Perspective Taking Through Partisan Eyes: 
Cross-National Empathy, Partisanship, and Attitudes Towards 
International Cooperation

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Abstract

How does cross-national empathy influence public attitudes towards international cooperation? Few studies have considered whether the capacity to see the world from the perspective of other actors promotes international cooperation or how partisanship may condition empathy’s effects. In this paper, we argue that cross-national empathy increases support for international agreements because seeing issues through the eyes of other states makes potential gains from cooperation more salient. However, partisan attachments undercut this effect. Across two waves of an original survey experiment covering 4,788 respondents, we find that cues to “step into” the perspective of other states increase support international cooperation. But this effect is concentrated entirely among those with weak partisan attachments. Descriptive text analysis confirms these differential effects across subgroups, while the results hold regardless of the issue area and potential partner country.

Keywords: empathy; cooperation; liberal internationalism; partisanship

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Introduction

Classic theories of international relations suggest that conflicts between states result from failures of cross-national empathy, or the act of considering issues from the perspective of other states. According to this logic, the security dilemma results when one state misperceives another’s defensive-minded behavior as offensive action due to prevailing mutual uncertainty about intentions and the difficulty of placing oneself in the other’s shoes.¹

If the absence of empathy makes international conflict more likely, the practice of empathy may facilitate international cooperation by helping leaders and audiences understand others’ interests, identify mutually beneficial agreements, and/or reduce self-serving biases about what constitutes a fair bargaining outcome. Building on deep literatures in philosophy, social psychology, and international relations,² a growing chorus of scholars and commentators argue that if leaders and publics took the time to consider the perspective of other countries and their leaders, they would bolster the cause of peace and cooperation.³

This folk wisdom is not limited to academics and pundits: it has informed the foreign policy doctrines of the last two Democratic presidential administrations in the United States. Former President Barack Obama emphasized how his willingness to consider issues through China or Iran’s eyes reflected a novel shift in the U.S.’s approach to international affairs.⁴ His first Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, described the foreign policy doctrine of “smart power” as “leaving no one on the sidelines, showing respect, even for one’s enemies, trying to understand and insofar as psychologically possible, empathize with their perspective and point of view.”⁵ President Joe Biden used his inaugural address to explicitly encourage Americans to “just for a moment, stand in the other person’s shoes.”⁶ Biden reportedly

¹Jervis (1978). Please note that this study was pre-registered with OSF.
²Smith (1759); Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000); Booth and Wheeler (2007).
³Walt (2009); Pinker (2012); Wright (2016).
⁴Obama (2020, 450, 482).
⁵David Sherfinski, “Hillary Clinton: ‘Smart power’ includes ‘showing respect, even for one’s enemies’”, Washington Times, December 3, 2014.
considers “strategic empathy” as an essential feature of his foreign policy outlook.  

However, optimism about the relationship between cross-national empathy and international cooperation rests on a surprisingly limited base of evidence. Three questions, in particular, remain unanswered. First, though empathetic dispositions correlate with support for internationalism in general, we know relatively little about the relationship between empathy and public support for U.S. cooperation with other states or membership in international institutions. The present fraying of norms associated with liberal internationalism makes these issues especially salient for understanding potential domestic constraints on foreign policy. Do empathetic attitudes engender popular backing for U.S. participation in multilateral institutions to manage economic, environmental, and security cooperation? 

Second, optimism about empathy’s role in stimulating cooperation assumes that it is both an ingrained disposition (that individuals may possess more or less of) and a quality that can be activated by situational cues to consider others’ perspectives (such as Clinton and Biden’s exhortations). Yet this proposition has not been rigorously tested. If empathy is influential but non-fungible, it may explain levels of support for international cooperation but offer little guide for changing them. Put differently, can cues to engage in perspective taking spur cross-national empathy and, in turn, increase support for cooperation? 

Third, we have little sense of whether empathy interacts with other dispositions like partisanship, which represents an increasingly binding constraint on U.S. foreign policy. A long tradition in American politics suggests that partisanship deeply shapes the strength and direction of individuals’ political attitudes, while recent research argues that empathy may accentuate rather than moderate partisan polarization. Donald Trump’s presidency exacerbated existing partisan divides over how to engage with multilateral institutions and whether to seek opportunities for cooperation with potential adversaries, reinvigorating scholarly in-

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8Bayram and Holmes (2019).


10Milner and Tingley (2015); Schultz (2017).

11Achen and Bartels (2016); Simas, Clifford and Kirkland (2020).
terest in the bases of elite and mass attitudes toward international cooperation. But how do empathy and partisanship interact in the process of foreign policy attitude formation?

In this paper, we develop and test a theory linking cross-national empathy, partisanship, and support for international cooperation. Drawing on social psychology, we hypothesize that cross-national empathy — as both a disposition and a reaction to situational cues — increases support for international cooperation by making individuals more cognizant of the potential for “win-win” cooperative outcomes. However, we argue that partisanship conditions this effect because it influences the malleability and content of individuals’ political attitudes. First, stronger partisans (Strong Democrats and Strong Republicans) are more attached to their attitudes about political issues, and are therefore less likely than weaker partisans (Democrats, Independents, and Republicans) to update their attitudes in response to empathetic cues. Second, left-learning partisanship is positively correlated with both support for international cooperation and dispositional empathy. Empathetic cues should therefore have larger average effects on the attitudes of Independents and Republicans, who are less likely than Democrats to engage in perspective taking and/or express support for engaging with international institutions in the absence of external stimulus to do so.

We evaluate our argument through an original, pre-registered survey experiment designed to isolate the effect of cross-national empathy on support for international cooperation. We asked 4,788 U.S. citizens to evaluate the United States’ ratification of a realistic international agreement and randomly assigned some respondents to “consider the perspective” of another country’s leader before reporting their personal attitude about the treaty. For robustness, we also randomly varied the arena of cooperation (climate change or nuclear nonproliferation) and target of perspective taking (China or India).

Our findings suggest that the glass is both half-full and half-empty regarding empathy and international cooperation. On the one hand, we find a substantial positive relationship

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between *dispositional* empathy and support for international cooperation. Respondents' self-reported levels of cognitive and emotional empathy (Davis 1983) are strongly correlated with support for U.S. participation in international treaties to limit carbon emissions and restrict nuclear weapons development. On the other hand, we find that *situational* cues to induce cross-national empathy yield only marginal aggregate effects. Respondents who were prompted to consider the other leader’s perspective display a small but statistically significant average increase (2.5 percentage points) in support for U.S. participation in international treaties.

In line with our theory of perspective taking and partisanship, however, the positive treatment effect is strongest for Independents (8.7 percentage points) and Republicans (6.6 percentage points). When we analyze the considerations that our subjects raised about the treaties in response to a free-text question, we find that the treatment promotes prosocial attitudes within these subgroups by making both the urgency and potential benefits of international cooperation more salient. Among Independents, the treatment increases focus on the dangers posed by nuclear weapons while diminishing concerns about how the other parties to the agreement might behave. For Republicans, the treatment raises worries about their carbon footprint and lowers concerns about increased energy costs associated with the climate treaty. We infer that situational empathetic cues stimulate support for cooperation by opening some individuals up to potential benefits that they might not otherwise consider.

Overall, we show that while *dispositional* empathy is correlated with support for international cooperation, partisanship significantly blunts the impact of *situational* empathetic cues, which are only effective against individuals with weak or pessimistic priors about international cooperation. One implication is that situational empathetic appeals may be an effective mobilizing tool, on the margin, for leaders seeking to construct a political coalition. But when, why, and how elites can successfully deploy empathetic considerations remains an important area for future study.

Below, we motivate our research by describing the twin challenges of anti-internationalism
and foreign policy attitude polarization in the United States before contextualizing our experiment in the growing body of research on empathy in social psychology and international relations. We then review the key features of the experimental design and present results for each of our preregistered analyses, including aggregate effects of perspective taking and heterogeneous effects by partisan affiliation. We conclude by discussing implications of our findings and highlighting opportunities for future research.

Darkening Prospects for Cooperation?

Our study unites research on the crisis in liberal internationalism with a growing literature on the psychology of foreign policy attitude formation. On the one hand, there is compelling evidence that anti-internationalist sentiments are not just potent, but also exacerbated by partisanship in the United States today. On the other hand, the prevailing folk wisdom about empathy, especially in policy circles, suggests that explicit consideration of others’ perspectives can ameliorate many of these ills. We lay out those competing cases before offering our theory of interaction between empathy and partisanship.

Liberal Internationalism vs. Foreign Policy Attitude Polarization

Scholars of world politics generally agree that the liberal international order faces a crisis of leadership and legitimacy. If international order encompasses the rules and institutions governing state-to-state interactions, the liberal international order emphasizes the pacifying force of international trade and organizations designed to reinforce mutual cooperation over time. Whereas scholars used to debate whether popular support for liberal internationalism was eroding, the Trump administration’s “America First” foreign policy heralded the demise of these norms. Though public support for forms of cooperation such as NATO

\[13\text{Robert Wright, “Biden’s foreign policy team is full of idealists who keep getting people killed,” The Washington Post, December 15, 2020.}\]

\[14\text{Jervis et al. (2018).}\]

\[15\text{Ikenberry (2011).}\]

\[16\text{Kupchan and Trubowitz (2007); Chaudoin, Milner and Tingley (2010); Hafner-Burton, Narang and Rathbun (2019).}\]
and free trade remains high,\textsuperscript{17} and Trump was often constrained in his ability to reshape American foreign policy,\textsuperscript{18} there remain serious questions about the future of cooperative structures governing nuclear proliferation, climate change, trade, and foreign direct investment, especially as challenges from non-Western institutions mount.\textsuperscript{19} President Biden has signaled that he will recommit the United States to liberal internationalism, but his ability to craft a domestic coalition in support of this endeavor remains to be seen.

This uncertainty persists at least in part because partisan polarization on foreign affairs has become strident, matching similar dynamics in domestic politics.\textsuperscript{20} While Democrats and Republicans have historically divided into dovish and hawkish camps, respectively, they broadly agreed on matters such as containing communism, expanding NATO, or liberalizing the global economy. But as partisan polarization has increased, much sharper divisions have emerged over issues such as the use of force and engagement with multilateral institutions, with Republicans (Democrats) favoring a more muscular (cooperative) approach.\textsuperscript{21} Today, polarization has even split the parties on the acceptability of foreign interference in American elections, while making the domestic politics of multilateralism more fraught by narrowing public support for key international initiatives such as combating climate change and curtailing Iran’s nuclear program.\textsuperscript{22}

Substantial evidence indicates that partisanship dramatically influences how people filter information, proxying for both their degree of attachment to their political attitudes and their orientations on foreign policy questions.\textsuperscript{23} For instance, Democrats have traditionally preferred cooperative interactions with foreign countries and multilateral institutions

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\item \textsuperscript{17}Moira Fagan and Jacob Poushler, “NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States,” \textit{Pew Research Center}, February 9, 2020; Bradley Jones, “Americans are generally positive about free trade agreements, more critical of tariff increases,” \textit{Pew Research Center}, May 18, 2018.
\item \textsuperscript{19}Urpelainen and Van de Graaf (2015); Pratt (2017).
\item \textsuperscript{20}Robert Shapiro, “Liberal Internationalism, Public Opinion, and Partisan Conflict in the United States,” in Jervis et al. (2018); Jeong and Quirk (2019); Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2004).
\item \textsuperscript{21}Schultz (2017, 10-11).
\item \textsuperscript{22}Tomz and Weeks (2020); “Climate Change and Russia Are Partisan Flashpoints in Public’s Views of Global Threats,” \textit{Pew Research Center}, July 30, 2019.
\item \textsuperscript{23}Guisinger and Saunders (2017).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
because they value egalitarianism, fairness, and others’ interests. Meanwhile, Republicans have long expressed much less warmth (and even skepticism or hostility) toward engaging with other countries and international organizations because they value social dominance and preserving a favorable relative position in the world.\textsuperscript{24} As we discuss in greater detail below, these partisan priors provide a stable basis for theorizing about who is likely to respond to empathetic cues, and in turn, support cooperation.

**Cross-National Empathy and International Politics**

In parallel, a substantial folk wisdom suggests that many cases of successful international cooperation — from Richard Nixon’s diplomacy with China to Bill Clinton’s brokerage of the Northern Ireland peace process — can be credited to the successful deployment of empathy.\textsuperscript{25} To unpack the the causal chain behind these claims, IR scholars have increasingly embraced the “behavioral turn” toward dissecting the psychological microfoundations of how leaders and citizens process information, formulate attitudes, and make decisions.\textsuperscript{26} A major focus has been the “theory of mind,” or individuals’ ability to understand the beliefs, intentions, emotions, and worldviews of other actors. Our goal here is to examine this folk wisdom through the behavioral turn’s microfoundational lens.

Empathy can come in many forms, but here we principally refer to cognitive empathy, or perspective taking, which is defined as the act of moving beyond one’s own psychological view to consider the views of others.\textsuperscript{27} It is theoretically distinct from emotional empathy, or experiencing the emotions of others, and social intelligence, or predicting others’ behavior without necessarily understanding their psychological point of view.\textsuperscript{28} In *situational* terms, the act of perspective taking is associated with prosocial motivation, social coordination, and cooperative behavior. By prompting subjects to imagine themselves in the lived experiences

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24}Rathbun (2007); Brutger (2021).
\item \textsuperscript{25}Shogan (2009); Grover (2016).
\item \textsuperscript{26}Hafner-Burton et al. (2017).
\item \textsuperscript{27}Davis (1983).
\item \textsuperscript{28}Coke, Batson and McDavis (1978); Neale and Bazerman (1983); Galinsky et al. (2008); Hilliard et al. (2018). As we discuss below, cognitive and emotional empathy are theoretically separate but empirically difficult to disentangle.
\end{itemize}
of others,\textsuperscript{29} various experiments have documented positive effects of perspective taking inducements on empathetic feelings, altruism, reduced stereotyping, and negotiating success.\textsuperscript{30} In dispositional terms, individuals who score higher on indices of perspective taking are more likely to assist, cooperate with, and sacrifice for others.\textsuperscript{31}

Several IR studies suggest that empathy plays an essential role in making international politics less conflictual. Empathy is key to understanding and preventing crisis escalation by allowing participants to understand what sort of resolution others will accept.\textsuperscript{32} The success or failure of peace summits can hinge on participants’ capability to convey empathy to one another as well as on mediators’ ability to construct empathy between disputing parties.\textsuperscript{33} The capacity to feel others’ pain stimulates greater generosity in foreign aid allocation.\textsuperscript{34} In positing that perspective taking is associated with de-escalation of hostilities and prosocial behavior, these studies offer validation for the folk wisdom.

More recent scholarship, however, pushes back on this optimistic view of empathy, arguing that perspective taking may escalate rather than ameliorate conflict dynamics depending on the local “knowledge structures” that it activates.\textsuperscript{35} Two additional factors may complicate the folk wisdom. The first is that much of what we know about the behavioral turn derives from studies of conflict and behavior rather than cooperation and institutions.\textsuperscript{36} While “theory of mind” is fundamental to concepts like the security dilemma, and the experimental literature on international cooperation has hardly ignored psychological factors, empathy itself has been understudied and its effects on international cooperation remain uncertain.\textsuperscript{37}

The second factor is partisanship, which may condition empathy’s effects. Research on empathy and related topics in IR has typically treated partisanship as a control variable

\textsuperscript{29}Stotland (1969); Clore and Jeffery (1972).
\textsuperscript{30}Batson (2009).
\textsuperscript{31}Batson and Moran (1999); Galinsky et al. (2008); Holmes (2018).
\textsuperscript{32}Booth and Wheeler (2007); Keller and Yang (2009).
\textsuperscript{33}Holmes and Yarhi-Milo (2017).
\textsuperscript{34}Bayram and Holmes (2019).
\textsuperscript{35}Kertzer, Brutger and Quek (2020).
\textsuperscript{36}Kertzer and Tingley (2018, 325)
\textsuperscript{37}Bechtel and Scheve (2013); Chaudoin (2014); Hafner-Burton et al. (2014); Hafner-Burton, LeVeck and Victor (2017); Tingley and Tomz (2014, 2019); Brutger and Rathbun (2020).
rather than a theoretically relevant factor.\textsuperscript{38} Yet we know that partisanship reflects both the malleability and content of individuals’ attitudes about international affairs.\textsuperscript{39} However, it remains to be seen whether perspective taking magnifies or moderates partisans’ tendency to distort incoming information in ways that reaffirm their preexisting worldviews.\textsuperscript{40}

**Theory and Hypotheses**

How does cross-national empathy influence attitudes towards international cooperation, and how does partisanship condition these effects? We argue that while cross-national empathy increases support for cooperation on net, its effects should be most pronounced among individuals with weak or pessimistic partisan priors regarding international engagement.

**Cross-National Empathy and International Cooperation**

There are three potential mechanisms through which cross-national empathy might affect attitudes toward international cooperation. While these mechanisms are mainly situational in nature, they also reflect how a disposition toward empathy might shape attitudes. First, perspective taking may reduce negative stereotypes about outgroups by challenging or replacing socially-received heuristics with more careful considerations about the context, incentives, and constraints facing other actors — though the effect of this shift is contingent on the nature of the strategic environment.\textsuperscript{41} In interactions featuring possible mutual gains, such as a coordination game, perspective taking may increase the odds of “win-win” cooperative outcomes by revealing the other’s incentives to cooperate. However, in a strategic environment with zero-sum payoffs or high risks of defection, weighing others’ incentives might point out the hazards of cooperation.\textsuperscript{42}

Second, perspective taking may reduce self-serving biases about what constitutes a “fair”

\textsuperscript{38}Notable exceptions include Baum and Groeling (2009); Levendusky and Horowitz (2012); Bayram and Holmes (2019); Kertzer, Rathbun and Rathbun (2020).
\textsuperscript{39}Kertzer et al. (2014); Gries (2014).
\textsuperscript{40}Simas, Clifford and Kirkland (2020).
\textsuperscript{41}Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000).
\textsuperscript{42}Epley, Caruso and Bazerman (2006).
outcome, which often otherwise impedes cooperation.\textsuperscript{43} Because fairness considerations shape public attitudes towards international politics, and given the well-documented tendency to view oneself as “holier than thou,” perceptions of bias among negotiating partners may narrow the range of acceptable cooperative agreements.\textsuperscript{44} However, recent salutary evidence suggests that perspective taking can mute these egocentric biases, potentially increasing opportunities for mutually beneficial outcomes.\textsuperscript{45}

Third, perspective taking may induce altruistic feelings towards other actors. Social psychology research suggests that inhabiting the perspective of others stimulates feelings of psychological closeness, emotional empathy, or sympathy.\textsuperscript{46} By increasing the feeling of overlap between self and other, perspective taking motivates individuals to seek out positive-sum cooperative arrangements and reduces concerns about asymmetric relative gains.\textsuperscript{47}

Regardless of the specific mechanism, this literature offers clear implications for empathy and international cooperation, and forms the basis for the folk theory that we seek to test. Whether individuals are prompted to consider the perceptions, motivations, and priorities of other political leaders or do so as a function of their underlying capacity for empathy, this may help them recognize opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation. For instance, Holmes (2018) suggests that empathetic understanding between leaders improves diplomatic bargaining by enabling leaders to gather information on their counterparts’ motivations, constraints, and worldviews.

We therefore expect situational empathetic cues to increase support for international cooperation on average. However, we also acknowledge that the effect of perspective taking may be context-dependent. For example, perspective taking may be less likely to promote prosocial outcomes in antagonistic settings, such as competitive games or in the presence of status hierarchies.\textsuperscript{48} For this reason, we test the impact of perspective taking under

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{43} Babcock and Loewenstein (1997).
\textsuperscript{44} Kertzer and Rathbun (2015); Epley and Dunning (2000).
\textsuperscript{45} Scaffidi Abbate, Boca and Gendolla (2016); Eyal, Steffel and Epley (2018).
\textsuperscript{46} Galinsky and Ku (2004); Batson (2009); Toi and Batson (1983).
\textsuperscript{47} Davis (1983); Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000).
\textsuperscript{48} Epley, Caruso and Bazerman (2006); Vorauer and Quesnel (2016).
\end{footnotesize}
both cooperative and competitive circumstances: roughly half of our respondents received a vignette about a climate treaty, while the remainder got one about a nuclear weapons treaty. Since the latter scenario is more likely than the former to invoke concerns about vulnerability and security competition, our setup builds in degrees of difficulty in testing the folk wisdom. If perspective taking cues prove equally likely to increase support for cooperation on either topic, this would validate the folk theory.

*H1: Perspective taking cues will increase support for international cooperation.*

**Perspective Taking Through Partisan Eyes**

We further argue that partisanship powerfully conditions the effect of cross-national cognitive empathy on support for international cooperation. The intuition for partisanship’s influence on perspective taking is straightforward: empathetic cues expand the range of considerations that individuals use to form political attitudes (e.g. the perceptions, priorities, and constraints facing other states), while partisanship shapes how individuals update their political attitudes in response to new considerations.49

Our theory of partisanship’s influence on perspective taking begins with the observation that standard measures of partisanship proxy both the malleability and content of individuals’ political attitudes towards foreign policy issues.50 Various descriptive evidence supports this claim. On the malleability of attitudes by partisan identification, strong partisans tend to hold more entrenched political views and be more politically engaged than weaker partisans.51 Table A8 confirms that within our sample, self-described Strong Republicans and Strong Democrats are nearly three times as likely to report “always” paying attention to politics compared to self-described Democrats, Independents, and Republicans (an average of 34 percent to an average of 13 percent). On the content of attitudes by partisan identification, Row 1 of Table A9 shows that partisanship is connected with what individuals think about

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50Rathbun et al. (2016).
international cooperation: among our control group (who received no empathetic cue and thus provide an appropriate baseline measurement), more Democratic (Republican) respondents exhibit higher (lower) support for U.S. participation in our hypothetical international agreement.

First, then, we theorize that the strength of partisan attachments predicts who will be influenced by the considerations introduced via empathetic cues. This argument reflects standard principles of Bayesian updating in response to new information. In this view, individuals update their attitudes predictably in the direction supported by novel considerations, but the degree of updating is inversely related to the strength of an individual’s prior attitudes. If cross-national empathetic cues prompt individuals to reflect on a range of new information about other states, this information should be most influential among those whose attitudes about international affairs are less firmly entrenched. We therefore expect perspective taking cues to have a larger positive effect on support for international cooperation among respondents with more weakly held partisan attachments than those with more strongly held partisan attachments. In making this argument, we do not claim that weak partisans have no priors whatsoever, but rather that relative levels of partisanship capture the strength of individuals’ attitudes toward international cooperation.

*H2a: Perspective taking cues will have more positive effects on support for international cooperation among weak partisans than among strong partisans.*

Second, we contend that the content of partisan attitudes about international affairs affects who will update their views in response to our empathetic cue. We predict asymmetric effects: Republicans and Independents, rather than Democrats, will become more supportive of international cooperation. This branch of the theory has two plausible mechanisms. For starters, we know that Democrats tend to hold favorable views of international cooperation,

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52 Gerber and Green (1999).
54 Though Guisinger (2017) notes those with middle-ground views may be conflicted rather than lacking in strong priors, we show in Table A10 that respondents who are more (less) attentive to politics are less (more) likely to display positive treatment effects, consistent with our interpretation of weak partisanship.
while Republicans are relatively skeptical of multilateral engagement, and Independents may not have strong prior attitudes either way. As a result, an invitation to engage in perspective taking may be less influential among Democrats simply because they already support initiatives involving international institutions.

Another related possibility is that partisanship conditions the effect of perspective taking because it is correlated with dispositional empathy (e.g. the propensity to engage in perspective taking in the absence of external cues). As Brutger (2021) has shown, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to identify with the needs of other actors in the context of negotiations. Row 3 in Table A9 confirms this finding: self-identified Democrats report higher levels of dispositional cognitive empathy than self-identified Republicans and Independents. As a result, perspective taking cues may be less influential among Democrats simply because Democrats are more likely to engage in perspective taking without prompting. While disentangling these mechanisms is easier in theory than in practice — given that differences in dispositional empathy could be the cause of partisan differences in support for international cooperation, and vice versa — we simply note that both factors generate the same empirical prediction.

**H2b**: Perspective taking cues will have more positive effects on support for international cooperation among Republicans and Independents than among Democrats.

To summarize, our theory of partisanship and perspective taking expects that perspective taking cues will be most influential among those with weak or pessimistic prior attitudes towards international cooperation. First, weak partisans have less entrenched attitudes about international engagement than strong partisans. Second, Democrats feel more favorably about international cooperation and are more empathetic than Republicans and Independents on average. The result is that Independents and Republicans are most likely to show increases in support contingent on receipt of the perspective taking cue, which provides new information that stimulates updating. We do not make predictions about whether Republicans versus

Independents will exhibit larger treatment effects since it is not obvious *ex ante* whether mechanisms related to the malleability or content of prior attitudes will dominate. Having laid out our theoretical predictions, we now turn to presentation of our data and results.

**Data & Methods**

**Sampling**

We fielded a survey experiment among 4,788 respondents between October 2019 and January 2020. The first wave sampled 1,052 respondents via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) survey platform, which is employed widely in political science and psychology for the purposes of convenience and generalizability. The second wave was embedded in a longer survey with a sample of 3,736 respondents recruited through the Lucid platform, which has been shown to track well with U.S. national benchmarks. Because the experimental design, treatment, and outcome measures were identical across surveys, we pool responses in our analyses but include a wave dummy variable to account for any variation by sample.

**Covariates, Random Assignment, and Treatment Conditions**

The experiment is a 3x2 factorial design with random assignment at the individual level. All subjects provided demographic and attitudinal information including age, education, race, and party identification. The MTurk sample additionally collected respondents’ income, willingness to trust other countries, support for American involvement in world affairs, and the index of perspective taking derived from Davis (1983); these items did not appear in the Lucid sample due to time constraints. The Lucid sample, meanwhile, also gathered respondents’ self-reported level of attention to government and politics. As expected, Table A1 shows that random assignment was not significantly correlated with respondents’ pre-treatment characteristics. Figure A1 shows the flow and contents of the experiment, which include a perspective taking cue inviting respondents to step into the shoes of another country (China or India) before considering a current issue of international importance (climate change).

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56Berinsky, Huber and Lenz (2012).
57Coppock and McClellan (2019).
change or nuclear proliferation). All control and treatment vignettes appear in Figures A2-A7.

The treatment conditions differ from control in three ways: by introducing the perspective taking text; by including a picture of the leader whose perspective respondents are to assume; and by asking respondents to pick a policy preference from that leader’s perspective. Here, we build on seminal social psychology experiments on cognitive empathy that explicitly ask participants to imagine themselves in another’s shoes. Though this treatment bundles together several factors that could induce an empathetic response, we suggest that this makes a hard test for perspective taking. If some combination of the prompt, photo, and question fails to induce empathy, then perspective taking is a far more difficult task than the folk wisdom often assumes.

**Target of Perspective Taking — Country Leaders**

Before reading about the treaty, respondents in the Chinese leader or Indian leader perspective taking conditions were shown the name and picture of Xi Jinping or Narendra Modi, respectively. They were then given the following prompt:

“As you read the scenario below, put yourself in the shoes of the leader of [India / China]. As the leader of [India / China], imagine how you would approach an international treaty to limit [climate change / nuclear weapons].”

After reading about the treaty, respondents in the perspective taking conditions were asked whether they would accept or reject the treaty if they were the leader of the foreign country, which was intended to cement the effects of the perspective taking cue. We

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58 Since probability of assignment to the perspective taking treatment varied slightly by wave, we apply inverse probability weights (IPW) across the sample, treating each wave as a block.
59 Stotland (1969); Clore and Jeffery (1972).
60 One limitation of this design is that it does not allow us to precisely identify which of these factors is driving the effect. We also acknowledge that there is a double form of perspective taking at work here in which respondents are asked to put themselves in the shoes of not just another country, but also another leader. However, in extensive piloting before fielding the experiment, a citizen-level perspective taking treatment that we explored yielded null results.
61 We deliberately chose photos depicting both leaders as they often appear in the media when greeting a crowd or entering a room — waving and smiling faintly — to increase the realism of the scenario.
62 This question was part of the treatment, so we could not ask it in the control condition.
selected China and India as the foreign targets of the perspective taking condition for two reasons. First, both are nuclear states and substantial emitters of greenhouse gases, and thus plausible candidates for cooperation on both issues. Second, while China is an autocracy and clearly viewed as a U.S. adversary, India is a democracy with whom the U.S. generally has friendly relations, allowing us to examine whether the effect of the perspective taking cue varies with perceived closeness to the United States. Further, by randomly assigning each combination of topic and country, we maximize the comparability of results by country across topics (and vice versa).

**Topic of Perspective Taking — International Treaty Issue**

Respondents in both the perspective taking and control conditions were asked to consider international negotiations around a treaty limiting greenhouse gas emissions or nuclear weapons development. We chose climate and nuclear weapons policy as topics of interest because both provide examples of treaties that have recently come under strain. In each vignette, we informed respondents that joint cooperation between states would generate positive outcomes — reduction in the impact of climate change or the danger of nuclear war — but that each participating state would incur costs, such as rising energy prices and a diminished ability to defend in the event of an attack on one’s country. To let respondents interpret the relative probability and importance of cooperative gains versus individualized losses, we did not provide precise economic, environmental, or security outcomes associated with different levels of interstate cooperation. However, we deliberately made the economic and security risks associated with treaty ratification — including energy taxes and diminished self-defense abilities — non-trivial to stack the deck against our theory, on the assumption that pure self-interest considerations might reasonably outweigh cooperative instincts.

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63 There are few other countries with whom both treaties would be plausible. Future work might explore these dynamics with the only other clear option, Russia. We acknowledge that both India and China have relatively small nuclear arsenals compared to the United States.

64 Mirilovic and Kim (2017). This was another of our preregistered hypotheses, for which we find only marginal support, as shown in Table 1.
Outcome Measures and Estimation

In keeping with our pre-registered analysis plan, our primary outcome of interest was individuals’ response to the question:

“Thinking about your personal views on [nuclear weapons / climate change], how much do you support the U.S. signing an international treaty that requires countries to [reduce carbon emissions by taxing energy, stop developing and producing tactical nuclear weapons]?”

Responses ranged on a five-point scale from “Strongly Oppose” to “Strongly Support.” We then asked all respondents to explain their reasoning for supporting or opposing international cooperation in at least 25 words. Finally, respondents received an attention check asking them to recall whether the proposed treaty in the scenario they read about involved climate change or nuclear weapons. To assess the effect of the perspective taking treatment on attitudes towards international cooperation, we perform a series of ordinary least squares regressions. We report results with and without covariate adjustment, but this does not change our interpretation.

Results

Dispositional Empathy and Support for Cooperation

Before delving into the experimental results, we first examine the descriptive relationship between the index of self-reported dispositions towards empathy and support for international cooperation. If there is any validity to the folk wisdom about empathy and cooperation, we would expect to find it here. While we caution that the results in Figure A8 cannot be interpreted causally, they are important nonetheless. The solid black line

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65 About 15 percent of respondents (724/4,788) failed the attention check. Since these failures were balanced across treatment and control in wave 1 but not in wave 2, we do not exclude these respondents from our analysis. However, dropping those who fail from the sample does not alter our results. See Appendix Tables A3 and A6.

66 In line with our pre-analysis plan, we use the LASSO algorithm to select prognostic covariates from the set of pre-treatment indicators we collected in both waves: age, gender, race, years of education, and party identification.
depicts the relationship between the aggregate index and support for cooperation, while the dashed and dotted lines break out its cognitive and emotional components, respectively (Davis 1983).

We draw two inferences from this figure. First, the positive slope for each line indicates that dispositional empathy, however we measure it, is indeed correlated with support for international cooperation. Second, the similar slopes of the dashed and dotted lines suggest that cognitive and emotional empathy are correlated with each other and thus difficult to disentangle in practice. These descriptive findings favor the optimistic view of empathy’s relationship with international cooperation.

**Situational Empathy and Support for Cooperation**

Turning to the main experimental results, we find that perspective taking cues have a modest, positive effect on support for international cooperation. As depicted in Table 1, assignment to the perspective taking condition increases support for international cooperation in aggregate by 0.07 on our five-point scale \( H1 \), with \( p = 0.037 \).\(^{67}\) This corresponds to a 2.5 percentage point increase in support if we treat the outcome variable as binary rather than continuous.

We also examine the robustness of this result by target country and topic. Columns 3-4 of Table 1 show that the interaction between the perspective taking treatment and country treatment is just short of statistical significance at conventional levels. The perspective taking treatment has a positive, statistically significant effect on cooperation with India, but the effect for China is not significant. This suggests that respondents were more willing to cooperate with India, but no more or less willing to cooperate with China, after receiving the cue.\(^{68}\) Columns 5-6 show that the effect of perspective taking did not significantly differ by topic of cooperation, as the interaction term is small and well short of statistical significance.

\(^{67}\)Table A4 depicts the full models, including the covariate coefficients.

\(^{68}\)The N for the individual country regressions includes respondents who received the control condition. The N in the interaction term is smaller than in the individual county regressions because it does not include the pure control group — only respondents assigned to treatment were assigned to a country.
The main treatment effect is slightly larger and closer to statistical significance for climate versus nuclear weapons.

The lack of substantial heterogeneity by country and topic suggests that the effect of perspective taking is robust across contexts and can induce prosocial outcomes. Consistent with more optimistic accounts of perspective taking, our empathetic cues may have prompted more careful consideration of other actors’ strategic incentives in a cooperative environment and highlighted additional benefits to cooperation (e.g. if the United States cooperates, other states are more likely to follow). Yet the effect’s modest size implies substantial limits to these prosocial dynamics. From this point of view, if our prompt, photo, and question only induced a slight shift in aggregate attitudes, then perhaps empathy’s benefits have been oversold. Indeed, once we turn to the partisan heterogeneity in our findings, we observe that the optimistic interpretation of perspective taking only pertains to certain individuals.

### Perspective Taking Through Partisan Eyes

The results among partisan subgroups and by strength of partisan affiliation appear in Figure 1 and are consistent with our interpretation of Bayesian updating \((H2a/H2b)\). First,
the positive effects of the perspective taking treatment are almost entirely concentrated among weaker partisans, in line with $H2a$. Among Independents, the perspective taking cue increases support for international cooperation among Independents by 0.22 on our five-point scale ($p = 0.002$), which equates to an 8.7 percentage point effect on a binary scale, or between three and four times the average treatment effect in the full sample. For Republicans, these effects are similar in terms of size (0.23) and statistical significance ($p = 0.013$), reflecting a 6.6 percentage point increase in support. Meanwhile, the perspective taking cue has a negligible impact on support for cooperation among strong partisans, with neither Strong Democrats nor Strong Republicans registering a significant increase in support for cooperation. The substantial effects among Republicans and Independents combined with the absence thereof for Strong Republicans and Strong Democrats confirm that the positive influence of the perspective taking cue is strongest among those with weaker prior attitudes.

This finding flows neatly into a discussion of $H2b$, which expects that the cooperation-inducing effects of perspective taking will be more positive among Republicans and Independents than among Democrats. Figure 1 shows that the treatment effect for Democrats is weakly positive and not close to statistical significance, in contrast to the large, positive, and significant results for Republicans and Independents discussed in the previous paragraph. These results affirm that among weak partisans, perspective taking cues have the greatest effects on those who are either skeptical of or may lack strong priors about international cooperation — Republicans and Independents, respectively.

On net, our results are especially interesting in light of recent research by Kertzer, Rathbun and Rathbun (2020) showing that the provision of factual information magnifies partisan polarization around contentious international matters. By contrast, we suggest that perspective taking reduces polarization on international cooperation among individuals with weak or pessimistic priors about the issue. Through inviting individuals to step outside of their own worldviews, perspective taking may elide the partisan filters that otherwise distort more traditional information processing. Yet for strong partisans, preexisting attitudes sharply
constrain the impact of perspective taking cues. These findings are consistent with but also temper the folk wisdom concerning cross-national empathy: its positive effects chiefly apply to individuals with low barriers to attitude change.

**Discussion**

To better understand the interaction between partisanship and perspective taking, we analyze the written answers to the free response question that we included at the end of all surveys regarding the considerations that came to mind for respondents when thinking about the treaty. As in the main regressions, we pool across survey waves.\(^{69}\) We then use structural topic modeling to test for systematic variation across treatment conditions within these qualitative data.\(^{70}\) We also provide representative quotes from the responses to support our conclusions. The results confirm that the perspective taking treatment works among Independents and Republicans by opening these respondents up to considerations that they might not have otherwise entertained, such as the risks posed by nuclear weapons.

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\(^{69}\)The text of the question appears in the Appendix. For quality control purposes, we manually review and remove responses that contain gibberish or text unrelated to the question.

\(^{70}\)Roberts et al. (2014). We use the `stm` package in R to preprocess the responses, tune the number of topics (6), and estimate the parameters.
and concerns about humans' carbon footprint. At the same time, Democrats exhibit little change, while Strong Democrats and Strong Republicans express sentiments consistent with their partisan priors.

Figure A9 plots the effect of the perspective taking treatment on topical prevalence for Independents and Republicans, pooling across the country and topic conditions. Movement from left to right in each plot indicates changes in topical prevalence from the control condition to the perspective taking treatment condition, with statistically significant differences represented by point estimates bounded away from zero. For Independents, the perspective taking treatment minimizes concern about how other parties to the agreement might behave while magnifying their attention to nuclear risks. Treated Independents are less likely to worry about whether others will comply or renege, with sentiments such as “Other countries won’t stop producing even if they say they will,” and “guarantee that all other countries stop also” becoming less common. By contrast, their increased sense of alarm and urgency about reducing nuclear weapons development and production is evident in responses such as “We don’t need to continue pursuing areas of weaponry that could destroy the world if gotten into the wrong hands,” and “The more nuclear weapons in the world, the harder it becomes to control them.” Thus, among Independents, the perspective taking treatment highlights the rationale for reaching an accord on nuclear weapons production and development while assuaging concerns about whether other countries will comply.

For their part, Republicans become more concerned about humans’ carbon footprint but less worried about energy costs as a function of the treatment. These are striking shifts for a members of a party that has staunchly opposed efforts to regulate U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. Despite evident skepticism of the threat posed by climate change, the perspective taking cue makes Republicans more likely to support the treaty “Because the [sic] we need to reduce our carbon footprint. Even if it eventually turns out that the whole climate change

\[ \text{Footnote:} \text{Figures A10 display analogous plots for Democrats, Strong Democrats, and Strong Republicans. Tables A11-A15 contain representative responses. Row 7 in Table A9 confirms that the findings are not driven by rumination effects; no partisan subgroup took meaningfully longer to complete the survey than others.} \]
thing is a hoax, it’s always better to be safe than to later regret.” and since “Climate Change seems like a big deal that is supposedly affecting our society to having this would probably calm down the concerns of the people.” In parallel, Republicans’ concern about rising energy costs as a function of the treaty — embodied in responses such as “energy cost to me, gasoline cost, heating fuel cost and electricity cost” and “It would increase the cost of electricity if the treaty were accepted. Energy prices are already too high for many people to afford, including me.” — drops in prevalence. The combination of Republicans’ greater attention to climate issues and diminished concern for their energy bills in response to the treatment underscores the mechanism at work: situational empathetic cues open these respondents up to considerations that might not occur to them otherwise.

In contrast, Strong Democrats’ and Strong Republicans’ responses are in line with what we might expect from more partisan individuals. On the one hand, Strong Democrats express more sentiments about a clean environment and less concern over others’ behavior, indicating that the perspective taking treatment did not open these individuals up to any novel considerations given that Strong Democrats tend to very pro-environment. On the other hand, Strong Republicans display no significant changes in topical prevalence, suggesting that the perspective taking treatment failed to cut through these respondents’ firm (and skeptical) priors about international cooperation.

Overall, the topic modeling results presented in this section confirm our theoretical intuitions and empirical findings from the regression analysis. The respondents most affected by the perspective taking treatment — Independents and Republicans — appear to have been moved to support international cooperation by considerations that might not have been salient to them otherwise. These results are salutary but cautionary for the optimistic view of situational empathy insofar as they point to a swing coalition, rather than the population as a whole, who are responsive to perspective taking cues.
Conclusion

Our theory and evidence suggest that cross-national empathy increases support for international cooperation, but partisan attachments strongly condition these effects. Prompting people to move beyond their own psychological viewpoint and consider that of others makes them more supportive, on net, of new international treaties — whether the issue at stake is ameliorating the effects of climate change or preventing the spread of tactical nuclear weapons. Consistent with a model of rational updating, the effect is concentrated primarily among those with weak or pessimistic partisan priors where international cooperation is concerned.

These results are striking not only in terms of their partisan heterogeneity, but also with regard to the microfoundations for the folk wisdom surrounding international cooperation. As our descriptive analysis illustrates, recent Democratic presidents are not wrong to highlight the importance of one’s innate capacity to see issues from others’ perspectives in working out cooperative solutions. Even if empathetic capacity is not evenly distributed across the population, it is clear that more empathetic people are also more inclined to support international cooperation. But our findings reveal much greater ambiguity over whether attempts to induce empathy through perspective taking cues are an effective rhetorical or political strategy. On the one hand, many of our experimental subjects did not increase their support for international cooperation in response to the perspective taking treatment due to strong partisan attachments. This is potentially discouraging if it captures how most citizens would react to perspective taking cues, especially in an increasingly polarized political environment. On the other hand, a middle swath of our sample — those with either weak or pessimistic priors about international cooperation — exhibited a substantial jump in support as a function of the treatment. This is potentially encouraging given that elections and policy debates are often won by attracting the marginal median voter to one’s cause. Whether the glass is half-full or half-empty regarding these “swing empathizers” may depend on your perspective (no pun intended).
This paper only scratches the surface of potential research applying logic of perspective taking to international politics. First, we suggest several mechanisms through which cognitive empathy may operate, finding tentative support for one in which perspective taking helps individuals key in on others’ incentives (as opposed to reducing egocentric bias or eliciting altruistic impulses). Additional research is required to more fully adjudicate among these competing logics. Second, we explore the effects of a multidimensional perspective taking treatment. More focused treatments, perhaps including real-world media or interpersonal contact, could help to isolate which factors are most important in inducing situational empathy. Third, we explore the effects of perspective taking among mass publics, but it remains unclear whether perspective taking has similar effects among foreign policy elites. Fourth, the effects of perspective taking may be contingent on various contextual factors, such as the medium or messenger. For example, one angle that we do not test in our experiment is the role of direct elite cues in promoting or inhibiting perspective taking. Follow-on work might examine whether statements favoring or opposing a potential international agreement from the president or other senior politicians amplifies or moderates the perspective taking treatment effects that we identify here.

As the institutions and regimes that undergird the liberal international order fray, and partisan polarization spills across the water’s edge, political leaders may be increasingly constrained in their ability to maintain, rebuild, or develop new institutions for international cooperation. The prospects for cooperative outcomes are perhaps dimmer now than at any time since the onset of the Cold War, as evidenced by recent strain on pacts covering issues such as climate change and nuclear weapons. To the extent that partisanship increasingly intersects with anti-internationalist sentiments in the United States, the largely bipartisan liberal internationalist consensus of yore may soon be a distant memory. Given these developments, it is more important than ever to understand how psychological factors such as empathy — which has long been viewed as critical to the psychology of conflict versus cooperation — and partisan attachments interact to affect attitudes toward internationalism,
and our work here offers an important first step in that direction.

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