

# How Political Content in *Us Weekly* Can Reduce Polarized Affect Toward Elected Officials

## Supplemental appendix

2	Figure A1: Examples of <i>Us Weekly</i> 's "25 Things You Don't Know About Me"
3	<i>Us Weekly</i> as a soft news outlet for political information
4	Experimental treatments
5	Details of the experiment and sample
5	Table A1: Balance Tests
6	Alternate specifications
6	Table A2: Effects of Personalizing Treatment, Alternate Specifications
7	Figure A2: Effects of Personalizing Treatment on Feeling Thermometer Ratings, by Senator
8	Effects of the treatment on the traits people associate with the senator
9	Table A3: Effects of Treatment on Perceptions of Politician Traits
10	Figure A3: Effect of Personalizing Treatment on Perceptions of Traits
11	Heterogeneous treatment effects
11	Figure A4: Treatment Effects by Shared Partisanship and Strength of Partisanship
12	Table A4: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects by Strength of Partisanship
13	Table A5: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects by Political Knowledge
13	Figure A5: Treatment Effects by Shared Partisanship and Political Knowledge
14	Limitations of the experiment
15	References

Figure A1: Examples of *Us Weekly's* "25 Things You Don't Know About Me"



### ***Us Weekly* as a soft news outlet for political information**

Politicians' "25 Things" columns can reach a wide audience, one that exceeds that of traditional news outlets. *Us Weekly* estimates that issues of their print magazine reach just short of ten million readers, with about 24 million unique visitors to their digital magazine site per month.<sup>1</sup> To give a sense of its reach relative news magazines, *Us Weekly's* print magazine circulation exceeds that of *Time* magazine and *The New Yorker*.

While news magazines provide in-depth reporting on current events, the *Us Weekly* column represents a type of soft news. While news magazines find an audience with those interested in current events, an entertainment magazine like *Us Weekly* is directed toward an audience looking for entertainment rather than traditional news reporting. The kinds of political information people acquire from this kind of soft news is distinctive as well. The tidbits that politicians share in the column are highly personalized, tied to favorite foods or family anecdotes. The tone of the column is positive, as it tends to be when politicians are interviewed on entertainment programs (Baum 2005). The content is also more personal than political, with minimal references to partisanship or policy content. It is a form of communication that is unmediated by journalists, where politicians share personal details in first person language as if they were speaking directly to the reader. This kind of unmediated direct communication can be seen as more compelling and relatable than the same information mediated through journalistic formats (Fogarty and Wolak 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://a360media.com/entertainment-group/us-weekly/>

## **Experimental treatments**

### Control – Ted Cruz condition

Ted Cruz is a conservative lawmaker who represents the state of Texas in the U.S. Senate.

How do you feel about Ted Cruz?

*(Feeling thermometer)*

### Treatment – Ted Cruz condition

Ted Cruz is a conservative lawmaker who represents the state of Texas in the U.S. Senate.

Here are five things you might not know about the senator:

- I was once suspended in high school for skipping class to play foosball.
- As a kid, I used to go bullfrogging on the lake behind our house.
- My favorite movie is *The Princess Bride*. I can quote every line.
- To my wife's great annoyance, my kids both love playing *Plants vs. Zombies* with Daddy on his iPhone.
- When I'm away from the family, in Washington, D.C., my dinner is a can of soup. I have dozens in the pantry.

How do you feel about Ted Cruz?

*(Feeling thermometer)*

### Control – Bernie Sanders condition

Bernie Sanders is a liberal lawmaker who represents the state of Vermont in the U.S. Senate.

How do you feel about Bernie Sanders?

*(Feeling thermometer)*

### Treatment – Bernie Sanders condition

Bernie Sanders is a liberal lawmaker who represents the state of Vermont in the U.S. Senate.

Here are five things you might not know about the senator:

- I like disco music. I like ABBA. We played some ABBA at my wedding.
- When I was a kid, I really liked attending Boy Scout camp in upstate New York.
- *Modern Family* is my favorite guilty pleasure TV show.
- My idea of the perfect day off is being at home in Vermont with the grandkids.
- I proposed to my wife in the parking lot of a Friendly's restaurant.

How do you feel about Bernie Sanders?

*(Feeling thermometer)*

How well do the following describe [Ted Cruz/Bernie Sanders]?

1: Does not describe at all    2    3    4    5    6    7: Describes very well

- Likeable
- Understands the problems facing people like you
- Trustworthy
- Willing to compromise with others to get things done

### Details of the experiment and sample

The experiment was included in a module of the 2020 Cooperative Election Study, administered by YouGov. One thousand adults participated in the survey online.

The unweighted sample is 58% female, 72% white, 11% Black, and 12% Latino. In a three-point partisanship item, 25% identify as Republicans, 35% identify as independents, and 40% identify as Democrats. The median age of participants is 50. In the sample, 37% are college educated.

Results from balance tests are summarized in Table A1.

**Table A1: Balance Tests**

	<i>Sanders condition</i>		<i>Cruz condition</i>		t-tests of treatment effects on demographics	
	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Politician	Personalizing info.
Percent female	57%	56%	62%	58%	t=-1.01, p<0.31	t=0.82, p<0.41
Percent nonwhite	30%	31%	31%	27%	t=0.62, p<0.53	t=0.58, p<0.56
Mean age	47	48	47	59	t=-0.95, p<0.34	t=-2.00, p<0.05
Percent college educated	33%	37%	42%	37%	t=-1.47, p<0.14	t=0.15, p<0.88
Percent Democratic	37%	40%	40%	45%	t=-1.17, p<0.24	t=-1.21, p<0.23
Percent Republican	24%	26%	23%	25%	t=0.23, p<0.82	t=-0.78, p<0.43

The survey module was reviewed by a university institutional review board and deemed exempt. No identifying details were collected in the course of this data collection. Participants were recruited by YouGov and opt-in to participate in public opinion surveys in exchange for points that can be converted into gift cards or cash. No deception was used in this study.

*Alternate specifications*

In the manuscript, I report results of two-way analysis of variance, given the continuous nature of the feeling thermometer dependent variable. I do not apply survey weights. In two-way ANOVA, I find a significant main effect associated with the personalizing treatment ( $F(1,990)=12.99, p<0.01$ ). The treatment has statistically similar effects on evaluations of Cruz and Sanders ( $F=0.80, p<0.37$ ), but with a difference in intercept since Senator Sanders drew warmer evaluations on average than Senator Cruz within this sample ( $F= 27.97, p<0.00$ ).

In Table A2, I report several alternate specifications using regression and the same feeling thermometer measure. I consider whether the effects of the personalizing treatment differ depending on the candidate people read about, and whether the results are robust to the inclusion of demographic controls. The insignificant interaction effects in the regression models confirm that the personalizing treatment does not significantly differ across politician conditions. Adding control variables does not change the results.

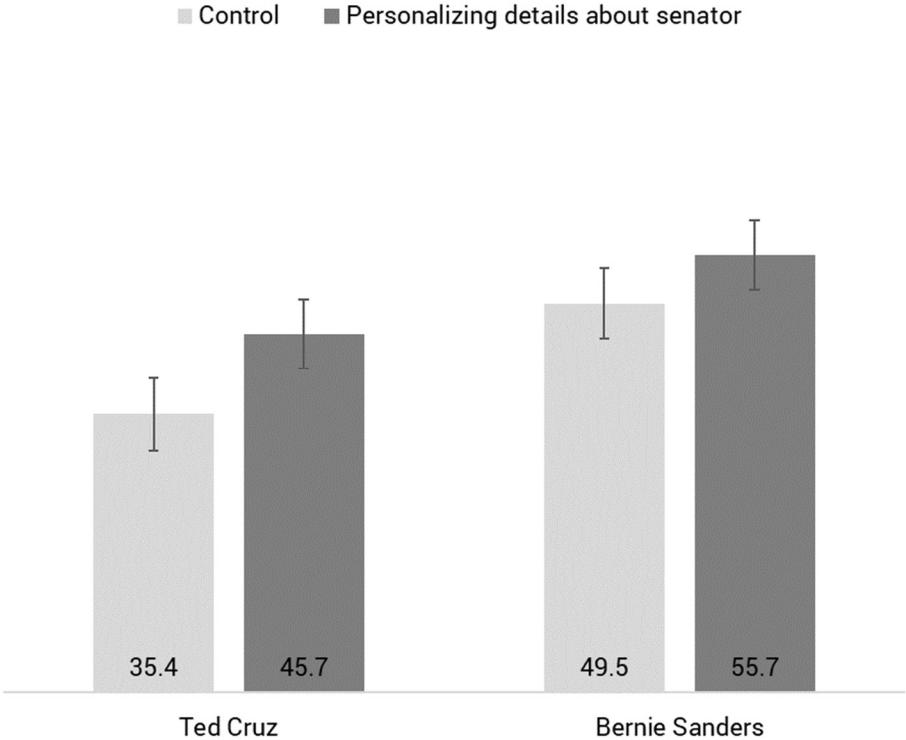
**Table A2: Effects of Personalizing Treatment, Alternate Specifications**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Personalizing treatment	8.191*	6.189*	8.432*	6.201*
	(2.286)	(3.195)	(2.284)	(3.186)
Ted Cruz treatment	-12.093*	-14.144*	-11.958*	-14.266*
	(2.286)	(3.233)	(2.283)	(3.240)
Personalizing treatment × Ted Cruz	---	4.102	---	4.598
		(4.573)		(4.578)
Female	---	---	-1.642	-1.604
			(2.348)	(2.349)
Black	---	---	10.222*	10.479*
			(3.784)	(3.792)
Latino	---	---	3.572	3.462
			(3.558)	(3.559)
Education	---	---	-4.746	-4.520
			(3.876)	(3.883)
Age	---	---	-0.083	-0.084
			(0.065)	(0.065)
Constant	48.582*	49.545*	54.350*	55.339*
	(1.939)	(2.216)	(4.628)	(4.732)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.038	0.039	0.050	0.051
N	994	994	994	994

2020 CES. Regression estimates. Standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p<0.05$

In Figure A2, I plot the predicted feeling thermometer ratings for the control and the treatment, divided by the identity of the politician. Predicted values are based on Model 2 from Table A2. The effects of the treatment do not significantly differ across the two politicians. The marginal effect for the treatment in the case of Senator Cruz is 10.292 (standard error 3.272,  $p < 0.05$ ). The marginal effect of the treatment in the case of Senator Sanders is 6.189 (standard error 3.195,  $p < 0.05$ ).

**Figure A2: Effects of Personalizing Treatment on Feeling Thermometer Ratings, by Senator**



## **Effects of the treatment on the traits people associate with the senator**

After rating the senator on the feeling thermometer, respondents were given a set of traits and asked how well each described the senator they read about. I consider first the effects of the treatment on perceptions of the likeability and trustworthiness of the senator, both of which reflect politically-salient personal traits of elected officials. I also consider two traits that are more closely tied to perceptions of how the senators perform in their jobs – namely whether the senator “understands the problems facing people like you” and whether the senator is “willing to compromise with others to get things done.” Because the effects of the treatment do not significantly differ across the two senators, I pool trait ratings across the senators. I include an indicator for the senator condition to control for baseline differences in how people think about Senator Sanders vs. Senator Cruz. In Figure A3, I show the effects of the treatment on people’s perceptions of how well each trait describes the senator.

I find that people are more likely to describe the senator as likeable after reading personalizing details about the politician. While this soft news treatment is relatively short, it nonetheless changes perceptions of the likeability of the two familiar senators, Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders. The effect is statistically significant but substantively small, just short of a 0.05 increase on the 0 to 1 scale. Yet it speaks to the value of soft news appearances for elected officials. In talking about their personal lives, their quirks, and their childhoods, politicians present another side of themselves. This side is seen favorably, where learning about the senators’ personal lives leads people to like them more. Likeability is often seen as something important for candidates to possess, and likeable politicians are seen as better able to win elections (Redlawsk and Lau 2006). I find that soft news content can make even well-known senators seem more likeable.

I also find that reading personalizing details shifts people’s assessments of the trustworthiness of the senator. People are generally cynical about whether politicians can be trusted (Citrin and Stoker 2018). Yet reading about the personal details of the senators boosts confidence in their perceived trustworthiness. The effect size of the treatment is 0.05, comparable to the magnitude of the effect on perceived likeability. Elected officials have incentives to cultivate public trust, as it serves as a resource that grants them greater flexibility to take political risks and improves their odds of reelection (Bianco 1994; Hetherington 1998). I find here that sharing personal details in a soft news format can help elected officials boost public impressions of their trustworthiness. For Fenno (1978), members of Congress work to cultivate a positive image in their district with the goal of building public trust. These findings confirm the expectation that politicians who share details about themselves as people are more likely to be seen as trustworthy.

However, I fail to find a significant effect of the treatment on people’s belief that the senators are any more empathetic to their political concerns. While we might expect that politicians share personal details about themselves so that they are seen as relatable, this information fails to convince people that politicians are any more likely to understand the challenges they face. Politicians who share personal details about themselves may be seen as more likeable, but they



are not any more likely to be perceived as able to understand the problems that average Americans might be facing.

Finally, I find that sharing personalizing details about the senator increases people’s optimism about the prospects of political compromise. In a time of deep partisan division, it is important for elected officials to work together to make policy progress. Americans want politicians to compromise, but there is skepticism about whether it is truly possible (Wolak 2020). I find that emphasizing personal details about a senator with strong ideological convictions leads people to say that they believe the senator is willing to make compromises to get things done.

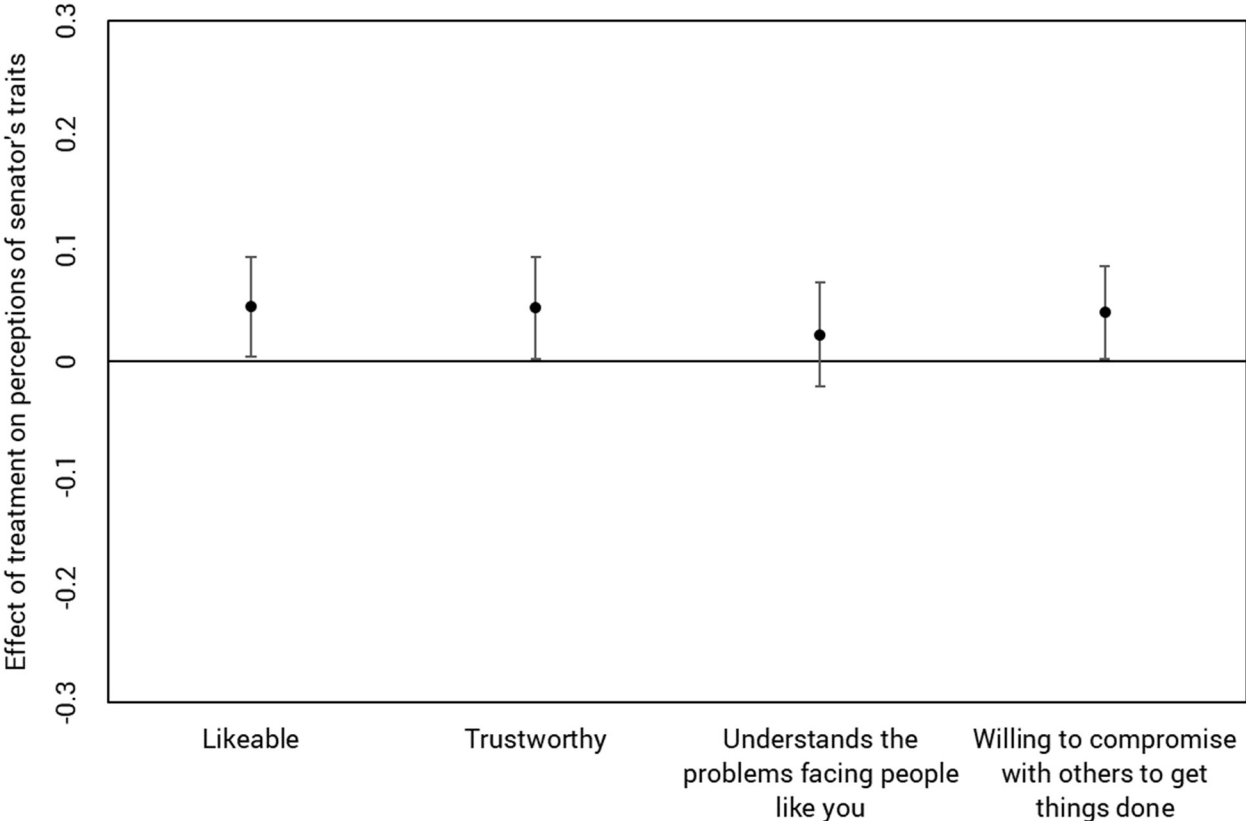
These findings provide additional evidence in support of the argument that this treatment shifts the ways people evaluate elected officials. Shifting people’s impressions of elected officials can have broader consequences as well. People who learn these personalizing details see the senator as more trustworthy and more willing to pursue compromises in politics. These feelings of trust are politically consequential, particularly given the public’s general pessimism about elected officials. Trust in politicians is important for the functioning of government. When elected officials enjoy higher levels of public trust, it influences how they approach their job and their ability to take policy risks (Bianco 1994; Hetherington 2005). A member of Congress who is trusted may have more leeway to back bipartisan legislation and sign on to the concessions that policy compromises can entail. Unpopular politicians may not have the same latitude to take risks, and may be reluctant to support policy options that have short-term costs but long-term gains. West and Orman (2003) worry that a focus on personalities in politics may devalue other kinds of practical political skills like negotiation and compromise. These findings challenge this view, suggesting that a focus on personalities might mute partisan divides and promote optimism about the prospects for compromise.

**Table A3: Effects of Treatment on Perceptions of Politician Traits**

	Senator is likeable	Senator is trustworthy	Senator understands the problems facing people like you	Senator is willing to compromise with others to get things done
Personalizing treatment	0.048* (0.022)	0.048* (0.023)	0.024 (0.023)	0.043* (0.021)
Ted Cruz treatment	-0.159* (0.022)	-0.155* (0.023)	-0.167* (0.023)	-0.110* (0.021)
Constant	0.523* (0.019)	0.518* (0.019)	0.533* (0.020)	0.437* (0.018)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.051	0.047	0.049	0.03
N	999	1000	1000	1000

Regression estimates. Standard errors in parentheses. \* p<0.05

Figure A3: Effect of Personalizing Treatment on Perceptions of Traits



## Heterogeneous treatment effects

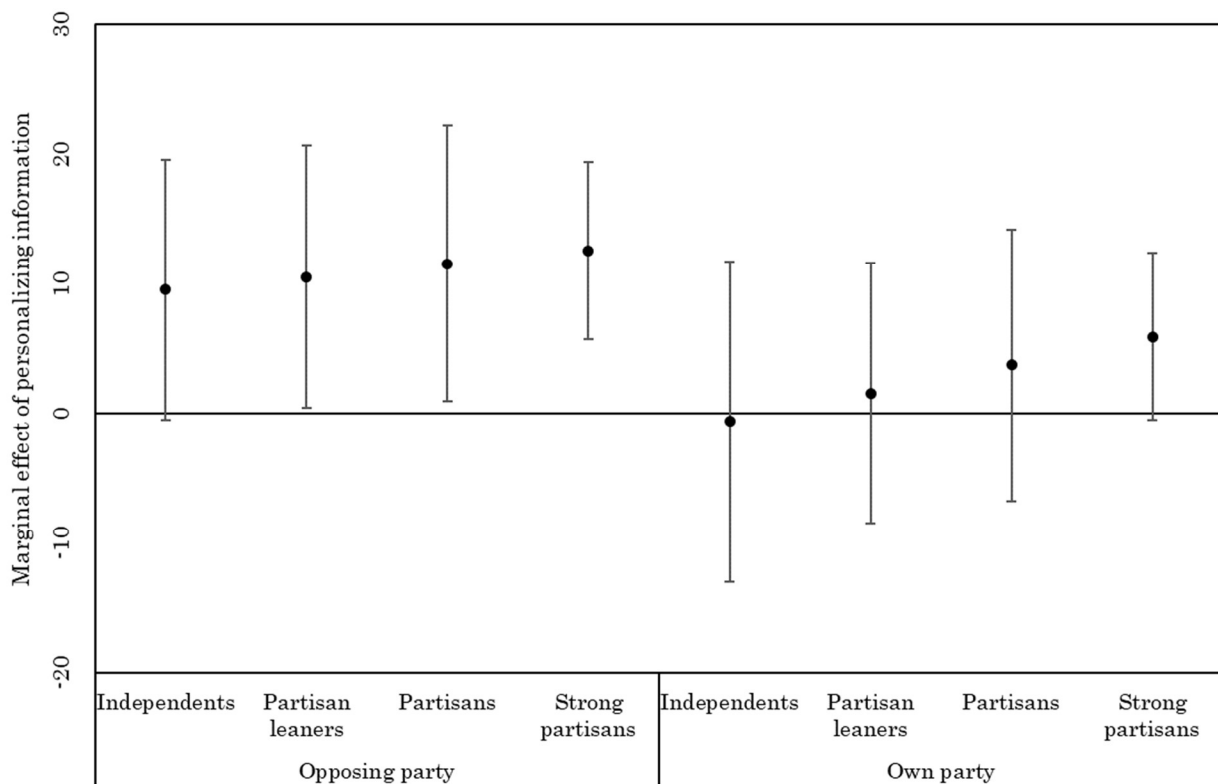
### *Strength of partisanship*

I have argued that personalizing details boost affect for politicians in part because their nonpolitical content is not processed through the lens of motivated reasoning. As a further test of this proposition, I consider the three-way interaction of the personalizing information treatment, own-party candidate, and strength of partisanship.

As Taber and Lodge (2006) argue, those with stronger priors and greater political sophistication are the most likely to engage in motivated reasoning. If people are engaged in motivated reasoning when reading these vignettes, then we should expect that strong partisans reward co-partisan politicians the most for personalizing information, with smaller ratings boosts among independents and partisan leaners. In the case of an opposing party legislator, strong partisans should be the most pessimistic in the face of personalizing details, with greater receptivity among weaker partisans.

However, I fail to find evidence in support of this. The three-way interaction of the treatment, shared partisanship, and strength of partisanship is not significant, indicating these relationships are not conditional on strength of partisanship. In Figure A4 below, I show the marginal effect of personalizing information across the range of strength of partisanship for co-partisan and opposing party politicians. Within each of shared partisanship conditions, the effects of personalizing information are quite similar over the range of partisan strength.

**Figure A4: Treatment Effects by Shared Partisanship and Strength of Partisanship**



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**Table A4: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects by Strength of Partisanship**

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	Feeling thermometer
Personalizing treatment	9.570* (4.228)
Shared partisanship	34.043* (4.439)
Personalizing treatment × shared partisanship	-10.185 (6.397)
Strength of partisanship	-5.057* (1.329)
Personalizing treatment × partisan strength	1.010 (1.942)
Shared partisanship × partisan strength	10.460* (2.013)
Pers, treatment × shared part. × part. strength	1.183 (2.852)
Ted Cruz treatment	-1.920 (1.653)
Constant	26.400* (2.858)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.523
N	994

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2020 CES. Regression estimates. Standard errors in parentheses. \* p<0.05

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### *Political knowledge*

Taber and Lodge (2006) argue that motivated reasoning will be more common among the politically sophisticated. I test whether the information treatment has heterogeneous effects for those with higher knowledge compared to those with lower knowledge. As shown in Table A5, I fail to find a significant three-way interaction term associated with the treatment, shared partisanship, and political knowledge (measured as the sum of five items about partisan control of Congress and partisan leanings of one's representatives in Congress). In Figure A5, I plot the marginal effects of the treatment for those at the minimum and maximum levels of political knowledge.

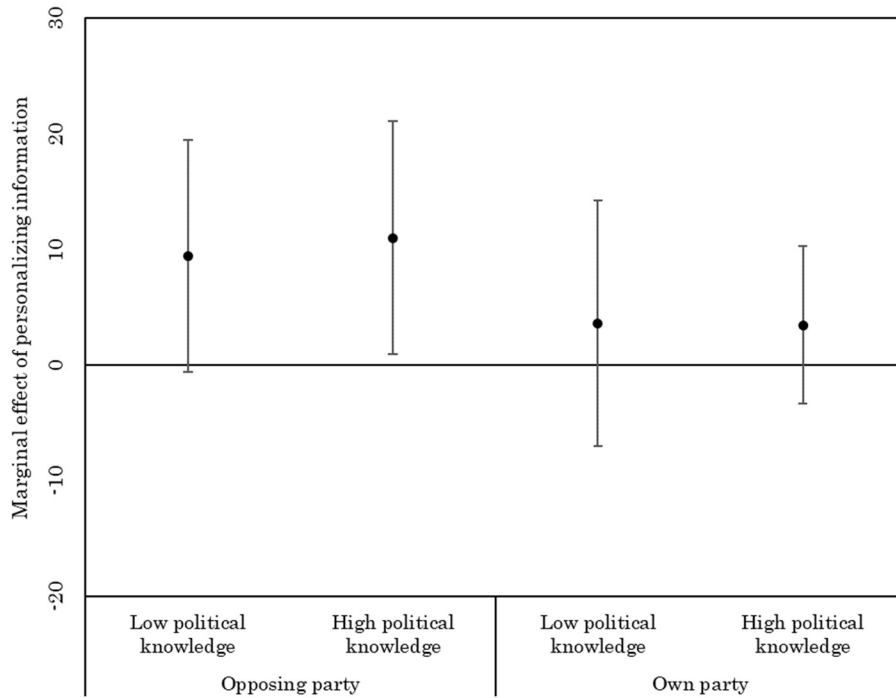
The results show that those high in political sophistication respond to the treatment similarly to those with low political sophistication. This suggests that people do not view these apolitical pieces of political information in partisan ways – this is information that does not seem to be interpreted through the lens of motivated reasoning.

**Table A5: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects by Political Knowledge**

	Feeling thermometer
Personalizing treatment	9.484* (4.726)
Shared partisanship	23.857* (4.891)
Personalizing treatment x shared partisanship	-5.819 (6.904)
Political knowledge	-6.037* (0.865)
Personalizing treatment × political knowledge	0.316 (1.229)
Shared partisanship × knowledge	8.783* (1.254)
Pers, treatment × shared part. × knowledge	-0.339 (1.766)
Ted Cruz treatment	-1.913 (1.616)
Constant	37.852* (3.402)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.547
N	982

2020 CES. Regression estimates. Standard errors in parentheses. \* p<0.05

**Figure A5: Treatment Effects by Shared Partisanship and Political Knowledge**



## Limitations of the experiment

1. *It is not possible to know whether some personalizing details matter more than others.*

By choosing items that Ted Cruz himself provided to *Us Weekly*, the stimulus is very realistic. However, it is not possible to know for certain whether some of these five details are more compelling to experimental participants than others, or whether there is meaningful heterogeneity across individuals in how they evaluate different items in the list. It is also not possible to know for certain whether a different set of personal details would be more or less effective at shifting people's impressions of the senators.

This concern is partially addressed by the fact that I find the same pattern of results with a different candidate and a different set of five personalizing details. In this, it suggests that these findings are not wholly unique to one politician or one set of personalizing details. Even though the two lists of personal details differ, I find in both cases that these kinds of personalizing details lead to warmer impressions of politicians. I also find that the effects of the treatment do not significantly differ across the two vignettes. So even though the politicians have different baseline favorability ratings among respondents, both secure similar average gains in positive affect from sharing personal details from their lives.

2. *Limits to generalizability.*

Survey experiments offer a best-case test for the effects of experimental stimuli like these, as people are asked about their impressions of the politician directly after reading the personalizing details. Because the details are novel and interesting, they may be retained even after the study ends. But we cannot know from this study how enduring these effects are, or how long people retain these details after the study ends. Situated among the other facts and details people learn during campaigns, the influence of these personalizing details is likely diminished. In a partisan context, details like these are not likely to overtake people's partisan loyalties in vote choice in most cases. However, they may help boost candidate affect in ways that contribute to higher approval or the incumbency advantage.

I chose two prominent national politicians for the experimental vignettes. Given that these politicians are well-known, they offer a tough test of whether personalizing details can shift impressions of familiar politicians. Whether the same patterns would emerge with different politicians cannot be known for certain with this data. I would expect that personalizing details would likely matter more with politicians who are less well-known to the public.

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