resembles the appeal to science treatment used by Prior, Sood, and Khanna (2015).

\(^{11}\)Analyses presented in the SI demonstrate that there is minimal concern that respondents were susceptible to this phenomenon.
Analyzing the Content of Forecast Justifications

Study 2 benefits from the ability to directly compare the content respondents provided as justification for their predictions, across all three experimental conditions (see Table 1). In the section below, I present the experimental results alongside a conventional qualitative content analysis which examines expressive and fact-driven rationales for subjects’ electoral predictions (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). In the SI, word clouds and frequency histograms depict a fuller view of the content provided by respondents.

The present analysis relies on hand-coding of 1,046 individual responses to the open-ended forecast justification question included in all conditions of Study 2. A categorization scheme was developed through an analysis of a randomly-drawn training set of 100 survey responses. These inductively-generated categories are described in Table 2 below.

The non-exclusive, non-exhaustive categories can be divided into two types: categories which account for the primary rationale or justification for a prediction, and the emotional valence that accompanied the response. Categories like pride, regret, and anger or fear stand in contrast to responses which leverage observations of real-world reports on the candidates’ standing in the race. Emotional reactions are likely driven by cheerleading behavior, as they largely concern the superiority of their preferred candidate or the characteristic defects of their opponent. However, regret signals a reluctant admission that the predicted candidate is more likely to win, indicating a reversal from the respondent’s congenial position.

Study 1: Disconfirming Forecasts

In Study 1, a sample of Amazon MTurk workers was asked to forecast the winner of the United States Presidential Election in August of 2016. Unsurprisingly, motivated reasoning and expressive bias in the survey response combined to produce substantially different forecasts for Democrats and Republicans in this survey. As seen below in Fig. 1, the propensity to predict a Clinton or Trump forecast (or to predict that another candidate would win) is strongly conditioned by party identification. Roughly 45.8% of Republicans predicted that Donald Trump would win the election, compared to only 9.0% of Democrats. Among Independents,
the proportion forecasting Trump was 29.1%, compared to 59.9% who believed Clinton would be victorious.

Despite these baseline differences, however, the degree of partisan congeniality was strongly affected by an experimental manipulation designed to reduce satisficing and to increase cognition. Fig. 2, below, provides a look at this relationship, by presenting the proportion of Donald Trump forecasters across partisanship and treatment condition. Models showing regression coefficients, including a fully interactive model, are presented in the SI.

The results in Table 2 provide evidence in support of H1 and H2. Relative to the control condition, Republicans exhibited a decline in Trump forecasting of 14.70% in response to Treatment 2, a condition designed to increase cognition through reduced satisficing (t = 2.68, p < 0.01). This large decrease in congenial forecasting suggests that Republicans in the sample devote greater attention to accuracy motivations when alerted to the presence of a writing task. Among Republicans, whose directional forecast conflicts with accuracy motivations, the decline in congenial forecasts in favor of disconfirming ones is substantial.

Republicans in the sample are not significantly influenced by the other accuracy motivation included in the study, despite a smaller shift in the expected direction. An appeal to science diminishes Trump forecasts by 10.42% relative to the control group (t = 1.82, p = 0.07). The reasons for this smaller shift are unclear, though it is possible that some Republicans were immune to the appeal to science due to antipathy towards scientists as a stereotypically-defined group.

Democrats, according to H2, should not be impacted by either accuracy incentive: in August of 2016, the vast majority of available information supported the notion that Hillary Clinton was leading the race. Increased accuracy motivations are expected to align with the congenial prediction among Democrats, meaning we should see no pro-Trump shift among Democrats. Both the appeal to science (δ = 3.01%, t = 1.20, p = 0.23) and the writing task condition (δ = 0.95%, t = 0.40, p = 0.69) elicit virtually no change in Democrats’ overwhelming propensity to forecast Trump over Clinton, and in fact trend slightly in the pro-Clinton direction. This finding corroborates the null expectations of H2.
The results of Study 1 have provided initial evidence that accuracy motivations rival directional goals for many partisans. Tasks designed to increase cognitive engagement in the survey response have reduced congenial forecasting among Republicans, whose preferred world state conflicted with the substantial lead enjoyed by Clinton in August of 2016. However, we still know little about the ways in which partisans justify the abandonment of the partisan-preferred interpretation of reality in favor of an accuracy-driven response. In order to explore this subject, I next turn to results from Study 2, which allow for a comparison of the content of partisans’ justifications for their forecasts.

**Study 2: Forecast Justifications**

Study 2 once again exposes respondents to one of three treatments designed to manipulate the accuracy incentive driving election forecasts. This time, however, Qualtrics qBus respondents were all asked to provide written justifications for their forecasts after making them (though just as in Study 1, subjects in Treatment 2 were forewarned of the existence of the writing task beforehand; see Table 1). Respondents’ justifications were coded for the presence of emotional content and references to sources of information such as polls and news report, among other attributes. See Table 2 for a full description.

H3 states that we should expect to see regretful justifications increasing as cognitive investment increases, among those making disconfirming forecasts. Below I present Fig. 3, which demonstrates the prevalence of regretful content among respondents making partisan-congenial, partisan-disconfirming, and neutral forecasts.

![Figure 3 about here.](image)

The leftmost panel of Fig. 3 shows the proportion of regretful forecasts among those making congenial forecasts. We see that across all treatment and control conditions, as might be expected, partisans favoring the partisan-preferred candidate’s chances of victory are quite unlikely to express regret. Regret also fails to increase in response to the treatments relative to the control. Treatment 1 invokes a slight decrease in regret ($\delta = -0.50\%$, $t = -0.28$, $p = 0.78$), and Treatment 2 results in an almost imperceptible negative shift ($\delta = -0.10\%$, $t = -0.05$, $p = 0.96$).

12Pure independents were coded as making neutral predictions, as well as partisans who forecast a winner of the election other than Clinton or Trump.
In contrast, those making disconfirming predictions exhibit increases in regret when their cognitive investment is stimulated. In response to the appeal to science in Treatment 1, those making disconfirming predictions became only around 6.03% more likely to express regret while doing so relative to those in the control group (t = 0.89, p = 0.37). But among those exposed to Treatment 2, where cognitive engagement was stimulated through awareness of the writing task, we see a greater increase. Among respondents making disconfirming predictions who were exposed to Treatment 2, regret increased roughly 18.50% relative to the control (t = 2.46, p = 0.02). This large and significant effect demonstrates that as partisans reflect upon their forecasts to a greater degree, they become much more likely to guard themselves against the cognitive dissonance that arises from disconfirming forecasts. Regret allows partisans to square their forecast with the preferred world state, as a regretful prediction exculpates their favored candidate from responsibility for their lack of expected success.

Pursuant to H4, we might also expect partisans making disconfirming forecasts to avoid reliance upon sources of objective information to substantiate their dissonant expectations. In Fig. 4, I provide an examination of the effects of the treatments upon the likelihood that respondents made mention of polls, news reports, or campaign events.

[Figure 4 about here.]

The overall pattern observed in Fig. 4 is of relatively low reliance upon information in forecasts across the sample. However, in addition to this low overall density of informed justifications, we see evidence that the treatment conditions do not increase the mention of relevant information. In fact, in response to Treatment 2, we see those making disconfirming predictions (δ = -7.42%, t = -1.03, p = 0.31) and those making neutral predictions (δ = -4.29%, t = -1.17, p = 0.24) are somewhat less likely than the control groups to rely on sources of information in their justifications. These findings comport with the null results expected by H4, which argues that respondents will focus upon the preservation of the partisan preferred world state when making disconfirming justifications. We see instead in Fig. 4 that emotionally regretful perceptions prevail in response to a cognitive investment task. The prevalence of regret in effortful forecasts shows how partisans can acknowledge their preferred candidate is losing the election, without abandoning the logical consistency of the preferred world state.
Conclusions

The present study possesses a variety of limitations. First of all, we must remain skeptical of the generalizability of the findings to other electoral contexts. The 2016 Presidential election was unique in its rancor, its focus on personalities, and its relative disinterest in the issues that characterize American political discourse (Graefe et al. 2016). Finding that emotion drove many electoral forecasts in the 2016 context is relatively unsurprising given these features. However, given the extreme distaste that many partisans expressed for the opponent—perhaps a consequence of the growth of so-called “negative partisanship” (Abramowitz and Webster 2016)—the degree to which partisans nevertheless entertain accuracy motivations is illuminating.

The study also verges on being underpowered among certain subgroup analyses, despite a power analysis (see the SI) which demonstrates that overall, power is adequate for the purposes of the study.

The present results show that when citizens engage in cognitively-effortful tasks, they betray a fuller understanding of candidates’ chances than what is captured by conventional surveys. Partisans often possess accuracy goals, the accomplishment of which can rival the satisfaction that comes from cheerleading on surveys. The results also show that when admitting to disconfirming facts, affective cheerleading behavior returns in service of ego-preserving justifications. Together, these findings provide evidence in support of the miraculous accuracy of citizen forecasts, despite the strength of partisans’ directional goals. Unlike in contexts like economic perceptions, where the meaning of the fluctuation of economic indicators is only indirectly related to the incumbent’s attributes, winning an election is a crystal-clear signal of a preferred candidate’s politically-relevant personal attributes. Despite this deep salience for partisan identities, we do not observe a situation in which partisans simply report the congenial interpretation of an election’s outcome. Cognitively-invested partisans make high quality election forecasts in service of accuracy motivations, using emotional justifications as a safeguard against this dissonant experience. Further research is poised to more fully investigate how effort and reflection condition partisan motivated reasoning in this realm.

Achen and Bartels’ (2016, 267) penultimate chapter asserts that when partisans engage in reasoning about factual events and trends, it merely “feels like we’re thinking”. The authors state that “once inside the conceptual framework” driven by selective media exposure and motivated reasoning, the more likely a voter
will be to prop up partisan-congenial positions with seemingly-accurate facts about reality. In this study, I demonstrate that when it comes to electoral forecasts, thinking and feeling coexist in the minds of partisans. Despite the obvious biasing effects of motivated reasoning and selective learning on citizens’ predictions, some partisans are able to square their directional biases with accuracy goals in order to regretfully arrive at quality electoral forecasts.

Bibliography


Lewis-Beck, Michael S., and Mary Stegmaier. 2011. “Citizen Forecasting: Can Uk Voters See the


Figure 1: Comparison of Forecasts by Party ID, August 2016 MTurk Sample
Figure 2: Comparison of Trump Forecasts by Party ID and Treatment, August 2016 MTurk Sample
Figure 3: Comparison of Regretful Forecasting by Forecast Congeniality and Treatment, October 2016 qBus Sample
Figure 4: Comparison of Informed Forecasting by Forecast Congeniality and Treatment, October 2016 qBus Sample
Table 1: Description of Treatment Text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Treatment 1</th>
<th>Treatment 2</th>
<th>Control Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vignette</strong></td>
<td>Now we are going to ask you a question which has a right and a wrong answer. Because we are conducting academic research, it is very important that you provide us with accurate answers that reflect the full extent of your knowledge about the subject.</td>
<td>Now we are going to ask you a question which has a right and a wrong answer. After you respond, we expect you to explain in writing why you believe you have arrived at the most accurate answer.</td>
<td>Now we are going to ask you a question which has a right and a wrong answer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question Wording</strong></td>
<td>Regardless of whom you support, and trying to be as objective as possible, who do you think will win the Presidential election of 2016?</td>
<td>Regardless of whom you support, and trying to be as objective as possible, who do you think will win the Presidential election of 2016?</td>
<td>Regardless of whom you support, and trying to be as objective as possible, who do you think will win the Presidential election of 2016?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Immediate Follow-Up</strong></td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Please provide a brief explanation for your response in the box below. Why do you expect this candidate to win?</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Next Page Follow-Up (Study 2 Only)</strong></td>
<td>Please provide a brief explanation for your response in the box below. Why do you expect this candidate to win?</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Please provide a brief explanation for your response in the box below. Why do you expect this candidate to win?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature</td>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>Example Text</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rationale: Informed Forecast</strong></td>
<td>Did R indicate a prediction based on knowledge of polls, campaign events, or news reports?</td>
<td>“Polls are currently showing Clinton gaining a wider advantage”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rationale: Policy or Ideology</strong></td>
<td>Did R justify their prediction based on a policy appeal or ideological commitment?</td>
<td>“I believe our country, is wanting, change from all the things, that is [sic] happening in our country.. If everyone is, in agreement with that from all the illegal, immigration, to our huge deficit and all the horrible things, then if, we all went, out to vote, we can have that happen.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winning Candidate Characteristic</td>
<td>Did R justify their prediction based on a characteristic of the candidate they project will win?</td>
<td>“I believe that Hillary Clinton will win because she is best suited for the job.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rationale: Losing Candidate Characteristic</strong></td>
<td>Did R justify their prediction based on a characteristic of the candidate they project will NOT win?</td>
<td>“I think people are seeing now that Donald Trump has some morality issues and a short fuse”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rationale: Corruption and Systemic Injustice</strong></td>
<td>Did R explain that the candidate is likely to win because of corruption, a “rigged” system, or other claims about institutions and campaigns?</td>
<td>“Through voter fraud and faulse [sic] votes she will steal the election”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotion: Anger or Fear</strong></td>
<td>Did R use fearful language, angry tone, curses, or invectives in their response?</td>
<td>“Because Trump is a lunatic’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotion: Regret</strong></td>
<td>Did R proffer their prediction using regretful emotional valence?</td>
<td>“Sadly, many uninformed voters are easily swayed by bias [sic] media”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotion: Pride/Positivity</strong></td>
<td>Did R proffer their prediction using a tone which evoked pride in the chosen candidate, or general enthusiasm?</td>
<td>“she has the most experience in government, she is highly respected around the world. Provides the most positive message, she behaves like an adult unlike her opponent, she is someone to be admired and respected for all her accomplishments, she will be the first female president of the united states.. i want to say i was alive when this happened and i was part of it.’”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-Topic, Unsure</td>
<td>Did R express views that signaled a lack of interest or certainty in their prediction?</td>
<td>“I’m not sure who will win, but who ever it is I hope things go well for this election”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>