

# Priorities Versus Payment: Partisan Cues and Public Preferences for Fossil Fuels and Renewables

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The second Trump administration has promoted fossil fuels and criticized renewable energy, which may serve as a partisan cue that further polarizes the US public on energy. Using a survey experiment with a quota-based sample of US residents ( $N = 3,113$ ), I examine how a Trump cue and a climate change cue shape how the public prioritizes fossil fuels versus renewables, as well as their willingness-to-pay (WTP) for each source measured with the Gabor-Granger method. Partisanship strongly predicted both outcomes, as Republicans gave greater priority to fossil fuels and were willing to pay less for renewables than those who identify with neither party, whereas Democrats gave greater priority to renewables and were willing to pay more for them. Neither cue had an overall, average effect on priority or WTP. The Trump cue moved Republicans toward fossil fuels on the priority scale, yet the climate cue did not move Democrats toward renewables. The cues did not reliably shift WTP for either source among partisans. The results suggest that cues are more likely to move costless expressions of energy preferences than the amount the public states it is willing to pay.

## Introduction

Shifting from fossil fuel sources of energy to renewables is needed to mitigate climate change. Such a shift requires the commitment and support of the public. In general, the US public seems to support using fewer fossil fuels and more renewable sources; however, there are partisan differences in the degree of that support, with Republicans tending to be more supportive of fossil fuels and Democrats tending to be more supportive of renewables (Bergquist, Konisky, and Kotcher 2020; Hamilton et al. 2018; Hawes and Nowlin 2022). Additionally, in the last several years, Republicans' support for fossil fuels has increased, whereas their support for renewables has decreased (Kennedy and Kikuchi 2026). The shift among Republicans may be, in part, a result of the rhetoric and actions of President Trump, which have focused on expanding fossil fuels and reducing renewables. Actions by such a divisive political actor can serve as a partisan cue for the public.

Cues have been shown to inform public opinion on climate change and energy preferences. For example, partisan and elite cues played a significant role in shaping opinion on climate change (Merkley and Stecula

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2021; Tesler 2018), and a climate change cue, or frame, can influence energy preferences (Feldman and Hart 2018). Given the emphases of the second Trump administration regarding fossil fuels and renewables, it is possible that polarization among the public on energy sources may increase in response. In this paper, I explore how exposure to a Trump or climate cue influences how the US public prioritizes fossil fuels versus renewables as well as their willingness-to-pay (WTP) for those energy sources.

As noted, the public is responsive to cues when forming their views on energy issues; however, less is known about how cues may impact the WTP of the public. The closest work, by Benegal and Green (2024), found that partisan cue-taking outweighed sensitivity to cost in support for the Green New Deal, yet the outcome in that study was support for a policy with a stated cost rather than the amount respondents would add to their own electricity bill for a specific energy source. In brief, the literature on WTP for energy finds that the public is responsive to price volatility for both fossil fuels and renewables (Cardella, Ewing, and Williams 2017), but in general is willing to pay more for renewable sources (Borchers, Duke, and Parsons 2007; Nkansah and Collins 2019) and is willing to pay for research and development by the federal government aimed at reducing the use of fossil fuels (Li et al. 2009). However, concern about the environmental impacts of energy (Knapp et al. 2020) and political beliefs (Aldy, Kotchen, and Leiserowitz 2012) can shape the WTP for energy.

In this study, I expand on current research by testing the impacts of a Trump cue versus a climate change cue on the prioritization of and WTP for fossil fuels and renewable sources of energy. The results are of interest because few studies compare the effect of a cue on a costless expression of preference, such as how energy sources should be prioritized, with its effect on a costly one, such as WTP, among the same respondents. Overall, I find that partisanship shapes energy preferences, as Republicans give greater priority to fossil fuels and are more likely to be willing to pay anything for them, whereas Democrats give greater priority to renewables and have a higher WTP for them. Neither cue had an average effect on either outcome. There is some evidence that Republicans in the Trump cue condition prioritized fossil fuels more, and there is no evidence that the climate cue moved Democrats toward renewables. Finally, the cues did not reliably shift WTP for either energy source among partisans, which suggests that cues are more likely to move costless expressions of preference than costly ones.

## **Cues, Public Opinion, and the Public's Willingness-to-Pay for Energy**

Partisan and elite cues shape public opinion on climate and energy issues, as the public tends to adopt the positions associated with their political party (Ehret, Van Boven, and Sherman 2018; Merkley and Stecula 2021; Tesler 2018). Cues provide an information heuristic, or shortcut, that allows the public to form opinions regarding a host of issues. Additionally, cues provide guides for motivated reasoning, as individuals apply reasoning in service of matching their views with those of their preferred party. Such motivated reasoning has been found in energy policy specifically. Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook (2014) found that party endorsements of an energy law led partisans to support the law when their party endorsed it and to oppose it when the other party did, and Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013) found, in experiments on drilling and immigration, that elite polarization intensifies the influence of party endorsements on opinion. Given the polarized elite environment surrounding energy, a cue tied to President Trump is likely to be a strong signal to partisans of both parties. Apart from partisan cues, connecting energy policies to the polarized issue of climate change can

also shape and polarize public opinion. For example, Feldman and Hart (2018) found that framing a low-carbon energy policy as a climate change solution, rather than as an air pollution or energy security measure, reduced support for that policy among Republicans.

In addition to beliefs and attitudes, partisanship is also likely to influence an individual's consumption choices and WTP. For example, conservatives were less likely to purchase an energy-efficient light bulb when it was labeled with an environmental message, as opposed to no label (Gromet, Kunreuther, and Larrick 2013). A larger number of studies have examined stated WTP and political beliefs. Kotchen, Boyle, and Leiserowitz (2013) found that Republicans reported lower WTP for a national climate policy than Democrats and independents, but that this partisan gap was largely explained by differences in beliefs about whether climate change is occurring. Using a similar national WTP measure, Kotchen, Turk, and Leiserowitz (2017) estimated an average household WTP of \$177 per year for a carbon tax, with respondents preferring that the revenue be spent on clean energy investment over other uses. More recently, Benegal and Green (2024) found that partisan cue-taking, where respondents supported policies proposed by their party, outweighed sensitivity to the policy's stated cost. Scheuch (2026) also found partisanship to be a significant predictor of WTP for local climate policy, alongside age and income. Overall, political beliefs seem to influence not just abstract support for climate and energy policy, but the dollar amounts people state that they are willing to pay.

The influence of cues may differ between costless and costly expressions of preference. Stating how energy sources should be prioritized is costless, so agreeing with a trusted source or disagreeing with a disliked one is easy. Indeed, research on expressive responding has found that partisan differences in survey responses shrink when respondents are given an incentive to answer accurately, which suggests that some partisan responses may be an expression of support for one's party rather than a sincere belief (Bullock et al. 2015; Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015). Stating a WTP, in contrast, asks respondents to consider a cost to their own household. A cue may therefore move how respondents prioritize energy sources without moving the amount they are willing to pay, as the cost of following the cue becomes concrete. However, Benegal and Green (2024) found that partisan cue-taking can outweigh cost sensitivity, so whether cue effects carry over from priority to WTP is an open question.

Looking to work that specifically examines public WTP for renewables and fossil fuels, several studies have found that the public is willing to pay more for renewables than other sources of energy. For example, Nkansah and Collins (2019) compared WTP for wind against natural gas generation specifically and found consumers willing to pay more for wind. Along similar lines, Murakami et al. (2015) placed fossil fuels, renewables, and nuclear power on the same WTP scale in the US and Japan, and found that respondents in both countries expressed positive WTP for increased renewable generation but negative WTP for increased nuclear generation, with US respondents expressing a stronger preference for renewables than Japanese respondents. However, Walter, Thacher, and Chermak (2023) found that US respondents' preferences over fossil versus renewable energy futures depended on their geographic proximity to fossil fuel production and their opinion about anthropogenic climate change. Finally, Li et al. (2009) estimated household WTP for a federal energy research and development fund aimed at reducing reliance on fossil fuels, and found broad support for that funding, suggesting that the public is willing to pay to reduce fossil fuel use even when no alternative energy source is specified.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that WTP for energy is not just a function of partisanship or environmental beliefs. Cardella, Ewing, and Williams (2017) found that price volatility, not just price level, shapes residential customers' generation-source decisions, and

## Theoretical Expectations

Previous research suggests that partisan cues are an important driver of energy preferences and that partisanship and environmental beliefs shape the WTP for energy sources. In this study, I use a survey experiment to examine the influence of a Trump cue and a climate change cue on preferences and the stated WTP for fossil fuels versus renewables.

The experiment includes three conditions: a Trump cue, a climate change cue, and a baseline. All respondents see an argument that renewables are not reliable and that fossil fuels are needed for energy security. In the baseline condition, the argument is attributed to “some,” so the baseline is an unattributed argument for fossil fuels rather than the absence of a message. In the Trump condition, the same argument is attributed to President Trump, so the comparison with the baseline isolates the effect of a partisan source cue. In the climate condition, the unattributed argument is followed by a statement that scientists have warned that fossil fuels will make climate change worse and that renewables should be increased. The climate condition therefore combines a scientific source, a climate change frame, and a counterargument, and its comparison with the baseline captures the effect of that combined message. Because the two cue conditions differ from the baseline in different ways, I compare each cue with the baseline rather than comparing the size of the two cue effects with each other.

Based on previous research, I posit the following hypotheses.

H1a: Republicans will prioritize fossil fuels and be willing to pay more for fossil fuels than those who identify with neither party.

H1b: Democrats will prioritize renewables and be willing to pay more for renewables than those who identify with neither party.

H2a: Those who receive the Trump cue will prioritize fossil fuels and be willing to pay more for fossil fuels than those in the baseline condition.

H2b: Those who receive the climate cue will prioritize renewables and be willing to pay more for renewables than those in the baseline condition.

H3a: The effect of the Trump cue on prioritizing and WTP for fossil fuels will be larger among Republicans than among those who identify with neither party.

H3b: The effect of the climate cue on prioritizing and WTP for renewables will be larger among Democrats than among those who identify with neither party.

In addition, I examine two exploratory questions. First, cues from a disliked source may lead partisans to move away from the position of that source (Feldman and Hart 2018), so I explore whether Democrats move toward renewables in response to the Trump cue and whether Republicans move toward fossil fuels in response to

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Knapp et al. (2020) found that stated WTP for green electricity programs does not consistently translate into enrollment once a real premium is offered. Aldy, Kotchen, and Leiserowitz (2012) likewise found that WTP for a national clean energy standard depended on how the standard was structured, in addition to the respondents' political affiliations.

the climate cue. Second, given the difference between costless and costly expressions of preference, I examine whether the effects of the cues on prioritization carry over to WTP.

## Data and Measures

To examine the importance of cues and partisanship in energy preferences, I use a survey experiment to measure respondents' prioritization of fossil fuels versus renewables as well as their WTP for those sources to generate electricity in response to a Trump cue or a climate change cue. Respondents were recruited using CloudResearch, which provides a quota-based sample of US residents, with quotas for age, race, and gender based on US Census data. Additionally, to further ensure as representative a sample as possible, I used the `survey` and `anesrake` packages in R to perform iterative raking to compute survey weights that weight respondents based on the US Census's 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) on demographic variables, including age, race, gender, and education. I also used the Pew Research Center's National Public Opinion Reference Survey (NPORS) from 2025 to weight the sample based on political party affiliation. With leaners assigned to a party, the NPORS targets were 45 percent Democratic, 46 percent Republican, and 9 percent identifying with neither party. I surveyed 3,113 US residents in April 2026, who were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a cue about Trump's critiques of renewable energy and his support for fossil fuels ( $n = 1,049$ ), a climate change cue that stated scientists recommend moving away from fossil fuels to renewables to address climate change ( $n = 1,013$ ), or a baseline condition in which the argument for fossil fuels was attributed to "some" ( $n = 1,051$ ).<sup>2</sup>

All respondents were shown the following paragraph:

The use of renewable energy sources for electricity, including wind energy, solar energy, and battery storage, has risen sharply in recent years. Indeed, most of the growth in new electricity generation in the U.S. has come from renewable sources.

Respondents were then shown the following statement. Those in the Trump cue condition saw President Trump named specifically, while those in the climate cue and baseline conditions were shown *some have*.

However, [*President Trump has/some have*] argued that renewable sources are not reliable and that we need to increase our reliance on fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas) to ensure energy security.

Those in the climate cue condition saw the following:

Additionally, scientists have warned that an increase in the use of fossil fuels will make climate change worse; therefore, we should increase our use of renewable sources.

Finally, all respondents were shown:

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<sup>2</sup>Randomization produced conditions that were similar on gender, college education, and income, but the conditions differed somewhat in age and in the share of white respondents. A balance table is shown in the supplemental material, and the results are similar when controlling for demographics.

Please consider how you think we should prioritize the development of fossil fuels and renewable sources to generate electricity.

After receiving the cues, respondents were asked, on a 1 to 7 scale, if fossil fuels should be prioritized (= 1), fossil fuels and renewables should be prioritized equally (= 4), or renewable sources should be prioritized (= 7). Next, I asked respondents their WTP for fossil fuel and renewable sources using the Gabor-Granger method (Gabor and Granger 1966). With the Gabor-Granger method, respondents are shown a random dollar amount, and if they are willing to pay that amount, they are next shown a higher amount, and if they are not, they are shown a smaller amount. This approach is a well-established survey-based technique for estimating WTP. It dates to early applications of iterative-bidding price experiments (Jones 1975) and was later formalized in marketing research (Wedel and Leeflang 1998). It remains one of the standard indirect approaches used to measure WTP (Breibert, Hahsler, and Reutterer 2006; Lipovetsky, Magnan, and Zanetti-Polzi 2011).

To establish WTP, I first gave respondents information about potential costs associated with each energy source, and the sources were presented in random order. The prompts were written to give respondents a plausible reason that increasing the use of each source would raise their electricity bill. In the WTP for fossil fuels question, I noted that costs associated with renewable energy have decreased and, therefore, respondents may need to pay more to use fossil fuels (see U.S. Energy Information Administration 2025). For renewable sources, respondents were told about the need to increase distribution. Specifically, respondents were shown the following prompts for fossil fuels and renewables, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

The cost of generating electricity from renewable sources has decreased in recent years. In many places, renewable energy sources are often more cost-effective than fossil fuels. Would you support the increased use of fossil fuels if your electricity bill were to increase by the following each month?

Renewable sources have become cheaper in recent years; however, investments are needed to distribute the electricity they produce to homes and businesses. Would you support the increased use of renewable sources if your electricity bill were to increase by the following each month?

To estimate WTP, respondents were first shown a random dollar amount between \$1 and \$46, in five-dollar increments, and asked if they would be willing to pay that amount extra per month on their electricity bill. If they indicated yes, they were shown a larger random dollar amount, and if they indicated no, they were shown a smaller dollar amount. This continued until they rejected an amount after accepting a lower one, accepted an amount after rejecting a higher one, or reached the \$46 maximum or \$1 minimum. Each respondent's WTP is the highest amount they accepted, and respondents who indicated no at \$1 were coded with a WTP of \$0. The starting and follow-up amounts were drawn at random, independently of the cue condition, but were not recorded. Therefore, I cannot control for the starting amount, which may anchor responses, though random assignment of the starting amount means anchoring is unlikely to differ across conditions.

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<sup>3</sup>The two prompts are not symmetric. The fossil fuel prompt notes that renewables are often more cost-effective than fossil fuels, which likely gives respondents a reason not to pay more for fossil fuels, whereas the renewables prompt does not include a comparable reason not to pay for renewables. As a result, the difference between WTP for fossil fuels and WTP for renewables may reflect the wording of the prompts as well as respondents' preferences. However, the wording of each prompt was the same in every condition, so the comparison of each cue with the baseline within each energy source is not affected by the asymmetry.

In the following analysis, I examine the prioritization of fossil fuels versus renewables and the WTP for those energy sources as a function of the cues and party identification. Party identification includes Democrats and Republicans, with those who identify with neither party as the excluded referent. Respondents who identified as independent or with another party were asked whether they lean toward the Democratic or Republican Party, and those who lean toward a party are coded as identifying with that party. Before leaners are assigned, 34 percent of respondents identified as independent or with another party, and after leaners are assigned, only 15 percent (unweighted;  $n = 466$ ) identified with neither party. Because this reference group is small, the cue effects among those who identify with neither party are estimated with less precision than the effects among partisans. Party identification was measured after the outcome questions, so the cues could, in principle, have shifted how respondents identified. However, the distribution of party identification did not differ across conditions ( $\chi^2 = 3.29$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = .511$ ).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the energy-priority scale, willingness-to-pay, and party identification (survey-weighted means and standard deviations, overall and by condition)

| Variable                    | Mean  | SD    | Min | Max | Baseline | Trump cue | Climate cue |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|-----|-----|----------|-----------|-------------|
| Energy-priority scale (1-7) | 5.17  | 1.74  | 1   | 7   | 5.17     | 5.15      | 5.20        |
| WTP, fossil fuels (\$)      | 8.33  | 13.79 | 0   | 46  | 8.55     | 7.54      | 8.86        |
| WTP, renewables (\$)        | 18.21 | 17.43 | 0   | 46  | 17.95    | 17.85     | 18.80       |
| Democrat                    | 0.45  | 0.50  | 0   | 1   | 0.43     | 0.48      | 0.44        |
| Republican                  | 0.46  | 0.50  | 0   | 1   | 0.48     | 0.43      | 0.47        |

Descriptive statistics for the energy-priority scale, WTP, and party identification are shown in Table 1. The mean on the energy-priority scale was 5.17 (SD = 1.74), which is above the midpoint of 4 and indicates that respondents, on average, leaned toward prioritizing renewables over fossil fuels. Regarding party identification, 45 percent of the weighted sample were Democrats and 46 percent were Republicans, with the remaining 9 percent identifying with neither party. These shares reflect the survey weights, which weight the sample to the party affiliation distribution in the NPORS. Unweighted, 56 percent of respondents were Democrats and 29 percent were Republicans, so the weights increase the share of Republicans from 29 to 46 percent.<sup>4</sup>

## Results

First, I use OLS regression to examine the prioritization respondents gave to fossil fuels versus renewables as a function of the cues, their party identification, and the interaction between cues and party identification. The results are shown in Table 2 and Figure 1.

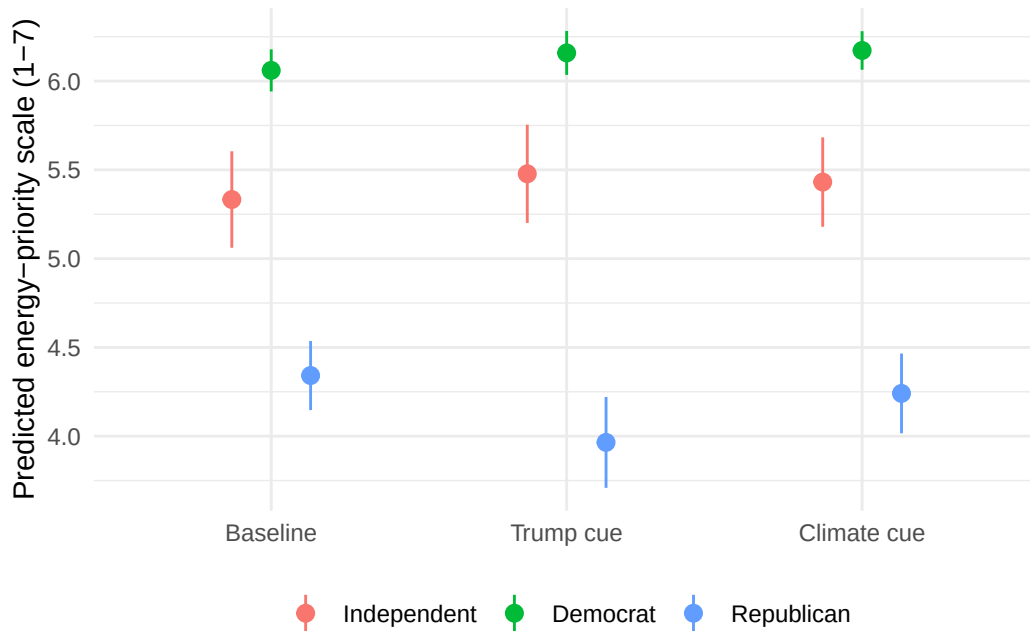
<sup>4</sup>However, because the models interact the cues with party identification, and the party weights give every respondent within a party the same weight, the party weights do not change the estimated interactions, which instead depend on the demographic weights. To account for this, I also estimate each model without the weights, and with only the party weights or only the demographic weights, and those models are shown in the supplemental material.

Table 2: Effect of cue condition, party identification, and their interaction on the energy-priority scale (survey-weighted OLS; baseline condition and those who identify with neither party as reference)

|                          | Priority scale      |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Trump cue                | 0.145<br>(0.198)    |
| Climate cue              | 0.098<br>(0.189)    |
| Democrat                 | 0.727**<br>(0.151)  |
| Republican               | −0.991**<br>(0.171) |
| Trump cue × Democrat     | −0.046<br>(0.216)   |
| Climate cue × Democrat   | 0.014<br>(0.206)    |
| Trump cue × Republican   | −0.521*<br>(0.257)  |
| Climate cue × Republican | −0.199<br>(0.242)   |
| (Intercept)              | 5.333**<br>(0.139)  |
| Num.Obs.                 | 3113                |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>      | 0.289               |

† p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01

Figure 1: Predicted energy-priority scale (1–7) by cue condition and party identification (survey-weighted OLS predictions with 95% CIs)



As expected, Republicans prioritized fossil fuels more than those who identify with neither party, with an estimated coefficient of -0.99 on the 1 to 7 scale, and Democrats prioritized renewables at 0.73. In terms of the interactions, which test whether the effect of a cue differs by party identification, the Trump cue moved Republicans toward fossil fuels more than it moved those who identify with neither party ( $b = -0.52$ ). The predicted value on the 1 to 7 scale for Republicans in the baseline condition was 4.34, indicating a roughly even split between fossil fuels and renewables, and it was 3.96 for those receiving the Trump cue, a significant shift toward fossil fuels (difference = -0.38,  $p = .022$ ). In contrast, the climate cue did not move Democrats toward renewables more than those who identify with neither party ( $b = 0.01$ ). The predicted value for Democrats was 6.06 in the baseline condition, indicating a strong priority for renewables, and 6.17 in the climate condition, which is not a significant difference. Finally, there is no evidence that Democrats moved toward renewables in response to the Trump cue or that Republicans moved toward fossil fuels in response to the climate cue.<sup>5</sup>

Next, I examine the percent of respondents at each possible dollar amount of the WTP measure for each source. Those results are in Table 3.

<sup>5</sup>Because the models include interactions, the coefficients for the Trump and climate cues are the effects of the cues among those who identify with neither party. To estimate the average effect of each cue, I also estimate models with the cues alone, shown in the supplemental material. Neither cue had a significant average effect on energy source priority compared to the baseline (Trump cue  $b = -0.03$ ,  $p = .785$ ; climate cue  $b = 0.03$ ,  $p = .775$ ).

Table 3: Distribution of willingness-to-pay for fossil fuel and renewable electricity (weighted percent of respondents choosing each dollar amount). Each value is the highest monthly amount the respondent accepted, so the respondent's WTP is at least that amount and below the next amount they rejected; \$0 indicates the respondent rejected \$1, and \$46 indicates the respondent accepted the highest amount offered.

| WTP (\$) | Fossil fuels (%) | Renewables (%) |
|----------|------------------|----------------|
| 0        | 47.0             | 14.0           |
| 1        | 14.7             | 15.6           |
| 6        | 10.6             | 14.0           |
| 11       | 5.6              | 9.1            |
| 16       | 4.9              | 7.3            |
| 21       | 2.7              | 4.3            |
| 26       | 2.9              | 5.8            |
| 31       | 1.2              | 3.2            |
| 36       | 2.1              | 4.7            |
| 41       | 1.9              | 3.8            |
| 46       | 6.3              | 18.3           |

As shown, nearly half of respondents, 47.0 percent, were not willing to pay any additional amount for fossil fuels, whereas 18.3 percent were willing to pay the maximum, \$46, for renewables. Overall, the median WTP for fossil fuels was \$1 with a mean of \$8.33. For renewables the median WTP was \$11 and the mean was \$18.21. The median WTP for renewables was \$10 higher than for fossil fuels, and the mean WTP was \$9.88 higher, a difference that is significant based on a survey-weighted paired t-test ( $t = 22.9$ ,  $df = 3111$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Given the large percentage of respondents with a WTP = \$0 for fossil fuels, I model the WTP for fossil fuels in two parts. First, I use a logit model to see whether a respondent has any positive WTP for fossil fuels. Next, using OLS, I examine the WTP for fossil fuels, among those with a WTP > \$0, and for renewables. The results of all three models are shown in Table 4.<sup>6</sup>

For fossil fuels, Republicans were significantly more likely than those who identify with neither party to have any positive WTP ( $b = 0.57$ , log-odds scale), and Democrats were significantly less likely ( $b = -0.46$ ). The predicted probability of any positive WTP in the baseline condition was 66.4 percent for Republicans compared to 41.6 percent for Democrats. Among those who identify with neither party, the Trump cue lowered the likelihood of any positive WTP for fossil fuels ( $b = -0.56$ ), and the Trump cue  $\times$  Republican interaction was marginally significant ( $b = 0.63$ ,  $p = .055$ ). However, this interaction reflects the decline among those who identify with neither party rather than an increase among Republicans, whose likelihood of any positive WTP in the Trump cue did not differ from the baseline (68.1 versus 66.4 percent; difference = 0.07 on the log-odds scale,  $p = .711$ ). The WTP amounts are shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

<sup>6</sup>Because WTP is bounded at \$0 and \$46, I also estimate a censored-normal (Tobit) model for each source, which treats \$0 as censored from below and \$46 as censored from above. Those models are shown in the supplemental material. The results of the Tobit models are consistent with those reported here. For renewables, party identification predicts WTP and no cue  $\times$  party identification interaction is significant at the .05 level. The Tobit results for fossil fuels are discussed below.

Table 4: Effect of cue condition, party identification, and their interaction on willingness-to-pay for fossil fuels (any positive WTP, and amount among those with any positive WTP) and for renewables (survey-weighted logit/OLS; baseline condition and those who identify with neither party as reference)

|                                  | Fossil fuels: Any WTP (logit) | Fossil fuels: Amount, if WTP > \$o (OLS) | Renewables: Amou    |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Trump cue                        | −0.560*<br>(0.263)            | −3.589<br>(2.990)                        | −2.003<br>(2.317)   |
| Climate cue                      | −0.341<br>(0.261)             | −3.568<br>(3.045)                        | −3.578<br>(2.245)   |
| Democrat                         | −0.458*<br>(0.204)            | −1.038<br>(2.454)                        | 3.971*<br>(1.813)   |
| Republican                       | 0.565*<br>(0.225)             | −2.786<br>(2.480)                        | −5.959**<br>(1.889) |
| Trump cue × Democrat             | 0.346<br>(0.298)              | 3.677<br>(3.390)                         | 2.842<br>(2.602)    |
| Climate cue × Democrat           | 0.260<br>(0.298)              | 3.710<br>(3.520)                         | 5.055*<br>(2.551)   |
| Trump cue × Republican           | 0.634†<br>(0.330)             | 2.744<br>(3.484)                         | 0.248<br>(2.715)    |
| Climate cue × Republican         | 0.469<br>(0.326)              | 5.257<br>(3.512)                         | 4.499†<br>(2.672)   |
| (Intercept)                      | 0.117<br>(0.179)              | 17.652**<br>(2.181)                      | 19.076**<br>(1.601) |
| Num.Obs.                         | 3113                          | 1433                                     | 3113                |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>              |                               | o                                        | o.o91               |
| McFadden’s pseudo R <sup>2</sup> | o.o59                         |                                          |                     |

† p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01

Figure 2: Predicted willingness-to-pay for fossil fuels, among respondents with any positive WTP, by cue condition and party identification (survey-weighted OLS predictions with 95% CIs)

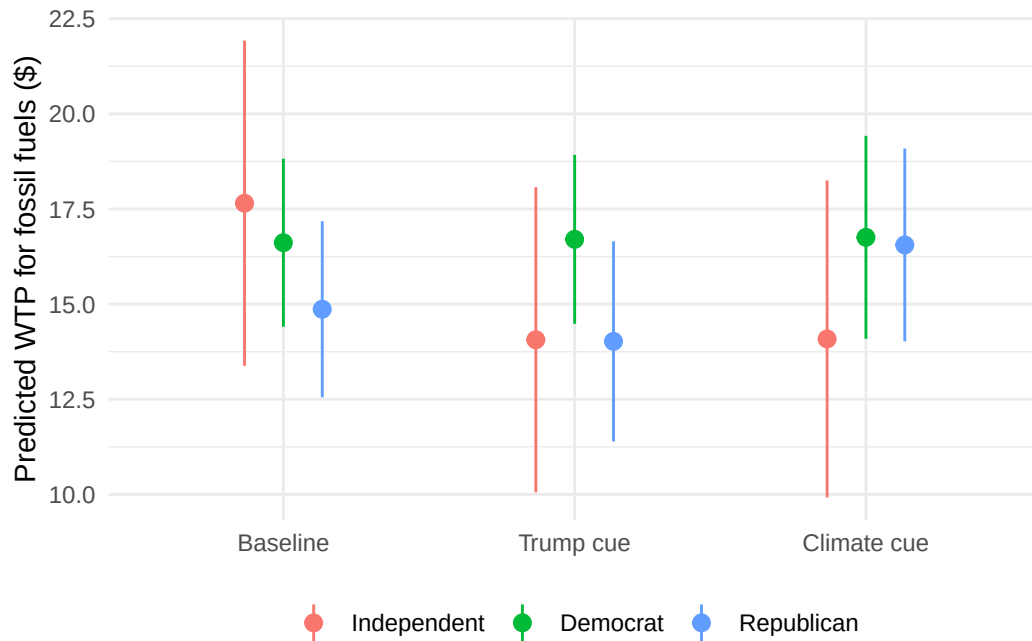
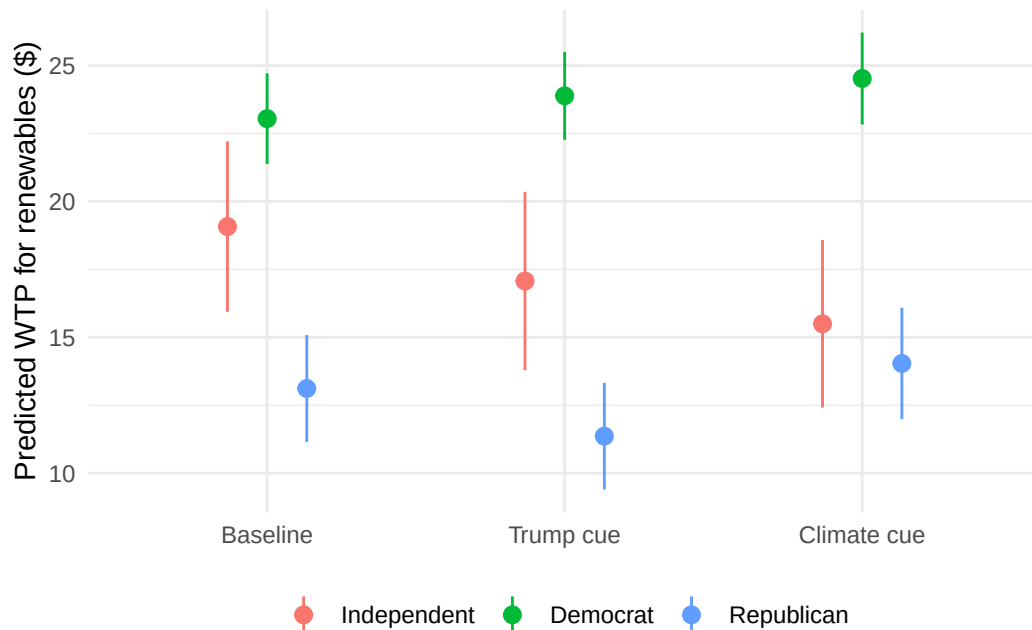


Figure 3: Predicted willingness-to-pay for renewables by cue condition and party identification (survey-weighted OLS predictions with 95% CIs)



Among those with positive WTP for fossil fuels, neither party identification, the cues, nor their interactions significantly predicted the dollar amount. The predicted amount for Republicans was \$14.87 in the baseline condition versus \$14.02 in the Trump cue.<sup>7</sup>

Looking to renewables, Democrats were willing to pay \$3.97 more, on average, than those who identify with neither party, and Republicans were willing to pay \$5.96 less, for a predicted WTP of \$13.12 among Republicans in the baseline condition. The climate cue  $\times$  Democrat interaction was significant ( $b = 5.05, p = .048$ ), and the climate cue  $\times$  Republican interaction was nearly as large ( $b = 4.50, p = .092$ ). However, both interactions largely reflect a lower, though not statistically significant, WTP for renewables in the climate cue among those who identify with neither party ( $b = -3.58, p = .111$ ). Among Democrats, the climate cue did not significantly increase WTP for renewables compared to the baseline (difference = \$1.48,  $p = .223$ ).

Comparing the results to the hypotheses, the support is mixed. As expected, partisanship shaped both preferences and WTP, largely supporting H1a and H1b. Republicans prioritized fossil fuels more than those who identify with neither party, were more likely to have any positive WTP for fossil fuels, and were willing to pay less for renewables. Democrats, in contrast, prioritized renewables, were less likely to have any positive WTP for fossil fuels, and were willing to pay more for renewables. However, among those with any WTP for fossil fuels, Republicans were not willing to pay more than others. H2a and H2b were not supported, as neither the Trump cue nor the climate cue had a significant average effect on energy priority or WTP for either source compared to the baseline condition. H3a received limited support. The Trump cue moved Republicans toward fossil fuels on the priority scale. H3b was not supported, as the climate cue did not move Democrats toward renewables on the priority scale, and the climate cue  $\times$  Democrat interaction for renewables WTP reflects a decline among those who identify with neither party rather than an increase among Democrats. Additionally, there was no evidence of a backlash effect, as neither cue led partisans to move away from the position of the source. Finally, the shift in priority among Republicans did not carry over to WTP, as Republicans in the Trump cue did not differ from those in the baseline in their WTP for fossil fuels. These results suggest that cues are likely more effective at moving the priority the public gives to energy sources than the amount they are willing to pay, though the design could not detect small effects on WTP.

## Discussion and Conclusion

A clean energy transition is needed to mitigate climate change, and public support is needed for the energy transition. However, President Trump's rhetoric and actions on energy may serve to polarize the public. This study examined how exposure to a Trump cue or a climate change cue shapes the US public's prioritization of, and willingness-to-pay for, fossil fuel versus renewable sources of electricity, and how these responses are shaped by partisanship. The results show that support for energy sources is polarized along partisan lines, in how respondents prioritized fossil fuels against renewables, in whether they were willing to pay anything for fossil fuels, and in the dollar amounts they were willing to pay for renewables. There is also some evidence that

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<sup>7</sup>In the Tobit model of fossil fuel WTP, the Trump cue  $\times$  Republican interaction ( $b = 9.64, p = .028$ ) and the climate cue  $\times$  Republican interaction ( $b = 9.60, p = .026$ ) are significant. However, these interactions reflect a lower WTP for fossil fuels in the cue conditions among those who identify with neither party (Trump cue  $b = -9.33, p = .012$ ; climate cue  $b = -6.80, p = .065$ ) rather than a higher WTP among Republicans, though the decline in the climate cue is only marginally significant. Republicans' WTP for fossil fuels did not differ from the baseline in either the Trump cue (difference = 0.31,  $p = .893$ ) or the climate cue (difference = 2.80,  $p = .215$ ).

a Trump cue moved Republicans toward fossil fuels. In contrast, the climate cue did not move Democrats toward renewables, which is likely because Democrats already strongly prioritized renewables in the baseline condition. Together, these findings suggest that a cue from a polarizing figure such as President Trump may exacerbate existing partisan divisions in how the public prioritizes energy sources.

The cue effects were also uneven across the two outcomes. Partisanship appears to condition the effect of the Trump cue on prioritization, but not on WTP. The Trump cue did not significantly change WTP for fossil fuels among Republicans. This is likely because stating a priority is costless, whereas stating a WTP asks respondents to consider a cost to their own household. Agreeing with a trusted source, or reacting to a cue, may be easy when nothing is at stake, but the concrete cost of an increase in an electricity bill may limit the influence of cues, especially in times of concern about rising energy costs.<sup>8</sup>

A single cue is likely a weaker treatment than the sustained rhetoric respondents may encounter outside of a survey. The few cue  $\times$  party identification interactions for WTP that reached significance reflected a lower WTP among those who identify with neither party rather than a shift among partisans, and this small group is estimated with less precision. However, the design could only detect relatively large interaction effects on WTP, so small effects of the cues on WTP cannot be ruled out. With 80 percent power and  $\alpha = .05$ , the smallest interaction effects the design could reliably detect are \$7.15 to 7.61 for renewables and \$9.50 to 9.86 for the amount of fossil fuel WTP, compared with 0.58 to 0.72 points for the priority scale. Indeed, the Trump cue  $\times$  Republican interaction on the priority scale ( $b = -0.52$ ) is smaller than the minimum detectable effect for that scale, so its magnitude should be interpreted with caution. Additionally, neither cue had a significant average effect on WTP for either source in the models with the cues alone (all  $p \geq .135$ ).

These results carry several implications for climate and energy policy. First, respondents, on average, leaned toward prioritizing renewables over fossil fuels, with a mean of 5.17 on the 1 to 7 scale, and 86 percent of respondents reported some positive WTP for renewables. This suggests that renewable energy investment likely has general public support even in a polarized environment. Second, given the responsiveness of Republicans to the Trump cue, elite rhetoric, including rhetoric tied to a single prominent figure, may widen the partisan gap in energy preferences further, which is a risk for those seeking durable, bipartisan agreement on energy policy. Third, because the cues did not shift prioritization in the sample overall and did not reliably shift WTP, messaging strategies aimed at building broad coalitions for the energy transition may benefit from emphasizing shared, cross-partisan benefits of renewables, such as local economic development, rather than frames tied to a specific political figure or to climate change, though this study did not test such messages.

This study has some limitations. First, respondents were recruited from an opt-in, quota-based panel rather than a probability sample. Second, the WTP prompts were not symmetric, as the fossil fuel prompt included a reason not to pay for fossil fuels, which likely inflates the difference between WTP for renewables and fossil

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<sup>8</sup>I ran a robustness check that included a measure of the respondent's concern about the cost of energy. The results are similar to what is reported here and are shown in the supplemental material. I also examined whether the cues weakened the effect of cost concern within each party, using models estimated separately for Republicans and Democrats with cost concern interacted with the cues and with demographic controls. Among Republicans with a positive WTP for fossil fuels, greater concern about cost was associated with a lower WTP in the baseline condition ( $b = -1.23$  per point on the 0 to 10 scale,  $p = .010$ ), but not in the Trump cue ( $b = -0.27$ ,  $p = .645$ ). Among Democrats, greater concern about cost was associated with a marginally lower WTP for renewables in the baseline condition ( $b = -0.64$ ,  $p = .071$ ), but not in the climate cue ( $b = 0.07$ ,  $p = .873$ ). However, in neither case did the effect of cost concern differ significantly between the cue and the baseline condition ( $p = .193$  and  $p = .205$ , respectively), so there is limited evidence that the cues override cost concerns among partisans.

fuels. Third, the conditions were not parallel. The Trump cue changed only the source of the argument for fossil fuels, whereas the climate cue added a scientific source, a climate change frame, and a counterargument, so the effects of the two cues cannot be compared directly. Fourth, party identification was measured after the outcomes, though its distribution did not differ across conditions. Additionally, after leaners are assigned to a party, the reference group of those who identify with neither party is small. Fifth, the survey did not include attention or manipulation checks, and the starting amounts for the WTP questions were not recorded. Finally, the WTP measure relies on a hypothetical, stated-preference elicitation, and stated WTP does not always translate into WTP once a real price change is introduced. The cues were also each delivered once, in a single survey context, and their effects may not persist or generalize to the repeated, cumulative exposure people experience outside of a survey.

Future research should examine whether repeated exposure to partisan cues over time widens the partisan gap in energy preferences identified here, and whether the cues have larger effects on WTP when respondents are asked to pay the stated amount rather than simply report it. Future research should also use parallel cue conditions and symmetric WTP prompts.

## Statements and Declarations

**Ethics approval.** This study was reviewed and approved by the University of Texas at Arlington Institutional Review Board [PROTOCOL NUMBER], and all respondents provided informed consent.

**Pre-registration.** The study was not pre-registered.

**Data availability.** The code to reproduce the analysis is available at <https://github.com/mnowlin/cue-WTP>. The survey data will be made available upon publication.

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**Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process.** During the preparation of this work the author used Claude (Anthropic), through Claude Code, to write and debug the R code for the analysis, to draft and revise portions of the manuscript text, and to check the manuscript for accuracy, consistency, and grammar. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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