Skewed Encores:

An Experimental Test of Post-Presidential Influence

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the potential for former U.S. presidents to serve as elite cue givers on matters of international affairs. Scholars such as Zaller (1992) and Berinsky (2007, 2009) have demonstrated that current presidents function as powerful cue givers to the public, particularly on matters of foreign policy. Additional scholarship (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998) has yielded insights into the more specific mechanisms of how the dynamics of information shortcuts, matters of trust, and public prominence underscore presidential influence. However, no experimental studies to date have attempted to examine the impact of former US presidents as providers of elite cues in the realm of foreign policy. With data from an original survey experiment, our results show that ex-presidents—even those who last served as many as 30 years ago—exhibit cue effects that are just as powerful as the current sitting chief executive. Our study argues for the specific institutional importance of the post-presidency and post-presidential commentary, and suggests additional inquiries moving forward.
1 INTRODUCTION

When presidents exit the White House, they do not merely fade into history, but continue to shape the national dialogue. Though lacking formal powers of state, former presidents are afforded an exclusive standing by the American people that provides a platform to further mold public opinion. Thanks to omnipresent news coverage and popular outlets like The Daily Show, presidents receive unprecedented levels of exposure while in office. Although coverage is not always favorable, it guarantees that each president exits the White House as one of the world’s most recognized figures. However, unlike other forms of celebrity, ex-presidents are also afforded a high degree of public esteem in recognition of their incomparable experience. The combination of these two factors—high recognition and public esteem—ensures that when a former president speaks on an issue of national importance, his comments are not merely covered by the media, but are also given unique weight and reverence.

Be it Jimmy Carter’s ardent denunciation of the Bush Doctrine or Ronald Reagan’s endorsement of the Brady Bill, we have anecdotally become familiar with the ongoing role of former presidents in shaping public opinion. This anecdotal understanding of the post-presidency mirrors much of the existing scholarship on the subject, with scholars examining the careers of former presidents through narrative histories and individual case studies. While these works offer an interesting look into the lives of ex-presidents, their purely descriptive nature prevents broader understanding of the mechanisms empowering the post-presidency, their potential impact on public opinion, or how such influence compares to other elite cue-givers.

We remedy this oversight through a survey experiment specifically designed to isolate the impact of former presidents as elite cue givers. The purpose of this experiment is to use existing theories of elite cue givers and partisan signaling to illustrate the ability of ex-presidents to influence
public sentiment. Through a brief vignette concerning an international incident, we evaluate how an identical quote alters our subjects’ views when it is alternatively attributed to President Obama, an ex-president, or a current senator. Given the identical nature of the quote, any differences between how respondents in the different treatment groups answer subsequent questions about the incident and America’s potential response can only be ascribed to the attributes of the source.

Based on the results of the experiment, we conclude that former presidents are not only capable of shaping public opinion, but have an influence that often exceeds that of other opinion makers, including the sitting president and members of the Senate. However, we also observe that this impact differs based on the partisanship of the respondent. Specifically, while Democrats, defying accepted theories of partisan signaling, are sympathetic to the influence of George H. W. Bush, Republicans and Independents fail to significantly respond to any of the treatments. These findings diverge from the existing literature on elite cue givers and illustrate the unique place of former presidents within American political discourse.

2 BACKGROUND

For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to devote attention to three largely discrete streams of scholarship: literature on the post-presidency, literature on the dynamics of elite cues and literature on the use of Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. All three streams speak to the approaches and results of this project but, more importantly, have not yet been synthesized in the course of any prior studies. This paper attempts to address these three areas of the literature in order to rectify existing gaps in scholarship—both of the post-presidency specifically, and of institutional influence on public opinion more generally.

The majority of the existing literature on the post-presidency comes from biographical studies, with authors providing insightful, detailed histories of individual presidents after leaving
office. While some focus on individual overall post-presidential legacies, others narrow further, examining post-presidential involvement with respect to specific issues or periods. These works offer compelling narratives and interesting details on the lives of ex-presidents. However, they generally offer only limited perspective on patterns of post-presidential action. They do not directly help us to understand the post-presidency as a political institution, nor do they pursue this line of inquiry with sufficiently organized methodological approaches. A number of typological studies attempt resolve this question by grouping ex-presidents into broad categories. As mentioned earlier, many such attempts are made in accordance with behavioral criteria stemming from personality and character. Schenker (1982) proposes that ex-presidents be evaluated along three scalar spectra: the orientation of their personalities and activities from “private” to overtly “public”; their involvement in government activity from none to seeking formal positions; and, finally, the overall pursuit of a post-presidential career from “passive” to “active.” He follows up with a comparative analysis of former American and British leaders, observing significantly higher levels of post-tenure involvement in the British case (Schenker, 1985). Obviously this discrepancy can be attributed to the starkly different institutional qualities between presidential and parliamentary forms of government. Theakston and de Vries (eds.) (2012) examine the role of former leaders across the advanced industrialized democracies, arguing for more formal institutionalized roles that are integrated into public policy and leadership discourse. Skidmore (2004) proposes four broad categories by which to classify ex-presidents: those seeking a return to the presidency; those seeking other elected or appointed office; those who take up service to education or other forms of “public understanding”; and, those who take up humanitarian affairs. Clearly, all four categories cannot be contiguous across the historical presidential time span, and the opportunity for overlap obscures meaningful distinction between the crafted categories. Hecht (1976) analyzes multiple post-
presidencies and puts forth a schema dividing their activities into two spheres: the sphere of power as former chief executive and head of the party, and the sphere of the private citizen. She provides examples of activities, but does not help resolve patterns of engagement and overlap across different post-presidencies. Belenky (1999) proposes six categories defining post-presidential careers: “Still Ambitious,” “Exhausted Volcanoes,” “Political Dabblers,” “First Citizens,” “Embracers of a Cause,” or “Seekers of Vindication.” Again, such categorizations allow for broad overlap, invite inadequate specificity, and rest on highly subjective assessments of personality characteristics. Schaller and Williams (2003) define the post-presidency more broadly based on historical contexts of media, society and technology, arguing that presidential power fuels post-presidential power, and that both have grown in recent years. While providing evidence for their claims, their study chooses to disregard well over a century of American history, undermining attempts at developing a clarified understanding of the institutional influence of the post-presidency.

A second relevant body of scholarship on which to draw is that concerning the relationships between elite cues and opinion formation. Several decades of research confirm significant links between political prominence of cue-givers and the quality and intensity of responsive opinions (Stagner, 1941; Rosen, 1973; Sigelman and Sigelman, 1981; Sigelman and Thomas, 1984; Smith and Squire, 1990). Cognitive psychological studies contributed critical new questions and findings related to decision-making processes and introduced new model frameworks for the more rigorous, systematic study of cue effects (Chaiken, 1980; DeBono and Harnish, 1988; Kahneman et al., 1982; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981; Sherman and Corty, 1984; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). More recent scholarship has diversified into studies on the flow, strength, content, consistency, quality and consensus of elite cues (Berinsky, 2006; Druckman, 2004; Gabel and Scheve, 2007; Gelpi, 2010; Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994; Lupia, 1994; Lupia and
McCubbins, 1998; Mondak, 1993b; Mondak et al., 2004; Popkin, 1991; Wittman, 1995; Zaller, 1992). These studies comprise an extensive foray into a continuously complex, expansive landscape of inquiry, but offer little attention to issues stemming from the actual prominence and prestige of political office itself. This study, in part, seeks to advance study of elite cue dynamics towards new question areas of associated prestige, residual power and measurable influence with respect to opinion formation.

Lastly it is important to address design issues stemming from the use of Amazon’s Mechanical Turk in this experiment. The past decade has witnessed the remarkable expansion of the Mechanical Turk user base and its embrace as a research tool. Paolacci et al. (2010) argue that empirical findings support the adoption of Mechanical Turk as a reliable method for data acquisition. Furthermore, they explain that Turk features practical operational advantages that enable faster recruitment and reduce threats to internal validity. Compared with laboratory settings or traditional web platforms (with or without a purpose-built website), studies conducted via Mechanical Turk offer lower risks of coverage error, heterogeneity of samples, issues stemming from subject motivation, subject pool contamination, dishonest responses or experimenter effects. Though non-response errors and multiple responses are slightly more likely, they can be detected and addressed accordingly due to the infrastructure of Amazon’s Worker ID system. Berinsky et al. (2012) confirm prior assertions on internal validity, adding that response rates do not show evidence of widespread chronic participation in studies, nor are they compromised by inattentiveness. They also argue that Mechanical Turk studies are no less externally valid, as respondents are only minimally less representative than those recruited through traditional internet-based panels and national probability samples, and are actually more representative than those recruited through in-person samples. On the more specific issues of subject recruitment,
Buhrmester et al. (2011) show that while compensation rates and task length do affect participation, recruitment remains rapid and inexpensive. More importantly, data quality is not impacted. A number of studies illustrate that data collected from Mechanical Turk studies are as valid as those collected from other sources, provided that basic steps are taken to ensure sensible survey design logic and respondent pre-screening (Barger et al., 2011; Kaufmann et al., 2011; Goodman et al., 2013; Mason and Suri, 2012; Kosara and Ziemkiewicz, 2010; Kittur et al., 2008). It is important to note that while such safeguards should be adopted, efforts to preserve external validity should not go so far as to unnecessarily employ worker rejection or delay compensation—such practices could potentially alienate members of the user base and cast suspicion on the longer term institutional integrity of Mechanical Turk (Paolacci et al., 2010). Given proper design logic and recruitment procedures, Mechanical Turk data are comparably reliable, even when drawn from more restrictive samples or for more complex tasks.

3 Theory

3.1 The Theory in General

Does a cue given by former president of the United States affect the public’s position on a policy, especially a military intervention abroad by the United States? A substantial literature argues that citizens use heuristic shortcuts to choose positions on policies (Chaiken, 1980; Mondak, 1993b; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman et al., 1991; Lupia, 1994; Lupia and McCubbins1998; Lau and Redlawsk, 1997; Kam, 2005; Lau and Redlawsk, 2006; Boudreau, 2009).¹ This literature shows that if an individual believes that a cue-giver shares his interests and has more knowledge (expertise) about a policy, then a pursuant cue moves the individual’s position on the policy: specifically, the individual takes on the cue-giver’s position (Zaller, 1992; Lupia and McCubbins,

¹ For a critique of this argument, see Kuklinski and Hurley (1994), Bartels (1996), and Lau and Redlawsk (2001).
According to this same literature, the individual’s behavior here is rational since doing so minimizes the cost incurred in gathering and cognitively processing information about the policy, since he only needs to acquire and cognitively process the cue, while simultaneously maximizing the probability that his adopted position is in his interest, as he believes the cue-giver knows more than him and has the same interests as him.

Further developments in this literature show that another similar process also occurs: given the individual believes that a cue-giver does not share his interests and has more knowledge expertise about a policy than him, a cue from the cue-giver also moves the individual’s position: specifically, the individual takes on the opposite of the cue-giver’s position (Berinsky, 2007, 2009). According to this same literature, the individual’s behavior here is also rational since by doing so he again minimizes the cost incurred from gathering and processing information, since he only needs to acquire and process the cue, while simultaneously maximizing the probability that his adopted position is in his interest, since he believes the cue-giver knows more than him but has the opposite interest from him.

These two findings imply that there are two possible types of cue-givers who are effective in moving an individual’s position on a policy. For the first type of effective cue-giver, the individual believes that the cue-giver shares his interests and has more knowledge about a policy than him and, as a result, the individual takes the same position as the cue-giver on the policy in response to a cue. For the second type of effective cue-giver, the individual believes that the cue-giver does not share his interests but has more knowledge about a policy than him and, as a result, the individual takes the opposite position from the cue-giver on the policy in response to a cue.

But these two findings further imply that there are two residual types of cue-givers who are ineffective in moving an individual’s position on a policy. For the first type of ineffective cue-
giver, the individual believes that the cue-giver shares his interests but does not have more knowledge about a policy than him and, as a result, the individual’s position on the policy does not move in response to a cue. For the second type of ineffective cue-giver, the individual believes that the cue-giver does not share his interests but also does not have more knowledge about a policy than him and, as a result, the individual’s position on the policy does not move in response to a cue. This literature suggests that the individual’s behavior here is also rational since he believes that he knows more about the policy than either of these types of cue-givers, and thus regardless of their interests, he gains no information about what position on the policy is in his interest and maintains his current one.

Altogether, this literature’s argument yields a mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive four-category typology of effective and ineffective cue-giver types based on the crossing of two factors: an individual’s belief about their interests and their knowledge of the policy relative to his own.

- **Friendly & Knowledgeable, or FK type (Effective).** An individual believes that these cue-givers share his interests and have more knowledge about the policy than him. As a result, the individual takes on the position of these cue-givers on the policy in response to a cue.

- **Unfriendly & Knowledgeable, or UK type (Effective).** An individual believes that these cue-givers do not share his interests but have more knowledge about the policy than him. As a result, the individual takes on the opposite position from these cue-givers on the policy in response to a cue.
• **Friendly & Unknowledgeable, or FU type (Ineffective).** An individual believes that these cue-givers share his interests but do not have more knowledge about the policy than him. As a result, the individual does not change his position on the policy in response to a cue.

• **Unfriendly & Unknowledgeable, or UU type (Ineffective).** An individual believes that these cue-givers do not share his interests and do not have more knowledge about the policy than him. As a result, the individual does not change his position on the policy in response to a cue.

This can also be summarized by the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unknowledgeable</th>
<th>Unfriendly</th>
<th>Friendly</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UK Type (Effective)</td>
<td>FU Type (Ineffective)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Type (Effective)</td>
<td>FK Type (Effective)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How does an individual decide the relative knowledge and friendliness of a cue-giver?

Since the individual’s belief about the relative knowledge of a cue-giver likely depends on the policy context, for now only consider the second part of this question: how does an individual decide the relative friendliness of a cue-giver? One branch of this same literature shows that an individual believes that the partisanship of a cue-givers indicates whether they are friendly or unfriendly, i.e., whether they share interests with him or not, respectively: in particular, the individual believes that cue-givers that share his partisanship are friendly and those that do not are unfriendly (Rahn, 1993; Mondak, 1993a; Druckman, 2001; Cohen, 2003; Bullock, 2009; Nicholson, 2011; Hayes and Guardino, 2011; Nicholson, 2012; Druckman et al., 2012). Thus given that the individual believes cue-givers are knowledgeable so that they are either UK types or FK types, in response to cues from them, he takes on the position on a policy of those cue-givers
that share his partisanship, i.e., FK types, but the opposite position from cue-givers that do not, i.e., UK types.

3.2 The Theory Applied to the Current President and the Use of Force

When applied to the use of force abroad by the United States, this last statement constitutes what Berinsky (2007, 2009) calls the “elite-driven” hypothesis (Belknap and Campbell, 1951; Zaller, 1992; Larson, 1996; Berinsky, 2007, 2009; Baum and Groeling, 2009). Restated then, given that an individual believes cue-givers are knowledgeable so that they are either UK types or FK types, in response to cues from them, he takes on the position on a particular use of force of those cue-givers that share his partisanship, i.e., FK types, but the opposite position from cue-givers that do not, i.e., UK types.

But it cannot be taken as given that an individual believes cue-givers are knowledgeable so that they are either UK types or FK types. Now given the policy context of the use of force, how does an individual decide the relative knowledge of a cue-giver? The same branch of this same literature shows that an individual believes that the current president of the United States is more knowledgeable about the use of force abroad than him, so that the current president is either a UK type or an FK type (Zaller, 1992; Meernik and Ault, 2001; Berinsky, 2007, 2009).

Altogether, an individual believes that the current president of the United States is either a UK type or an FK type because he believes the president is knowledgeable about the use of force abroad, and the individual determines whether the president is a UK type or an FK type by observing the president’s partisanship to infer whether the president is friendly or not, believing

\footnote{Another competing literature argues instead that citizens use information about a use of force abroad such as estimates of its casualties and monetary costs, its probability of success, or its objective to choose their positions on it, a claim Berinsky (2007, 2009) calls the “event-response” hypothesis (inter alia, Mueller, 1971, 1973; Lorell et al., 1985; Jentleson, 1992; Larson, 1996; Gartner et al., 1997; Gartner and Segura, 1998; Jentleson and Britton, 1998; Burk, 1999; Klarevas, 2000; Eichenberg, 2003; Feaver and Gelpi, 2004; Eichenberg, 2005; Gelpi et al., 2006; Boettcher and Cobb, 2006; Fordham, 2008; Gartner, 2008; Gelpi et al., 2009).}
that the president is an FK type if he shares his partisanship but a UK type otherwise. Under this logic, if the individual determines that the president is an FK type, he takes on the president’s position on the use of force, but if the individual determines that the president is a UK type, then he takes the opposition position from the president’s position on the use of force.

3.3 The Theory Applied to Former Presidents and the Use of Force

The above predicts that the current president of the United States is an effective cue-giver on the use of force abroad because an individual believes that the president is knowledgeable on the use of force, i.e., is either a UK type or an FK rather than UU and FU types. But what about former presidents — does the same logic apply? We argue that the answer to this question is yes. In particular, we hold that the typical individual believes that ex-presidents have at least as much knowledge on the use of force abroad as the current president because he perceives that the former have at least as much experience on this policy and in general as the latter. As a matter of fact, all the living ex-presidents as of this writing (Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush) have substantial experience in foreign policy: certainly this could lead an individual to believe them to have at least as much knowledge on the use of force as the current president (Barack Obama). By this logic, ex-presidents are effective cue-givers on the use of force abroad, i.e., UK and FK types, just as the current president is. We formalize this hypothesis below.

Hypothesis 1 (Effectiveness). Ex-presidents are only UK and FK types. This means that ex-presidents are effective cue-givers on the use of force because an individual believes that they are knowledgeable on the use of force abroad, and thus he moves his position in response to a cue from them.

The above also predicts that given the current president is an effective cue-giver on the use of force abroad (in other words, he is knowledgeable and thus either an FK type or a UK type), he
can via a cue induce an individual to take on his position if the individual believes that they share interests proxied by partisanship, i.e., the current president is an FK type, but the opposite position otherwise, i.e., the current president is a UK type. But again, what about former presidents — does the same logic apply here, too? The literature supporting the elite-driven hypothesis would argue that the answer to this question is yes: ex-presidents are still political so that the individual still believes that their partisanship relative to his own indicates whether they share his interests or not, are friendly or unfriendly to him, are FK types or UK types. We formalize this extension of the elite-driven hypothesis below.

**Hypothesis 2** (Elite-Driven). *Assume the Effectiveness Hypothesis holds. An ex-presidents via a cue induces an individual to take on his position if they share the same partisanship, i.e., the ex-president is a FK type, but the opposite position otherwise, i.e., the ex-president is a UK type.*

We disagree with this extension of the elite-driven hypothesis. We argue that the same logic does not apply to both the current president and ex-presidents. In particular, we hold that ex-presidents are post-political so that the individual does not believe that their partisanship relative to his own indicates anything about whether they share his interests or not, are friendly or unfriendly to him, or are FK type or UK types. Instead, we hold that the individual always believes that ex-presidents share his interests and are friendly to him. Thus, an ex-president via a cue induces the individual to take on his position regardless of their relative partisanship, i.e., an ex-president is always an FK type. We formalize this exploratory hypothesis below.

**Hypothesis 3** (Post-Political). *Assume the Effectiveness Hypothesis holds. An ex-presidents via a cue induces an individual to take on his position regardless of partisanship, i.e., the ex-president is always an FK type and never a UK type.*
4 The Survey Experiment

We obtain data useful for testing these hypotheses through a survey experiment.

4.1 The Setup

We used Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to recruit a nonprobability sample of 406 subjects to complete “a survey that asks several questions about activities by the United States abroad” and used Qualtrics to collect their responses from April 2, 2013 to April 20, 2013 and from May 23, 2013 to June 12, 2013.

First, the survey instrument presented all subjects with questions about their sex, education, attentiveness, political knowledge, and partisan identification, which we describe in an appendix. Second, the survey experiment presented all subjects with the statement:

Over the past few months, the Gulf of Guinea has witnessed a historic rise in maritime piracy. The International Maritime Organization has recorded 37 pirate attacks in the waters off of Africa’s west coast since last summer, including 15 incidents since January 1st. Eight ships have been captured since the beginning of the year and their crews, a total of 47 sailors including 5 Americans, are being held for ransom. Following this recent uptick in attacks, the Gulf of Guinea has surpassed Somalia as the most pirate infested waters in the world.

4.2 The Experimental Groups

Second, the survey instrument then randomly assigned subjects to either a control group or one of five treatment groups. Subjects in the control group received no exposure to a support cue and no statement. Subjects in each treatment group received a single support cue from either Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, or Senator Angus King, which took the following form, here given for Jimmy Carter:
Former President Jimmy Carter addressed the issue of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea at a recent event in New York. Carter stated that the pirates “represent a clear threat to international commerce and the freedom of seas.” Furthermore, Carter called on the United States to dispatch a naval task force to the Gulf of Guinea in order to “protect American ships and ensure that no other vessel falls prey to these pirates.”

The only difference in the support cues received by the treatment groups is the source attribution, which is one of three former presidents, the sitting resident, or an independent senator. We include full texts of these five possible support cues in Appendix A.

4.3 The Measures

Third, the survey instrument presented subjects with five questions, in randomized sequence, about their positions on intervention by the United States. Ultimately, the questions measure on a scale of 0 to 10 a subject's opposition or support for the intervention in the Gulf of Guinea, based on their beliefs about its worthwhileness (Worth), its prospects for success (Success), its rightness (Rightness) as well as their approval of it (Approval) and whether or not U.S. military involvement should be increased there (Level). We include full texts of these five possible questions in an Appendix B.

5 RESULTS

We summarize all the statistically significant movements in subjects’ position on this use of force abroad from receiving a support cue from either the current president or one of the four living ex-presidents as well as an Independent current senator (based on Welch unequal variance t-tests) in three tables, one for subjects that are Democrats, one for those that are Republicans, and one for those that are Independents. For the interested reader, we present a
fully rigorous analysis with complete explanation in Appendix C and graphical results in Appendix D.

5.1 Democrats

Consider first the results for Democrat subjects in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Carter</th>
<th>Clinton</th>
<th>Obama</th>
<th>King</th>
<th>Bush</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worth Approve</td>
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<tr>
<td>+1.64</td>
<td>+1.41</td>
<td>+1.32</td>
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<td></td>
<td>+1.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Success Right</td>
<td>+1.58</td>
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<td>+1.20</td>
<td>+1.22</td>
<td>+1.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level</td>
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<td>+1.17</td>
<td>+1.13</td>
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As the elite-driven hypothesis predicts for the current president of the United States, a positive cue from Democrat President Obama increases support for this use of force abroad for a Democrat subject: on a 0 to 10 ordered scale, by +1.32 on Approve, +1.20 on Right, and by +1.13 on Level. And as predicted by our Post-Political Hypothesis, a positive cue from both Democrat ex-presidents and a Republican ex-president increases support for this use of force abroad (and by similar magnitudes) for a Democrat subject, too: by +1.64, +1.41, and +1.50 on Approve for Carter, Clinton, and Bush, respectively, by +1.58 and 1.64 on Right for Carter and Bush, respectively, and by +1.17 for Clinton on Level. The evidence on Level is consistent with both the elite-driven hypothesis and our Post-Political Hypothesis, since a subject takes on the position of an ex-president that does share his partisanship. However, the evidence on Approve and Right is consistent with the Post-Political Hypothesis but not the elite-driven hypothesis since a subject takes on the position of an ex-president that does not share his partisanship, here a Democrat subject and a Republican ex-president. Further, as predicted by the Effectiveness Hypothesis, a positive cue from ex-presidents induces at least as much movement in a Democrat
subject’s position as one from the current president. Unfortunately, there is no evidence among Democrat subjects for any of the hypotheses on *Worth* and *Success* and somewhat limited evidence on *Level*. But there is strong evidence among Democrat subjects for the Effectiveness Hypothesis and Post-Political Hypothesis and against the elite-driven hypothesis on *Approve* and *Right*.

### 5.2 Republicans and Independents

Next consider the results for Republican and Independent subjects in the two tables below.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Carter</th>
<th>Clinton</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Worth</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Approve</strong></td>
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<td>+1.67</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Success</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Right</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Level</strong></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Carter</th>
<th>Clinton</th>
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<th>Bush</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Worth</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Approve</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Success</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Right</strong></td>
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<td>−1.72</td>
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<td><strong>Level</strong></td>
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</table>

Unfortunately, there is no consistent evidence from either Republican or Independent subjects for any of the three hypotheses but merely two idiosyncratic movements. As predicted by the Post-
Political Hypothesis, a positive cue from a Republican ex-president increases support for this use of force abroad for a Republican subject on one of the dependent variables: by $+1.67$ on Worth for Bush. But this is limited evidence for the Post-Political Hypothesis, as no other political actor moves support for this use of force abroad for a Republican subject on this dependent variable or any other. Further, in opposition to the Post-Political Hypothesis, a positive cue from a Democrat ex-president decreases support for this use of force abroad for an Independent subject on one of the dependent variables: by $-1.72$ on Right for Clinton. Not only is this evidence contrary to the Post-Political Hypothesis, just as in the case of a Republican subject, no other political actor moves support for this use of force abroad for an Independent subject on this dependent variable or an other. This lack of results for Republicans and Independents suggests that the Effectiveness Hypothesis and Post-Political may be limited to Democrat individuals – but future research can adjudicate this point: it is possible that the experiment is underpowered for Republican and Independent subjects, either because the size of the treatment effects are smaller in magnitude for them than Democrat subjects or because they each constitute less of the total sample than Democrat subjects (i.e., as coded, there are 152 Democrat subjects in the sample but only 152 Independent subjects and 82 Republican subjects).

6 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Prior to conducting our experiment we posited three hypotheses on how former presidents would function as elite cue givers. The first hypothesis held that though ex-presidents held no formal office, former presidents maintain an accepted expertise on political issues and the use of force in particular. Consequently, all former presidents would be considered knowledgeable by the general public and serve as effective cue givers—demonstrating either the FK or UK type. In our experiment, we found significant evidence to support this hypothesis. All of the former presidents
tested, despite being out of office for at least a decade, continue to demonstrate a considerable power to mold public opinion. On several measures, notably Approval and Right, those subjects receiving a quote from an ex-president provided a response significantly above that of the control.

Furthermore, our experiment suggests that former presidents are not only effective but also significant elite cue givers. In terms of magnitude of influence, the impact of an ex-president often equaled or exceeded that of the current president. Likewise, former presidents almost always surpass the effect of a cue given by a current senator. This dynamic is best illustrated when participants were asked to state their approval for America’s mission in the Gulf of Guinea. While all treatments fail to elicit a significant response from either Independents or Republicans, all of the former president cues had a positive effect among Democrats that was at least equal to that of President Obama and greater than that of a Senator King. This result is striking when one considers that Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush have not held office for 33 and 21 years, respectively, yet retain an ability to influence public opinion that is greater than that of the sitting president. If nothing else, these findings mean that the public comments of former presidents should not be treated with idle curiosity, but rather viewed as potentially potent political forces.

It is important to note that while our study found significant evidence for former presidents as effective cue givers, this impact was by no means universal across our measures. Notably, all of our treatments, including those for Obama and King, failed to produce any meaningful pressure on the subjects when asked to assess the likelihood of the mission’s success. This result, though initially troubling, is likely the consequence of a flaw in our method. Unlike other questions, the measure concerning Success was speculative in nature and asked the subject to predict an outcome based on a very limited amount of information. This makes the question awkward for respondents as it asks them to predict the future rather than merely assess a situation. Given the limited amount
of information provided in the survey, a significant degree of unwillingness to predict the outcome of a hypothetical intervention is certainly understandable, particularly in light of recent experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Indeed, the recent debate concerning an American intervention in Syria demonstrated that a general lack of confidence in predicting an outcome is fairly widespread phenomenon and not limited to this experiment.

Having found clear evidence of former presidents as effective cue givers, our second and third hypotheses examine whether ex-presidents function as traditional political elites and are subject to the same partisan signaling evident in other elected officials. If former presidents operated in a similar fashion to other political elites, we would see Republicans treating former Democratic residents as the UK type and move opposite to the prompt and Democrats treating former Republican presidents in the same manner. However, we did not expect this to be the case and instead advanced a third hypothesis arguing that former presidents were post-partisan figures and would demonstrate an effect on public sentiment, but not the partisan backlash associated with political figures. Specifically, we anticipated that all of the former presidents would demonstrate the FK type and move all respondents towards their positions regardless of the subject’s partisan affiliation. Interestingly, our experiment found that Democrats and Republicans treat former presidents in a manner that is not only distinct from accepted theories of partisan signaling, but also different from one another.

Among Democratic subjects our test actually yielded results that support our third hypothesis and the absence of partisan bias in weighing the views of an ex-president. All former presidents have a positive draw among Democrats regardless of the specific identity of the ex-president. This effect is most striking in case of George H. W. Bush who, despite being a Republican, not only produced a positive result among Democrats on Approval and Right, but had
an effect which was significantly larger than even President Obama’s. Despite being of the opposite party, this is clear evidence of George H. W. Bush being treated as the FK type and indicative of post-partisan treatment.

Unlike Democrats, Republicans within our study show hints of partisan filtering while demonstrating a general immunity to the cues from all of the elites in the experiment. Of all the variables tested and all of the treatment groups, Republicans produced a statistically significant shift in two iterations. In line with extant literature on partisan cues, Republicans responded positively on the variable *Worth* when provided with the prompt from George H. W. Bush. While this hints at support for former presidents being treated as standard political elites, this effect is far from robust. Beyond *Worth*, Bush is unable to exert any meaningful influence on his co-partisans.

More importantly, all of the other treatment groups, Carter, Clinton, Obama and King, fail to elicit any significant response from Republicans—either positive or negative. This pattern repeats itself with Independents who aside from showing a marked antipathy for Bill Clinton on the issue of *Right* do not respond in any consequential way to any of the other cue givers.

This unwillingness of Republicans and Independents to react to any of the cue givers not only confounds our expectations but also countervails most of the existing theories on elite cue giving. While these odd results may simply be the product of a flaw in our experiment, particularly the sample sizes for Republicans and Independents, it may also suggest a deeper trend in how elites are treated. Specifically, while our treatment groups appear politically diverse, all of the political figures we use are from the traditional political establishment. It is possible that our subjects treat our treatments not as former presidents and active politicians of various political stripes, but rather seen them all as establishment figures. This distinction is particularly meaningful given the recent anti-establishment sentiment among American conservatives. In line
with this thinking, our subject may have rejected the expertise of all of the cue givers and discounted their knowledge of the subject. This could lead conservatives to reject all of the politicians based not on partisan grounds, but as not being credible experts. This would lead to all of our treatment groups being classified as uninformed (either UU or FU types) and summarily ignored by the participants. Such a distinction would largely explain our results. Unfortunately the design of our study is insufficient to establish this claim. However, in light of recent changes in the Republican Party base with regards to traditional elites, it is our belief that potential shifts in the perceptions of expertise based on partisan affiliation warrants further research.

The intent of our study was to use the current literature on elite cue givers and partisan signaling to analyze former presidents as shapers of public opinion. Through our experiment, we were able to find significant evidence that despite lacking public office, ex-presidents continue to have a significant influence on the views on important issues like foreign policy and the use of force. Beyond illustrating the continued salience of presidents to the national dialogue after they leave office, our study also uncovered some unique findings that countervail established norms of partisan signaling. The ability of George H. W. Bush to sway Democrats on the subject of the use of force indicates a reverence for expertise despite belonging to opposing parties. Conversely, the non-effect of all of our treatment groups on Republican and Independent subjects forces us to question the relevance of issue expertise with certain political factions. These results cannot be easily explained by existing theory nor adequately explored within the confines of a single paper. Yet, it is our hope that this paper and unique findings spark a continued interest in the continued role of former government officials after leaving office and inspire other scholars to look beyond the temporal blinders of elected terms.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS

The survey instrument then randomly assigned subjects to either a control group or one of five treatment groups. Subjects in the control group called “None” or “C” received no exposure to a support cue and no statement. Subjects in the first treatment group called “Carter” or “T1” received a support cue from former President Jimmy Carter given by the statement:

Former President Jimmy Carter addressed the issue of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea at a recent event in New York. Carter stated that the pirates “represent a clear threat to international commerce and the freedom of seas.” Furthermore, Carter called on the United States to dispatch a naval task force to the Gulf of Guinea in order to “protect American ships and ensure that no other vessel falls prey to these pirates.”

Subjects in the second treatment group called “Clinton” or “T2” received a support cue from former President Bill Clinton given by the statement:

Former President Bill addressed the issue of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea at a recent event in New York. Clinton stated that the pirates “represent a clear threat to international commerce and the freedom of seas.” Furthermore, Clinton called on the United States to dispatch a naval task force to the Gulf of Guinea in order to “protect American ships and ensure that no other vessel falls prey to these pirates.”
Subjects in the third treatment group called “Obama” or “T3” received a support cue from current President Barack Obama given by the statement:

President Obama addressed the issue of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea at a recent event in New York. Obama stated that the pirates “represent a clear threat to international commerce and the freedom of seas.” Furthermore, Obama called on the United States to dispatch a naval task force to the Gulf of Guinea in order to “protect American ships and ensure that no other vessel falls prey to these pirates.”

Subjects in the fourth treatment group called “King” or “T4” received a support cue from current Senator Angus King given by the statement:

Senator Angus King addressed the issue of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea at a recent event in New York. King stated that the pirates “represent a clear threat to international commerce and the freedom of seas.” Furthermore, King called on the United States to dispatch a naval task force to the Gulf of Guinea in order to “protect American ships and ensure that no other vessel falls prey to these pirates.”

Subjects in the fifth treatment group called “Bush” or “T5” received a support cue from former President George H. W. Bush given by the statement:

Former President George Bush, Sr. addressed the issue of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea at a recent event in New York. Bush stated that the pirates “represent a clear threat to international commerce and the freedom of seas.” Furthermore, Bush called on the United
States to dispatch a naval task force to the Gulf of Guinea in order to “protect American ships and ensure that no other vessel falls prey to these pirates.”

**APPENDIX B: THE MEASURES**

The survey instrument presented subjects with five questions, in randomized sequence, about their positions on intervention by the United States. The first question asked: “All in all, considering the costs versus the benefits to the U.S., do you think the conflict in the Gulf of Guinea is worth fighting, or not?” with eleven possible ordered responses on a scale between “0” and “10” with “0” indicating “not worth it” and “10” indicating “worth it.” The second question asked: “Which of the following best describes your feeling about the U.S. mission in the Gulf of Guinea?” with eleven possible ordered responses on a scale between “0” and “10” with “0” indicating “disapprove” and “10” indicating “approve.” The third question asked: “Some people believe that the U.S. will be successful in its operations in the Gulf of Guinea while others believe we will not be so successful. How do you feel about the progress the U.S. will make in the Gulf of Guinea?” with eleven possible ordered responses on a scale between “0” and “10” with “0” indicating “unsuccessful” and “10” indicating “successful.” The four question asked: “Do you think the U.S. will be making the right decision or the wrong decision if it uses military force in the Gulf of Guinea?” with eleven possible ordered responses on a scale between “0” and “10” with “0” indicating “wrong” and “10” indicating “right.” The fifth question asked: “Do you think the level of U.S. military involvement in the Gulf of Guinea should be increased?” with eleven possible ordered answers between “0” and “10” with “0” indicating “not increased” and “10” indicating “increased.”
APPENDIX C: ANALYSIS

We test the hypotheses using data obtained from the survey experiment.

C.1 Variable Coding

We begin by how we code variables that indicate a subject’s partisan identification, treatment group assignment in the survey experiment, and answers to the five questions. In an appendix, we describe how we code three control variables that indicate a subject’s sex, education, attentiveness, political knowledge.

We code two variables that indicate a subject’s partisan identification. The survey instrument presented all subjects with the two-part branching question used by the ANES Time Series Studies to classify respondents into one of seven ordered and mutually exclusive partisan identification categories. First, if the subject responds that he is a strong Democrat or a weak Democrat, we code the variable Democrat to take on the value 1 but the value 0 otherwise. Second, if the subject responds that he is a strong Republican or a weak Republican, we code the variable Republican to take on the value 1 but the value 0 otherwise. Under our coding, if the subject responds that he is an Independent, the variables Democrat and Republican both take on the value 0 by construction. For convenience, however, if the subject responds that he is an Independent, we code the variable Independent to take on the value 1 but the value 0 otherwise.

We code five variables that indicate a subject’s treatment group assignment in each survey experiment. First, if the survey instrument assigned the subject to the first treatment group “T1” or
“Carter,” we code the variable \textit{Carter} to take on the value 1 but 0 otherwise. Second, if the survey instrument assigned the subject to the second treatment group “T2” or “Clinton,” we code the variable \textit{Clinton} to take on the value 1 but 0 otherwise. Third, if the survey instrument assigned the subject to the third treatment group “T3” or “Obama,” we code the variable \textit{Obama} to take on the value 1 but 0 otherwise. Fourth, if the survey instrument assigned the subject to the fourth treatment group “T4” or “King,” we code the variable \textit{King} to take on the value 1 but 0 otherwise. Fifth, if the survey instrument assigned the subject to the first treatment group “T5” or “Bush,” we code the variable \textit{Bush} to take on the value 1 but 0 otherwise. Under this coding, if the survey instrument assigned the subject to the control group “C” or “None,” \textit{Carter}, \textit{Clinton}, \textit{Obama}, \textit{King}, and \textit{Bush} all take on the value 0 by construction. For convenience, however, if the survey instrument assigned the subject to the control group “C” or “None,” we code the variable \textit{None} to take on the value 1 but 0 otherwise.

We code five dependent variables corresponding to the five questions that the survey experiment presents to subjects: \textit{Worth} corresponding to the first question, \textit{Approve} corresponding to the second question, \textit{Success} corresponding to the third question, \textit{Right} corresponding to the fourth question, and \textit{Level} corresponding to the fifth question. We code each variable corresponding to a question to take on a value which exactly correspond to the subject’s response. For example, if the subject responds to the first question with “5,” we code \textit{Worth} to take on the value 5.

\textbf{C.2 Estimation}

We perform two methods of analysis on the data obtained from the survey experiment. Let \( y \in \{\text{Worth, Approve, Success, Right, Level}\} \). In the first method, separately for Democrat subjects \( (\text{Democrat} = 1) \), Republican subjects \( (\text{Republican} = 1) \), and Independent subjects
(Independent = 1), we perform five Welch unequal variances t-tests. The first tests the difference in the mean of each dependent variable $y$ between those subjects assigned to the control group “C” or “None” (None = 1) and those assigned to the first treatment group “T1” or “Carter” (Carter = 1). The second tests the difference in the mean of each dependent variable $y$ between those subjects assigned to the control group “C” or “None” (None = 1) and those assigned to the second treatment group “T2” or “Clinton” (Clinton = 1). The third tests the difference in the mean of each dependent variable $y$ between those subjects assigned to the control group “C” or “None” (None = 1) and those assigned to the third treatment group “T3” or “Obama” (Obama = 1). The fourth tests the difference in the mean of each dependent variable $y$ between those subjects assigned to the control group “C” or “None” (None = 1) and those assigned to the fourth treatment group “T4” or “King” (King = 1). The fifth tests the difference in the mean of each dependent variable $y$ between those subjects assigned to the control group “C” or “None” (None = 1) and those assigned to the fifth treatment group “T5” or “Bush” (Bush = 1) In the second method, we estimate an ordinary least squares regression model for each dependent variable $y$ of every possible form. Both methods yield equivalent results, and therefore we only present the results of the first method, which are the easier to understand.

APPENDIX D:  GRAPHICAL RESULTS

We present the differences in the mean separately for Democrat, Republican, and Independent subjects on each on the five dependent variables all measured on 0 to 10 ordered scale from opposition to support between subjects assigned to the control group and subjects assigned to each treatment group. We plot these movements in the mean between subjects assigned to a control
group and subjects assigned to each treatment group for each of the five dependent variable accompanied by ninety percent confidence bands from a Welch unequal variance t-test, with Democrat subjects in blue on the left, Republican subjects in red on the right, and Independent subjects in purple in the middle; confidence bands that do not cross zero indicate a statistically significant difference in mean between subjects assigned to the control group and those assigned to a treatment group.

FIGURE 1
FIGURE 2

FIGURE 3