

Partisan Self-Stereotyping: Testing the Salience Hypothesis in a Prediction of Political Polarization

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The goal of this study is to theorize the relationship between the news and political polarization through a lens of group dynamics. Consistent with the salience hypothesis of the category fit and category accessibility interaction, we first articulate when and how news exposure makes news consumers think of themselves as Democrats or Republicans instead of unique individuals. Drawing on group polarization literature, we further hypothesize partisan self-stereotyping—an automatic reaction to partisan identity salience—as a mechanism behind the polarizing effect of partisan conflict-framed news. Two experimental studies provide a consistent pattern of support for our hypotheses. The implications of these findings were discussed in comparison with extant studies testing similar news effects under a different theoretical framework—namely, motivated reasoning.

Keywords: self-stereotyping, polarization, identity salience, conflict framing, self-categorization

In the presence of conflict, people favor members of their own group (in-group) over members of the opposing group (out-group; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In-group favoritism of this sort trumps personal goals to be fair or maximize the common good (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). In addition, decisions made as group members are known to be more extreme than decisions made as unique individuals (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Mackie, 1986; Mackie & Cooper, 1984; Price, 1989). The more intense intergroup competition grows, the more prominent such group influences become (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

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As one of commonly agreed news values in the practice of American journalism (de Vreese, 2012; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Price & Tewksbury, 1997), conflict prevails in news coverage of political events (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Lawrence, 2000; Patterson, 1993). As vicarious experience, partisan conflict-framed news may encourage news consumers to respond to a disputed issue in the news as the members of the Democratic or Republican Party and show more extreme positions in the direction of their party. To date, however, very few studies have linked media's emphasis on partisan conflict to political polarization in American politics through a lens of group dynamics.

Outside of the political realm, Price (1989) showed the potency of social identity elicited by news exposure. In his experiment, college participants reading a news story about conflict of opinion between humanities and hard sciences majors expressed stronger support or opposition in the direction of their group. No such polarization was observed among participants reading a news story without group conflict. Drawing on group polarization literature (e.g., Turner et al., 1987), Price argued that polarization between the two majors should be attributed to the heightened salience of group identity resulted from news exposure.

Along similar lines, many studies acknowledge the role of partisan identity salience in political polarization (e.g., Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Levendusky, 2013). However, the nature of identity salience has been poorly discussed in these studies. In particular, it has been unclear whether media exposure equally makes partisan identity salient to all news consumers or does so at varying degrees. Without deeper discussion, current literature typically assumes that the former would be the case and argues that defensive information processing in favor of their political values is a core factor toward polarization in the American mass public (e.g., G. L. Cohen, 2003; Druckman et al., 2013; Levendusky, 2013). This line of reasoning, however, warrants further scrutiny because theories of social identity, on which the aforementioned studies build, argue for the latter: There are gradations in group identity salience (e.g., Hogg, 2003; Oakes, 1987, 2002; Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994).

To overcome this limitation, in this study we define partisan identity salience consistent with the literature of social identity. We then test how variability in partisan identity salience is associated with attitude polarization along party lines. Given the importance of group identity salience in the development of social identity theories (Oakes, 1987, 2002), putting a special emphasis on this topic would be a pertinent way to incorporate group dynamics into the studies of mass media effects.

The Salience Hypothesis: Fit × Accessibility Interaction

Inspired by Bruner's (1957) idea of categorization process, social identity theorists conceptualize group *identity salience* as an interaction between a situation and a perceiver (Hogg, 2003; Hogg & Turner, 1987; Oakes, 1987; Oakes et al., 1991; Turner et al., 1994). For example, when an African American boards an elevator filled with White Americans, this *comparative situation* elicits the person's racial identity. By contrast, if the elevator were filled with African Americans, no salience of racial identity would occur in the mind of the person. This example exhibits that group identity salience is emergent and context specific.

However, a situational context is not a sole determinant of group identity salience. A given situation can be perceived differently from person to person. In the previous example, suppose that the African American who was about to board was a woman while the White Americans in the elevator were all men. Would this version of comparative situation make the person's racial identity salient or gender identity? All else being equal, it depends how importantly she includes her racial or gender identity into her self-concept. If she put a greater emphasis on her being African American than a woman, racial difference would be more prominent to her, and her Black identity would become salient. On the other hand, if the opposite were the case, the given situation would be perceived more in terms of gender difference, resulting in her woman identity salient. This modified example underscores the importance of subjective commitment to a group category in the process of group identity salience.

Taken together, Oakes (1987, 2002) proposes the *salience hypothesis*, such that identity salience would emerge from an interaction between the extent to which a group categorization "fits" the stimuli under consideration and the perceiver's "accessibility" of the particular group categories. This hypothesis clearly suggests that identity salience is the combined effects of a situation (fit) and a perceiver (accessibility). Consistently, our operationalization of partisan identity salience consists of two parts: (1) the fit between the conflict situation described in news stimuli and participants' partisan identity and (2) participants' accessibility of their partisan identity.

Nonetheless, many studies of political communication build on an unsubstantiated premise that media exposure—that is, a stimulus under consideration—heightens the salience of partisan identity among all party identifiers (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012; Levendusky, 2013). By excluding Independents in their analyses, these studies may claim that they also took the features of perceivers into consideration. Yet this argument should be reconsidered, at least with two respects. First, Independents are not expected to be susceptible to partisan conflict as much as Democrats and Republicans because their political identity belong to none of the given partisan group categories. Therefore, the exclusion of Independents should be discussed with respect to the fit element of the salience hypothesis. Second, and more specifically, these studies excluded *pure* Independents, but not *leaners*. Based on how the party identification is assessed in the American National Election Study (ANES), leaners initially categorized themselves as Independents, but when further asked, they responded that they thought themselves closer to Democrats or Republicans. Given that perceivers' categorization of themselves and others into distinctive groups is a tenet of social identity theories (Bruner, 1957; Turner et al., 1987), the inclusion of leaners who do not categorize themselves as Democrats and Republicans is problematic in testing the role of partisan identity. Therefore, in this study we stage the fit component of the salience hypothesis by having self-identified Democrats and Republicans be exposed to a news story centering on partisan conflict.

Regarding the accessibility component of the salience hypothesis, we note that prior studies have adopted the ANES strength measure of party identification as a proxy for accessibility (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012; Stroud, Muddiman, & Lee, 2014), but its measurement validity is somewhat questionable. To elaborate, the ANES measure asks participants how strongly they support the Democratic Party or the Republican Party. Based on how it is measured, Greene (1999, 2002) pointed out that what the ANES measure actually assesses is participants' attitude toward a political party rather than their subjective belonging to a political group category (see also Tropp & Wright, 2001). In the salience hypothesis,

accessibility is defined as the "importance of a particular group membership to an individual's self-definition" (Oakes, 1987, p. 129; see also Oakes, 2002; Turner et al., 1994). Consistent with this definition, measures are developed particularly to gauge the perceived importance of a group category to a person's self-concept. We employ one of these measures to more reliably test the salience hypothesis.

Partisan Identity Salience, Self-Stereotyping, and Group Polarization

Then how could partisan identity salience induce group polarization of attitudes? Having confirmed the effectiveness of conflict in making a relevant group identity salient (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; Tajfel et al., 1971), exposure to partisan conflict-framed news—a vicarious experience of conflict—is also expected to heighten the level of partisan identity salience (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Once people think of themselves as Democrats or Republicans rather than unique individuals, they begin to follow their group norms and behave like other Democrats and Republicans. Such internalization of group norms has been conceptualized as *self-stereotyping* (Hogg, 2003; Hogg & Turner, 1987; Turner et al., 1987). Supporting evidence of self-stereotyping has been well documented. For example, Onorato and Turner (2004) found that people directed to think of themselves in gender terms described their personality to be more consistent with a gender stereotype. That is, dependency was more pronounced among female participants, whereas independency was more pronounced among male participants. This gender split did not emerge among participants directed to think of themselves as unique individuals (see Cadinu & Galdi, 2012; Hogg & Turner, 1987; Kuppens & Yzerbyt, 2012; Munro & Ditto, 1997, for more examples of self-stereotyping).

Moreover, self-stereotyping has been discussed as a primary force behind group polarization of attitudes (Hogg, 2003; Turner et al., 1987). In the presence of intergroup conflict, people make sense of an issue under contention in terms of where their group and the opposing group stand; such active comparison and contrast often produces a greater contrast between positions of the two groups. Taking Mackie's (1986) experiment as an example, when student subjects were informed that their group was in confrontation with the other group, they indicated their group's issue position on the abolishment of standardized tests for university admission to be more extreme as opposed to the other group (see also Hogg, Turner, & Davidson, 1990; Mackie & Cooper, 1984; Price, 1989). At last, attitude polarization between the two groups occurs when group members conform to these perceptually exaggerated group positions.

Theoretically, self-stereotyping is an automatic behavioral reaction triggered by group identity salience (Hogg, 2003; Turner et al., 1987). That is, so long as news exposure can make partisan identity salient in the minds of news consumers, the outcome of news exposure will be group polarization along party lines about the issue under discussion. Given the salience hypothesis of the category fit and category accessibility interaction, exposure to a partisan conflict-framed news story is necessary, but is not a sufficient condition for the salience of partisan identity. Variability in partisan identity salience is expected depending on the subjective importance of partisan identity to an individual's self-concept. This argument differentiates this study from extant research arguing that news exposure can equally elicit partisan identity to all party identifiers. We therefore propose two hypotheses for the sake of comparison. H1a states only the fit component of the salience hypothesis, whereas H1b states the fit and accessibility

interaction. Although H1a is typically assumed in prior research, we argue for H1b consistent with the salience hypothesis.

H1a: Democrats and Republicans exposed to partisan conflict-framed news will express more extreme positions in the direction of their party compared with Democrats and Republicans exposed to news without partisan conflict.

H1b: The greater the importance of partisan identity to an individual's self-concept, the more pronounced will be the impact of partisan conflict-framed news on attitude polarization.

Beyond Political Bias in the News

In testing the influence of news media on partisan polarization in the United States, mass communication scholarship has paid much more attention to political bias in the news rather than conflict framing of the news. With the proliferation of partisan cable news channels, many studies have found that both Democrats and Republicans tune in to news sources that resonate with their political viewpoints (e.g., Republicans watching Fox News or Democrats watching MSNBC). This congenial exposure reinforces partisans' prior attitudes, resulting in partisan polarization (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Hollander, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Jones, 2002). Moreover, partisans are also unexpectedly or purposefully exposed to news channels that challenge their political perspectives (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2014). What is interesting is that this uncongenial news exposure can generate even greater partisan polarization relative to congenial news exposure (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Cryderman, 2013; Levendusky, 2013; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Researchers explain this asymmetry as being consistent with theories of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990). That is, people tend to process information in a way to confirm their preexisting preferences and reach a conclusion they desire. Such defensive motivated reasoning increases when individuals' beliefs and identities are threatened rather than supported.

In contrast, our salience hypothesis predicts no such difference when political bias *appears with* partisan conflict framing. So long as exposure to partisan conflict-framed news satisfies the fit component of the salience hypothesis, whether news exposure is congenial or uncongenial to an individual's party identification adds little to the process of partisan identity salience. Similarly, Oakes (1987) noted,

An element of rivalry or explicit competition obviously increases the separateness of the categories and thus reliably increases salience, whereas co-operation only decreases salience to the extent that other factors which could maintain awareness of the intergroup distinction are not present. (p. 120)

This implies that congenial news exposure would not discourage partisan identity salience when the other factor of the news, namely, partisan conflict framing, promotes distinctiveness between Democrats and Republicans.

We do not deny a possibility that uncongenial exposure may galvanize partisans' defensive motivated reasoning relative to congenial exposure. However, from the perspective of the salience hypothesis, exposure to partisan conflict-framed news could be considered to have the fit component of the salience hypothesis satisfied. Thus, the difference in the level of partisan identity salience, if any, would be marginal between congenial and uncongenial exposure to partisan conflict-framed news. To be clear, we are not attempting to argue that the salience hypothesis is a better explanatory mechanism accounting for the polarizing effect than motivated reasoning. Instead, at the minimum, marginal influences of political bias above and beyond partisan conflict framing would bolster our claim that conflict framing of the news can be an independent cause of attitude polarization along party lines; the polarizing effect emerges via partisan self-stereotyping—that is, an automatic reaction to partisan identity salience. This leads to the second set of hypotheses, as follows:

H2a: Regardless of whether news exposure is congenial or uncongenial to their party identification, Democrats and Republicans exposed to partisan conflict-framed news will express more extreme positions in the direction of their party.

H2b: Regardless of whether news exposure is congenial or uncongenial to their party identification, the greater the importance of partisan identity to perceivers' self-concepts, the more pronounced will be the impact of partisan conflict-framed news on attitude polarization.

Present Study

With two experiments, this study explicitly tests the salience hypothesis in a prediction of political polarization. Departing from the extant studies arguing that partisan identity salience is a sole function of news reports emphasizing partisan conflict (H1a), we hypothesize partisan identity salience as a combined effect of news exposure and perceivers: the more important partisan identity is to a person's self-concept, the greater the salience of partisan identity in response to partisan conflict-framed news, thus inducing greater polarization via partisan self-stereotyping (H1b). Study 1 tests this hypothesis with two news exposure conditions (i.e., partisan conflict-framed news vs. news without partisan conflict). Study 2 aims to expand the finding of Study 1 in the presence of political bias. Specifically, irrespective of whether news exposure is congenial or uncongenial to participants' party identification, we expect greater polarizing effect of partisan conflict framing among Democrats and Republicans whose partisan identities carry greater importance to their self-concepts (H2b). Furthermore, by showing a marginal difference in polarization between congenial and uncongenial news exposure, Study 2 attempts to strengthen our claim that the underlying mechanism behind the news effect is partisan self-stereotyping.

Study 1

Method

Participants

A total of 259 undergraduate students were recruited campus-wide from a large public University in the Midwest United States. Twenty-four participants were excluded from all analyses as they were not eligible to vote in the United States. Given the fit component of the salience hypothesis, 54 Independents (including leaners) who had not identified themselves as Democrats or Republicans were also excluded, leaving an N of 181 (65% Democrats). Our sample consisted of 75% females and 82% White. The average age of the participants was 20 years ($SD = 2.70$), with a range of 18 to 45 years.

Stimuli

Two news stories were written by researchers with regard to the so-called "Buffett Tax" proposal, which would require people making over \$1 million to pay a tax of at least 30% of their income. This news topic is selected because preferences on economic issues (e.g., social welfare and taxation) predict the partisan divide more consistently than preferences on cultural issues (e.g., abortion, gay rights and gender inequality; Iyengar et al., 2012). This indicates that both the Democratic and Republican Parties have a more persistent position on economic issues, thus Democrats and Republicans easily form a group norm regarding tax issues.

Partisan conflict-framed news emphasized ongoing partisan controversy about the Buffett Tax proposal consistent with prior studies (Druckman et al., 2013; Price, 1989). The partisan tax debate was directly spelled out in the headline (i.e., Partisan Tensions Flare in Tax Debate) and closing statement. In addition, repeated party cues, such as "Republican House Representative" or "Democratic Senator," were used. In news writing, labeling a source is a powerful method to prime group identity (Turner & Onorato, 1999). Voices from the Democratic and Republican Parties were juxtaposed through direct quotations in an effort to make the news story unbiased. Partisan arguments from both sides equally consist of one argument promoting its own policy stance and another argument attacking its opponent's position.

In contrast, *news without partisan conflict* was straight news on the fact that a new tax plan, the so-called Buffett Tax, was released. The news story mainly described what the Buffett Tax is without mentioning partisan debate on the tax proposal at all. As such, neither partisan cues nor any kinds of conflict were presented in the news story. With regard to the description of the Buffett Tax, the equivalent words were used as with partisan conflict-framed news. To control the length of news stimuli, however, a history of tax code changes was added after the description.

The news stimuli are formatted to be consistent with a typical news story layout composed of a large headline, byline, and several short paragraphs (see Appendix A for actual stimuli).

Procedure

Participants completed an online questionnaire at the time of recruitment. This pretest questionnaire included questions of personality batteries including the importance of partisan identity to a self-concept, political knowledge and demographics (including the party identification measure of the ANES). About a week later, participants came to a lab at an assigned session time. In this posttest, they were randomly assigned to one of the news stimuli and then responded to their own position on the Buffett Tax proposal. After debriefing, participants received either extra credit or a \$5 gift card for their voluntary participation.

Measures

Attitude Polarization

On both pretest and posttest, participants indicated to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the Buffett Tax on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*). As with prior studies (e.g., Levendusky, 2013; Mackie, 1986; Mackie & Cooper, 1984), attitude polarization was computed by subtracting participants' pretest scores from their scores measured after news exposure (see Cronbach & Furby, 1970, for the limitation of the use of a difference score). Changes in scores were coded as positive numbers (+) to indicate attitude polarization in the direction of their party and negative numbers (–) to indicate depolarization. To do that, the direction of Republicans' difference scores was reversed. For example, a Republican who marked 5 in the pretest, but 2 in the posttest showed polarization (i.e., stronger opposition to the Buffett Tax proposal) after news exposure, but the raw difference score was –3, indicating depolarization. We thus reversed the direction of this raw score as +3 to indicate polarization. This sort of recoding was not performed in the case of Democrats.

Importance of Partisan Identity

Participants answered the four-item identity subscale from the Collective Self-esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). This measure was developed especially to capture the subjective importance of a social identity to a person's self-concept. The wording of the scale was modified to measure partisan identity, the particular group identity we focused on, as follows: "The political party I identify with is an important reflection of who I am"; "Overall, my political party has very little to do with how I feel about myself" (reverse scored); "The political party I identify with is unimportant to my sense of what kind of a person I am" (reverse scored); and "In general, identifying with a political party is an important part of my self-image." All responses were completed on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) and then averaged ($\alpha = .855$).

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among these key variables.

Table 1. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables: Study 1.

	Correlations	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Attitude polarization	—	1.10	1.90
Importance of partisan identity	.12	3.71	1.46

Note. The inter-item correlation was non-significant at the alpha level of .05.

Results

Manipulation Check

We conducted a manipulation check with following purposes in minds: (1) to test whether the two news stories are truly different in their emphasis on partisan conflict related to the Buffet Tax, and (2) to test whether the two news stories have no political bias favoring either Democrats or Republicans. To this end, at the end of the posttest, participants indicated to what extent they thought the news story that they read (1) emphasized the partisan conflict between Democrats and Republicans on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all emphasized conflict*, 5 = *very much emphasized conflict*) and (2) was more in favor of either Democrats or Republicans on a 5-point scale (1 = *much more supportive of Democrats*, 3 = *supportive of neither Democrats nor Republicans*, 5 = *much more supportive of Republicans*).

A 2 (news exposure) × 2 (party identification) between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) showed no significant interaction effects, Wilk's $\lambda = .996$, $F(2, 176) = .371$, $p = .691$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .004$. This allows us to examine the main effect of news exposure and party identification separately.

First, the univariate *F* tests found that partisan conflict-framed news put greater emphasis on partisan conflict ($M = 3.65$, $SD = .75$) compared with news without partisan conflict ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.17$), $F(1, 177) = 38.644$, $p < .001$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .179$. Second, regarding political bias in the news, participants found no distinctive political bias between partisan conflict-framed news ($M = 2.52$, $SD = .93$) and news without partisan conflict ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.04$), $F(1, 177) = .241$, $p = .624$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .001$. Responses were not significantly different between Democrats and Republicans, all $p > .80$.

These analyses indicate a clear difference in the emphasis of partisan conflict between the two news stories without a distinctive political bias.

Main Analyses

To determine whether exposure to partisan conflict-framed news induced attitude polarization (H1a) and whether such attitude polarization was more pronounced among Democrats and Republicans whose partisan identity carries greater importance to their self-concepts (H1b), we tested a hierarchical regression model. To begin, we created a dummy variable of news exposure (1 = *partisan conflict-framed news*), centered importance of partisan identity, and computed their interaction terms. These variables were included as predictors of attitude polarization. To detect potential asymmetry between Democrats

and Republicans, participants' party identification (1 = *Democrats*, 0 = *Republicans*) was also entered into the model. Table 2 summarizes the regression results.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Testing the Impact of Exposure to Partisan Conflict-Framed News and the Importance of Partisan Identity on Attitude Polarization: Study 1.

	Step 1		Step 2	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Constant	-.74***	.23	-.74***	.22
Party identification (1 = <i>Democrats</i>)	2.17***	.24	2.16***	.24
Exposure (1 = <i>conflict framing</i>)	.73**	.23	.71**	.23
Importance of partisan identity			-.04	.12
Exposure × Importance of partisan identity			.29	.16
<i>R</i> ²	.355		.377	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

To test whether exposure to partisan conflict-framed news induced attitude polarization (H1a), we first entered news exposure and a control variable in the first step of the regression model. This model explained a significant portion of the variance in attitude polarization $R^2 = .355$, $p < .001$. The main effect of news exposure was statistically significant. Specifically, Democrats and Republicans exposed to partisan conflict-framed news expressed more extreme issue positions ($M = 1.50$, $SD = 1.69$) compared with Democrats and Republicans exposed to news without partisan conflict ($M = .56$, $SD = 2.04$), $b = .73$, $SE = .23$, $p = .002$. Thus, H1a was supported.

Next, to test the salience hypothesis (H1b), which newly introduces the role of a perceiver's characteristic in the process of partisan identity salience, we added importance of partisan identity and the interaction term in the second step of the regression model. This addition increased the variance explained, R^2 change = .022, $p = .051$. Although the interaction effect did not reach statistical significance, $b = .29$, $SE = .16$, $p = .065$, simple slope analyses were performed based on Cohen's (1992) suggestion for magnitude of effect sizes: R^2 change = .022—equivalent to $r = .148$ —implies a small effect, which is "noticeably smaller yet not trivial" (p. 99). Simple slopes analyses (see Figure 1) illustrated a clear tendency that Democrats and Republicans whose self-concepts greatly embrace their partisan identities (i.e., 1 SD above the mean, $b = 1.14$, $SE = .33$, $p = .001$) showed greater attitude polarization compared with Democrats and Republicans whose partisan identities carry less importance to their self-concepts (i.e., 1 SD below the mean, $b = .29$, $SE = .32$, $p = .376$). The results are plotted in Figure 1.

Despite such a clear tendency, the interaction effect was marginally significant in a t test ($t = 1.857$, $p = .065$). Thus, H1b received partial support.

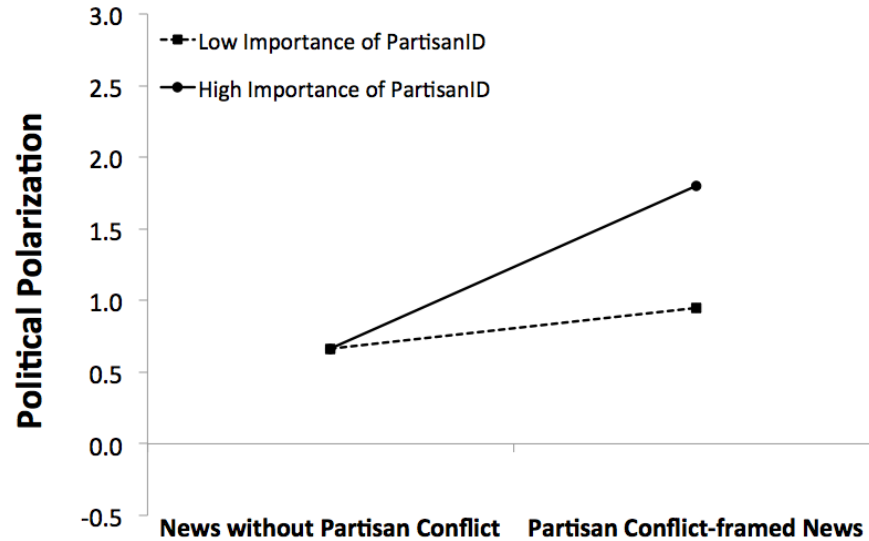


Figure 1. The impact of exposure to partisan conflict-framed news on attitude polarization as a function of the importance of partisan identity to a person's self-concept.

Study 2

Study 2 tests whether the findings of Study 1 persist in the presence of political bias. By showing minimal difference in polarization between congenial and uncongenial exposure to partisan conflict-framed news, Study 2 aims to provide stronger support that conflict framing of the news induces attitude polarization along party lines through partisan self-stereotyping, an automatic reaction to partisan identity salience.

Method

Participants

A total of 368 undergraduate students were recruited from a large public University in the Midwest United States. As with Study 1, 66 students who identified themselves as Independents were excluded from all analyses, leaving an N of 302 students (57% Democrats). Our sample consisted of 78% females, and 87% were White. The average age of the participants was 21 years ($SD = 1.73$), with a range of 19 to 34 years.

Stimuli

We constructed two news stories about a tax proposal, with a particular emphasis on partisan conflict about the issue. Specifically, ongoing partisan controversy was spelled out in headlines, summary leads, and closing statements. Repeated party cues were also employed. The stories are distinctively biased in favor of either the Democratic or Republican Party. To develop a distinctive political bias in each news story, direct quotations were used. Consistent with the intended direction of political bias, the number of direct quotations attributed to the favored party (promoting its own policy stance) outnumbered direct quotations attributed to the other party (attacking its opponent's position) 3 to 1. Precisely, the quotations from Democrats mainly argued that the solution for the fiscal deficit is not defunding Social Security, but taxing the rich who have a larger responsibility to finance governmental programs. Conversely, the quotations from Republicans pointed out the inefficiency of an economic stimulus plan and primarily argued that raising more taxes to bail out cities and states, which cannot pay their bills, is an attack on job creators. Although the direct quotations were forged, they mirrored actual ongoing discussions at the time of the study.

The news stories mimicked day-to-day news reporting in American newspapers based on factual information and were formatted to be consistent with a typical news story layout composed of a large headline, byline, a blurb, and several short paragraphs (see Appendix B for actual stimuli).

Procedure and Measures

Participants completed an online questionnaire at the time of recruitment. About a week later, participants completed another online questionnaire and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (i.e., partisan conflict-framed news with a Democratic bias, partisan conflict-framed news with a Republican bias, and no exposure control).² The same measures were used in both Studies 1 and 2 with modifications when changes were unavoidable. For example, at the time of data collection, the Obama administration released a budget plan including a surtax on income in excess of \$1 million, which was very similar to the Buffett Tax, along with a \$477 billion economic stimulus plan. Although this tax proposal was not identical to the Buffett Tax proposal in Study 1, we decide to use the details from ongoing tax debates for the sake of ecological validity. Accordingly, in the case of the measurement of attitude polarization, we asked participants to what extent they agree or disagree with President Obama's jobs bill instead of the Buffett Tax proposal. After debriefing, participants received either extra credit or a \$5 gift card for their voluntary participation.

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among the measures. Looking at Table 3, the positive correlation between attitude polarization and importance of partisan identity ($r = .18, p = .002$) implies that greater polarization emerges among Democrats and Republicans whose partisan identities carry greater importance to their self-concepts. Although we have not yet examined the moderating role of importance of partisan identity in the relationship between partisan conflict framing and attitude polarization, this inter-item correlation already provides a positive sign for the proposed moderation. Also, note that in Study 1 (see Table 1) the counterpart correlation did not reach statistical

² We used no exposure as a control condition following prior studies (e.g., Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Simon & Jerit, 2007).

significance ($r = .12$, $p = .100$). According to Cohen (1992), however, correlation coefficients should be discussed with a greater emphasis on their effect sizes than on their statistical significance. In terms of magnitude of effect sizes, there was no apparent difference: Given that a correlation equal to .10 is a benchmark for a small effect size (Cohen, 1992), both Studies 1 and 2 showed *weak* and positive relationships between attitude polarization and importance of partisan identity. We speculate that the different sample sizes between Studies 1 and 2 possibly resulted in the divergent statistical significance test results. Study 2 employed many more participants ($N = 302$) than did Study 1 ($N = 181$) because a greater sample size was required in Study 2, which had three experimental conditions compared with two conditions in Study 1.

Table 3. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables: Study 2.

	Correlations	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Attitude polarization	—	.23	1.58
Importance of partisan identity	.18**	3.61	1.22

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results

Manipulation Check

At the end of the posttest, participants indicated to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statements regarding the news story they read: (1) "This news story reports a partisan conflict between Democrats and Republicans"; (2) "This article is biased in favor of Democrats"; and (3) "This article is biased in favor of Republicans." All responses were completed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Because there was no exposure control, the questions were presented only in the two experimental conditions.

A 2 (news exposure) \times 2 (party identification) between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) showed no significant interaction effects, Wilk's $\lambda = .999$, $F(3, 233) = .046$, $p = .987$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .001$. This allows us to examine the main effect of news exposure and party identification separately.

First, the univariate F tests found both news stories equally emphasized partisan conflict ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .71$), $F(1, 177) = .054$, $p = .816$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .0002$. Regarding political bias in the news, however, a Democratic bias was more noticeable in the Democratic-biased story ($M = 3.60$, $SD = .93$) than in the Republican-biased story ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.08$), $F(1, 177) = 52.599$, $p < .001$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .183$. Similarly, a Republican bias was more noticeable in the Republican-biased story ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.10$) than in the Democratic-biased story ($M = 2.12$, $SD = .75$), $F(1, 177) = 80.596$, $p < .001$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .255$. Responses were not significantly different between Democrats and Republicans, all $p > .05$.

Main Analyses

Study 2 was conducted with a one-factor (news exposure: partisan conflict-framed news with a Democratic bias, partisan conflict-framed news with a Republican bias, and no-exposure control) between-

subjects experiment. To test the hypotheses, the experimental conditions were regrouped into a congenial news exposure (i.e., Democrats exposed to the Democratic-biased news and Republicans exposed to the Republican-biased news; $n = 130$), uncongenial news exposure (i.e., Democrats exposed to the Republican-biased news and Republicans exposed to the Democratic-biased news; $n = 110$), and control (i.e., both Democrats and Republicans exposed to no news story; $n = 62$) conditions.

As with Study 1, our hypotheses were tested by a hierarchical regression model. To begin, we created two dummy variables of congenial exposure and uncongenial news exposure, centered importance of partisan identity ($\alpha = .890$), and computed their interaction terms. These variables were included as predictors of attitude polarization while controlling for party identification (1 = *Democrats*). Table 4 summarizes the regression results.

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Testing the Impact of Exposure to Partisan Conflict-Framed News and the Importance of Partisan Identity on Attitude Polarization: Study 2.

	Step 1		Step 2	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Constant	-.35	.22	-.33	.21
Party identification (1 = <i>Democrats</i>)	.26	.18	.22	.18
Congenial exposure	.48*	.24	.47*	.24
Uncongenial exposure	.64**	.25	.65**	.24
Importance of partisan identity			-.15	.19
CongenialExp × IMPpartisanID			.47*	.22
UncongenialExp × IMPpartisanID			.43*	.21
R^2	.030		.078	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

To test whether attitude polarization emerges in both congenial and uncongenial exposure to partisan conflict-framed news (H2a), we first entered two dummy variables of news exposure conditions and a control variable in the first step of the regression model. This model explained a significant portion of the variance in political polarization, $R^2 = .030$, $p = .026$, and found significant main effects of congenial news exposure ($b = .48$, $SE = .24$, $p = .047$) and uncongenial news exposure ($b = .64$, $SE = .25$, $p = .010$). Although the regression coefficient of uncongenial news exposure was greater than that of congenial news exposure, the difference was not statistically significant, *critical ratio* = .462, $p = .644$. Specifically, Democrats and Republicans reading partisan conflict-framed news with a congenial bias ($M = .28$, $SD = 1.58$) or an uncongenial bias ($M = .44$, $SD = 1.66$) showed more extreme issue positions on the job's bill than Democrats and Republicans having no news exposure ($M = -.23$, $SD = 1.34$). Thus, H2a was supported.

Next, to test the salience hypothesis (H2b), we added importance of partisan identity and the interaction terms in the second step of the regression model. This addition increased the variance explained, R^2 change = .048, $p = .002$. The interaction effects were significant both when the news

exposure was congenial ($b = .47$, $SE = .22$, $p = .034$) and uncongenial ($b = .43$, $SE = .21$, $p = .045$). Although the regression coefficient of congenial exposure was slightly greater than that of uncongenial exposure, the difference was not statistically significant, $critical\ ratio = .013$, $p = .990$.

Simple slope analyses indicated that after reading the news story with a congenial bias, Democrats and Republicans whose self-concepts greatly embrace their partisan identities (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean, $b = 1.04$, $SE = .35$, $p = .003$) showed greater attitude polarization compared with Democrats and Republicans whose partisan identities carry less importance to their self-concepts (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean, $b = -.10$, $SE = .36$, $p = .788$). The same was true after reading the news story with an uncongenial bias (i.e., scoring high in importance of partisan identity: $b = 1.17$, $SE = .35$, $p = .001$; scoring low in importance of partisan identity: $b = .12$, $SE = .36$, $p = .736$). Thus, the salience hypothesis (H2b) was supported in Study 2. The results are plotted in Figure 2.

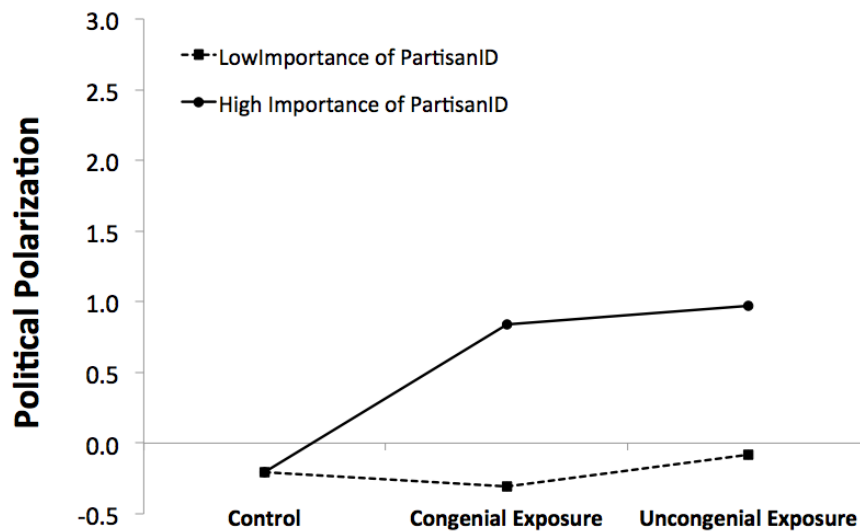


Figure 2. The impact of congenial or uncongenial exposure to partisan conflict-framed news on attitude polarization as a function of the importance of partisan identity to a person's self-concept.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to theorize the relationship between the news and political polarization through a lens of group dynamics. Informed by the salience hypothesis of the fit and accessibility interaction (Oakes, 1987, 2002), we first articulated when and how news exposure made news consumers think of themselves as Democrats or Republicans instead of unique individuals. Drawing on group polarization literature (Mackie & Cooper, 1984; Price, 1989; Turner et al., 1987), we further hypothesized

partisan self-stereotyping—an automatic reaction to partisan identity salience—as a mechanism behind the polarizing effect of partisan conflict-framed news.

Two experimental studies provided a consistent pattern of support for our hypotheses. First, Study 1 showed that Democrats and Republicans reading partisan conflict-framed news expressed more extreme positions along party lines than did Democrats and Republicans reading news without partisan conflict; news exposure exerted greater power on attitude polarization among Democrats and Republicans whose partisan identities carried greater importance in their self-concepts. This finding supports our claim that partisan identity salience would not be an all-or-nothing phenomenon, but would vary from person to person. Also, the level of partisan identity salience would be reflected on the degree of attitude polarization via partisan self-stereotyping. Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 in the presence of political bias: Regardless of whether partisan conflict framing appeared with a congenial or uncongenial political bias, attitude polarization was more pronounced among partisans whose self-concepts greatly embrace their partisan identities.

Before discussing the implications of these findings, we note an important difference discovered between Studies 1 and 2. In Study 1, Democrats showed greater attitude polarization ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.33$) than Republicans ($M = .31$, $SD = 1.81$). The difference was considerable ($b = 2.81$, $SE = .24$, $p < .001$; see Table 2). On the other hand, no such difference was found in Study 2 ($b = .27$, $SE = .18$, $p = .126$; see Table 4). One possible explanation for this partisan difference would be *conflict of interest* that only Republicans might experience during news exposure in Study 1. *Both* news stimuli for Study 1 denoted that the Buffett Tax proposal was named after billionaire investor Warren Buffett, who argues that no millionaires should pay a lower income tax rate than their secretaries; compared with the effective rate of 35% paid by his secretary, Mr. Buffett's income was taxed at only around 15%. It is very likely that participants felt closer to Mr. Buffett's secretary than Mr. Buffett, meaning that the tax proposal serves participants' personal interests. This may generate a dilemma situation for Republican participants where their personal preferences conflicted with their party's issue position.

In support of this conjecture, Republicans reading news without partisan conflict expressed strong support for the Buffett Tax proposal ($M = -1.06$, $SD = 1.61$), whereas after exposure to partisan conflict-framed news, Republicans' positions on the tax proposal were more in alignment with the position of the Republican Party—that is, opposition to the Buffett Tax proposal ($M = .31$, $SD = 1.81$). On the other hand, Democrats who were not the subject of such a situation showed strong attitude polarization even after regarding news without partisan conflict ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.51$); greater polarization emerged after exposure to partisan conflict-framed news ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.33$). The provocative descriptions contrasting Mr. Buffett's tax rate to that of his secretary may also account for the strong polarization among Democrats. To be clear, we note that the news stimuli for Study 2 did not include the descriptions under discussion, although they also reported on surtax on income in excess of \$1 million. Our data to substantiate this possibility are limited. We therefore recommend future studies to directly test how partisans respond when their personal interests diverge from their Party's issue stance.

To our knowledge, this study is the first explicit test of the salience hypothesis in the context of media consumption. Identity salience is a tenet of social identity theories that heavily rely on the moment when people think of themselves as members of social groups (Oakes, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Despite its importance, current studies of political communication have devoted little attention to the process of partisan identity salience. For example, although partisan identity salience is a prerequisite of partisan motivated reasoning, a deeper discussion is rare in terms of how and why media exposure galvanizes news consumers' partisan identities. Instead, many of these studies jump to how partisan-motivated reasoning is affected by political awareness (e.g., Lodge & Taber, 2013; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010), the strength of prior attitudes (e.g., Levendusky, 2013), and ability to rebut opposing arguments (e.g., Arceneaux et al., 2013). This prevents the extant studies from taking full advantage of a social identity theory approach, which could add group-level analyses to media effect studies.

The process of group polarization following partisan identity salience, namely, self-stereotyping, is all about group-level social cognition (Turner et al., 1987). As members of the Democratic or Republican Parties, participants perceive an issue under contention by first clarifying their group norms; the perceived group norms are exaggerated more than they actually are because group members inflate the differences between in-group and out-group. As a result of participants conforming to the perceived group norms as a Democrat and Republican, more extreme positions emerge in the direction of their group. As such, this study sheds new light on how people respond to news frames as members of social groups instead of unique individuals. This is an imperative contribution to the field.

Our study stresses the role of partisan conflict framing in growing polarization in the American mass public. The findings of Study 2 revealed the marginal impact of political bias above and beyond news focus on partisan conflict. Despite their recent growth, partisan cable news channels (e.g., Fox News and MSNBC) constitutes less than one-twentieth of the average viewership of the three nonpartisan networks, NBC, CBS, and ABC (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2014). The prevalence of conflict framing in mainstream news channels has been well-documented (Lawrence, 2000; Patterson, 1993). Also, horse-race journalism has been found to increase public interest in politics (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004) as well as political cynicism, which hinder people from acquiring political knowledge through news exposure (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). This study points at attitude polarization as an additional outcome of conflict-saturated news reports.

On a separate note, our use of the identity subscale from the Collective Self-Esteem Scales is another important contribution to the field. This measure was developed to assess the subjective importance of partisan identity to a person's self concept (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Although an increasing number of studies of political communication underscore the importance of partisan identity informed by social identity theories (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012; Stroud et al., 2014), these studies employed the ANES strength measure of party identification. Based on our data, the inter-item correlation between the identity subscale and the strength measure was less than .50 in both Studies 1 and 2. Similar inter-item correlations were reported by Greene (2002). Given the conceptual relevance of the importance measure and its empirical differences from the strength measure, we urge future studies to use the identity subscale—that is, the importance of partisan identity to a person's self-concept—when examining the role of partisan identity salience.

To conclude, with a particular focus on the process of partisan identity salience and its polarization effect through self-stereotyping, our findings enhance the current understanding of how the

news exacerbates attitude polarization between Democrats and Republicans in the United States. We invite future studies to employ such group-level analyses more often in an effort to flatten out the field, which is disproportionately biased toward microlevel effects of news media.

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Appendix A: News Stimuli for Study 1

Partisan Tensions Flare in Tax Debate

By JASON VAN STEENWYK

NEW YORK — President Obama released on Wednesday a tax reform proposal, the so-called Buffett Tax plan, which would apply a minimum tax rate of 30 percent on households making more than \$1 million a year.

Republican Rep. Paul Ryan immediately accused President Obama of “class warfare.” Mr. Ryan added, “Class warfare may make for good politics, but it makes for rotten economics.”

President Obama’s tax proposal is named after billionaire investor Warren Buffett, who argues no millionaires should pay a lower income tax rate than their secretaries.

Compared to the effective rate of 35 percent paid by his secretary, Mr. Buffet has paid about 17 percent of his income

in federal taxes. His income is largely made up of stock dividends and capital gains, which are taxed at only 15 percent.

Democrats emphasize that the new plan sets tax rates on capital gains at the same level as the rates on earned income among the rich.

“Lowered tax rate on capital gains is a loophole that benefits the very wealthiest Americans,” said Democratic Sen. Bruce Morrison to reporters. “Republicans have been giving tax breaks to the rich for years, and it’s time to scale that back.”

The White House estimates that the Buffett Tax could raise \$53 billion over a decade. “About 0.3 percent of taxpayers would directly be affected by the tax hike but it would be earmarked for deficit reduction,” said Democratic Rep.

David Barnes in an interview with NBC’s Meet the Press.

However, raising the tax rate is anathema to Republicans. Thousands of Tea Party members congregated on the west side of the Capitol in opposition to raising tax rates. “Democrats are trying to tax the money that will create jobs and boost the economy,” said organizer Sarah Ervin. Supporters erupted into cheers and applause.

“Tax cuts on capital gains are necessary to keep capital from fleeing to lower tax countries,” said Republican Sen. Ben Pershing to Bloomberg.

The Buffett Tax will be the latest battleground for Republicans and Democrats as they gearing up for next year’s election, and is likely to be an increasingly contentious fight over how to support the United States’ struggling economic recovery.

Buffett Rule Guides New Tax Plan

By JASON VAN STEENWYK

NEW YORK — A new tax plan, the so-called Buffett Tax plan, was released on Wednesday. The proposed tax code would apply a minimum tax rate of 30 percent on households making more than \$1 million a year.

The new tax plan is named after billionaire investor Warren Buffett, who argues that no millionaires should pay a lower income tax rate than their secretaries.

Compared to the effective rate of 35 percent paid by his secretary, Mr. Buffett has paid about 17 percent of his income in federal taxes. His income is largely made up of stock dividends and capital gains, which are taxed at 15 percent.

The Buffett Tax plan sets tax rates on capital gains and stock dividends at the same level as the rates on ordinary income like salaries and wages among households making more than \$1 million a year.

The federal government implemented an income tax in 1861 to pay for the Civil War. It levied a flat tax of three percent on all incomes above \$800. A year later, Congress changed the system, creating the first progressive tax structure. That is, the more money an individual made, the higher the percentage he or she paid in taxes.

The tax rate in the highest tax bracket rapidly increased during World War I — up to 67 percent in 1917 and 77 percent in 1918. During World War II, the maximum tax rate was 81 percent in 1940 and 94 percent in 1944.

In 1986, the top marginal rate fell to under 30 percent for the first time since 1931 before slowly rising to the 39.5 percent it is now.

During the 1990s, the tax rates on capital gains and earned income were uncoupled. Currently the tax rates on capital gains and most stock dividends have been lowered to a high of 15 percent, less than half the 35 percent top rate on ordinary income.

Appendix B: News Stimuli for Study 2

Democrats Seek Tax on the Rich, Jobs Bill Stalled in Congress

By CHRIS BENNET

WASHINGTON — Democratic efforts to take up President Obama's jobs bill were blocked again by Senate Republicans on Wednesday. For the past four months, Republicans have continuously defeated every Democratic economic stimulus plan that was put before the Congress.

Amid this controversy over government expenditure, Danielle Kelly's death has left Republicans open to counterattack by Democrats. Danielle, a disabled teenager, died of starvation in 2008 because the two social workers assigned to her failed to check up on her once a week due to their overload. The two social workers, Dana Kreft, 54, and her manager Michael Wilson, 62, were sentenced Thursday to three years in prison for child endangerment.

"The loss of the child is a shame," said Democratic Representative Ben Pershing to reporters. "However, reflecting the limited workforce, the loss is not a product of the personal failures of Dana Kreft and Michael Wilson. It's a system failure."

Since the economic recession began in December 2007, state and local governments

have shed over a half million jobs, while the 2010 Census data shows the nationwide number of children living in poverty has jumped by 28 percent.

"More people are in need. Yet hands are in short supply," Mr. Pershing added.

Referring to Danielle's case, Democrats emphasized the need to rebuild Social Security. On Thursday, thousands of protesters congregated on the west side of the Capital mourning Danielle's death and in opposition to further government budget cuts.

"Continuous budget cuts kick the most vulnerable people in our society out of the system," said organizer Sarah Ervin.

'The rich have a larger responsibility to finance the economy'

Democratic Representative David Barnes joined the rally with many of his fellow Democratic House members and said that Republicans are trying to use the public's

legitimate concerns about the deficit to seriously cripple the social security net.

"The solution for the fiscal deficit is not defunding Social Security but taxing the rich," Mr. Barnes shouted. Supporters responded with chants of "Tax the rich."

However, raising tax rates is anathema to Republicans. "We cannot raise any more taxes to bail out cities and states that cannot pay their bills," said Republican Senator Bruce Morrison in an interview with Bloomberg.

Still, Democrats believe that the rich have a larger responsibility to finance the economy.

"By taxing the richest of the rich a little bit more, we can fund job creation and ensure this country's economic success," said Democratic Senator Eric Jeffrey. "Republicans should remember that the economic recession occurred during the Bush administration and their policy of cutting tax rates is responsible for the major financial problems we suffer from right now."

With just eight months remaining until the 2012 Presidential election, the rivalry between Democrats and Republicans over government expenditure is getting intense.

Republicans Defeat Tax on the Rich, Jobs Bill Stalled in Congress

By CHRIS BENNET

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans on Wednesday succeeded again in defeating a Democratic effort to take up President Obama's jobs bill, which requires a tax on the rich. Over the past four months, Republicans have resisted every Democratic economic stimulus plan that has been put before the Congress.

Amid the controversy over government expenditure, Danielle Kelly's death has further motivated Republicans to put their position forward. Danielle, a disabled teenager, died of starvation in 2008 because the two social workers assigned to her failed to check up on her once a week. The two social workers, Dana Kreft, 54, and her manager Michael Wilson, 62, were sentenced Thursday to three years in prison for child endangerment.

"The loss of the child is a shame," said Republican Representative Ben Pershing to reporters. "While the lack of morality in civil servants is nothing new, how could a child under social care have starved to death? Taxpayers should not have to support this irresponsible spending by the current government."

Since the economic recession began in December 2007, many states and local governments have suffered from fiscal deficits. To meet balanced-budget requirements, they have made spending cuts in public services such as education, health care, and human services.

"Layoffs are painful," said Mr. Pershing. "However, we cannot raise more taxes to bail out cities and states that cannot pay their bills."

'We cannot raise any more taxes to bail out cities and states that cannot pay their bills'

Referring to Danielle's case, Republicans emphasized the need to downsize government and cut taxes. On Thursday, thousands of Tea Party members congregated on the west side of the Capital mourning Danielle's death and in opposition to raising tax rates.

"Democrats are trying to tax the money that will create private sector jobs and boost the economy," said organizer Sarah Ervin.

Republican Representative David Barnes joined the rally with many of his fellow Republican House members and lambasted the Democratic proposal.

"Democratic proposal would impose a permanent tax hike on 300,000 US business owners," Mr. Barnes shouted. "It is an attack on job creators." Supporters erupted into cheers and applause.

However, Democrats believe that the rich have a larger responsibility to finance the government. "Taxing the richest of the rich a little bit more will reduce the deficit substantially," said Democratic Senator Bruce Morrison in an interview with Bloomberg.

Still, Republicans doubt the effectiveness of more spending.

"Why on earth would you support an approach that we already know won't work?" asked Republican Senator Eric Jeffrey. "President Obama should explain how another stimulus would be more successful than the \$787 economic stimulus law he signed in February 2009."

With just eight months remaining until the 2012 Presidential election, the rivalry between Republicans and Democrats over government expenditure is getting intense.