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## **It's My Party, I'll Endorse If I Want To: Effects of Intra-Party Endorsements**

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This experimental study examines the impact of endorsements by party elites within a primary election for the U.S. Senate. This experiment used a pretest-posttest design to identify and measure an endorsement's effect on participants' evaluations of the endorsed primary candidate and the unendorsed primary candidate, as well as their evaluations of the endorser and their political party. Results showed that such endorsements impacted participants' assessments of both the endorsed and unendorsed candidates, while the impact on perceptions of their political party approached a level of significance. Implications of these results are discussed, and recommendations for future research initiatives are presented.

*Keywords: intra-party endorsement, political elites, political endorsement, primary elections*

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Habermas' (2012) idea of a public sphere—and the vibrant exchange of ideas that go with it—is probably best seen during political campaigns within a thriving democracy. The public sphere not only allows candidates to promote their own ideas; it also allows individuals and organizations to speak out in support of a preferred candidate or ballot initiative. It is important, therefore, not just to understand how a candidate successfully persuades the electorate; it is equally important to understand how and why other influencers within the public sphere also shape voters' attitudes towards candidates and issues. Endorsements have been widely used by political candidates and as part of contested ballot initiatives (Gerber & Phillips, 2003). Such endorsements can come from outside organizations and associations, celebrities, or political elites including elected officials and party leaders.

While party elites typically have refrained from endorsing within a contested primary, recent elections show such elites are more frequently breaking this unwritten rule of avoiding intra-party endorsements (Zanona & Caygle, 2020). Indeed, the 2018 midterm elections were characterized by President Donald Trump's strategy to "(buck) the tradition set by previous presidents by endorsing many candidates during primary season, adding his influence to races while Republicans are still facing off against other Republicans" (para.1, Carlsen & Grullon, 2018). Moreover, Trump's strategy even included endorsing Republicans that challenged sitting incumbents during the primaries.

During the 2020 congressional primary season, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez leveraged her popularity and influence within the liberal wing of the Democratic Party to endorse several Democrats running for office during the primaries (Kane, 2020). Most notably, she endorsed U.S. Senator Ed Markey—facing a challenge from Rep. Joseph Kennedy, who was himself endorsed by the titular head of the Democratic Party, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (Balz, 2019).

This trend of political elites endorsing during intra-party elections leads to many questions regarding the impact of such endorsements, not just on a particular election or a particular candidate, but on the political parties and the broader political process as well. This experimental study examines the impact of intra-party endorsements by political elites within the context of a special election held in 2020 to fill the term of U.S. Senator Johnny Isakson (R-GA).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Because political endorsements can come from a variety of sources, it is not surprising that previous research has examined the impact of different types of endorsements. Previous research has examined the impact of endorsements by a political party (Kousser et al. 2015), media outlets such as newspapers (Ladd & Lenz, 2009), labor unions (McDermott, 2006), and general advocacy groups (Gerber and Phillips, 2003). Others have examined endorsements by individuals; such research has tended to focus more on celebrity endorsements (see Payne et al. 2007) than on political elite endorsements (see Vining & Wilhelm, 2011).

Jackson and Darrow (2015) examined the impact of celebrities' endorsements of specific issue positions. Notably, the study did not focus on individual candidates, nor were the issues studied part of a specific ballot initiative. Nevertheless, the researchers found that celebrity endorsements helped to strengthen the support of an already popular issue but also helped to moderate strong negative feelings towards unpopular issues.

While most researchers generally found a positive effect of an endorsement vis-à-vis the endorsed candidate, there were some slight exceptions. Indeed, such celebrity endorsements can oftentimes create a backlash effect, and mobilize supporters of the endorsee's opponent (Payne et al. 2007).

Endorsements by political elites may influence voter attitudes and behaviors in different ways than endorsements by celebrities. Indeed, Summary (2010) argued that "The study of individual political leader endorsements is important because it is an issue that has not been examined systematically until recently and is a key variable in understanding candidate performance in the primaries and caucuses" (p. 285). Chou (2015) found different effects between endorsements by political elites, celebrities, and regular citizens. As an example, political elite endorsements were more effective

when such endorsements were inconsistent with the voter's preferred political party, while celebrity endorsements were more effective for a "preference-consistent party" (p. 537).

Acknowledging Chou's (2015) differentiation between a celebrity endorser and a political elite endorser, other researchers have focused specifically on the impact of an endorsement given by political elites, which can include elected officials, party officials or former elected officials and politicians. Indeed, scholars have defined "political elites" in different ways. Kane (2019) examined if and when partisans may change their attitudes towards political elites, and narrowly defined elites as chief executives such as the president or state governors. Vis (2019) defined political elites more as "party leaders" (p.41). Vis also noted that previous research on political leaders have focused on "members of cabinet, party leaders, or members of parliament" (p. 41-42).

Studies have examined elite endorsements within the context of a ballot initiative (Bullock, 2011), judicial elections (Vining & Wilhem, 2011), intra-party primary elections (Cancela et al. 2016; Dominguez, 2011)), and general elections (Nicholson, 2011; Vizcarrondo & Painter, 2020). Of these cited studies, three relied on experimental methods, offering the best approach to identifying causal relationships (Gay & Airasian, 2002). Bullock's (2011) experimental study of elite endorsements during a ballot initiative found such endorsements to be effective, but issue-related information was at least as influential as endorsements in influencing voter attitudes. Vizcarrondo and Painter's (2020) experimental study during the 2018 midterm elections found that elite endorsements were more effective on low information voters but generally tended to have a negative effect on voters' assessments of the endorsed candidate. Similarly, Nicholson (2011) found a backlash effect, where supporters of the non-endorsed candidate became more polarized and engaged in response to an endorsement.

## THEORY

Understanding the effect of endorsements on voters' attitudes and behaviors is grounded in numerous theoretical perspectives that help explain the persuasive process in general, and political persuasion in particular.

The success of any endorsement relies at least in part on the effectiveness of the source of that endorsement. Hovland and Weiss (1952) showed that persuasive messages attributed to a "high credibility source" were more successful in changing opinions than were those messages that were attributed to "low credibility sources." This study lay the foundation for the Source Credibility Theory, which has been used to help explain persuasive effectiveness in news reporting (Miller & Kurpius, 2010), advertising (Demba et al. 2019), and political communication (Yoon, et al. 2005).

Source credibility theory helps explain the importance of key characteristics of the source of any persuasive message (Ohanian, 1990). As a provider of a persuasive message, the endorser of a political candidate will be judged by the audience receiving that message. The credibility of a source can be based on different source characteristics such as expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness (Wood & Herbst, 2007) as well as the source's similarity to its audience (Wong et al. 2019). These traits can be credited to individuals or to institutions (e.g., businesses, political organizations, etc.).

Other theories help explain how audiences interpret and process persuasive messaging messages. Dual process theories such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the Heuristic Systematic Model (Chaiken, 1980) argue that individuals process persuasive appeals in one of two ways. The first is a highly engaged and deliberative process where receivers of persuasive

messages carefully consider the information being offered in support of the persuasive appeal. This approach is the central route of processing in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), while Chaiken's Heuristic Systematic Model (HSM) identifies it as the systematic method of processing.

Conversely, other individuals may forgo a highly detailed examination of the information presented, and instead look for shortcuts or cues that help them evaluate a persuasive message. This approach—ELM's peripheral processing route or the heuristic processing approach of the HSM—may prove to be persuasive—but are oftentimes considered to be less likely to result in long-lasting attitude changes.

Other researchers have noted that the dual process options are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that receivers of persuasive messages may use both processing methods before forming their attitudes related to any particular persuasive appeal (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014).

While source credibility theory focuses on the persuasiveness of the source of a persuasive message, and dual processing models focus more on the receiver's interpretation of the message, the Meaning Transfer Model (McCracken, 1989) examines the overall persuasive process, particularly with respect to endorsements as persuasive messages. Jackson and Darrow (2005) explain that a successful endorsement involves “two crucial transfer(s) of meaning: from celebrity to product and then from product to consumer” (p.83). The theoretical underpinnings of the Meaning Transfer Model rely on the transfer of the meaning of an endorsed product. This endorsed product can be a consumer product or—in some cases—a political candidate or political issue.

McCracken (1989) notes that the meaning is established and transferred in three different stages. In Stage 1, meaning is established with the endorser, be it a well-known celebrity or a well-established political elite. If successful, the endorser transfers meaning to the product (Stage 2), which could include a candidate or referendum/ballot issue. Finally, the desirable qualities of the endorser that have been transferred to the endorsee (i.e., product) are accepted by the target audience (Stage 3). This stage is not automatic, nor is it guaranteed. Indeed, Jain and Roy (2015) have noted the possibility of negative meaning transferring from the endorser to the endorsee.

Relying on the MTM, Jackson and Darrow (2005) studied how celebrity endorsements help shape young adults' views on political issues and found such endorsements reinforce existing popular opinions while moderating views of unpopular issues. Beyond these findings, the researchers showed the MTM's applicability to political endorsements when explaining how celebrities' comments on political issues impact public opinion.

## HYPOTHESES

The previous review of the existing literature shows that endorsements can influence voters' perceptions and views on issues as well as candidates. Building upon Jackson and Darrow's (2005) use of the MTM to examine how celebrity endorsements may influence young adults' perceptions and attitude, this study also examines the overall persuasive process, but within the context of a political endorser and how it may affect a more diverse group of potential voters. Consistent with these findings, this study hypothesizes that:

**H1:** Primary candidates receiving an endorsement from a party elite will see an increase in their evaluation among prospective voters within the same political party.

In addition to impacting voters' evaluations of an endorsed candidate, endorsements may also have an impact on other individuals. While very little research has examined the impact that intra-party endorsements may have on the non-endorsed candidate, a logical conclusion could be that if such an endorsement is positive for the endorsed candidate, it would conversely have a negative impact on the non-endorsed candidate. Accordingly, this study hypothesizes:

**H2:** Primary opponents of candidates receiving an endorsement from a party elite will see a decrease in their evaluation among prospective voters within the same political party.

Historically, party elites have avoided endorsing candidates within a primary election (Zanona & Caygle, 2020). One reason for this is the potential for a backlash among partisan voters, who may support a different candidate within the partisan primary. Given the historical reticence for political elites to make such intra-party endorsements, and given the potential backlash from such endorsements, this study hypothesizes that:

**H3:** Party elites offering endorsements to candidates within a political primary will suffer a decline in their favorability among members of the party.

This study will also examine the impact that intra-party endorsements have on voters' perceptions of their respective political party. Because intra-party endorsements have previously been viewed as potentially damaging to a political party, it is likely that such an endorsement could create an increased sense of conflict within the party, making it more difficult for partisans to "rally behind the party." As such, this study anticipates a backlash effect on political parties with the following hypothesis:

**H4:** Party elite endorsements within a partisan primary will lead to lower evaluations of the political party among those self-identifying with that party.

## METHODS

This IRB-approved project utilized an experimental design to test each hypothesis. Boudreau (2020) contends that, "experiments are particularly useful for identifying when political endorsements will (and will not) persuade citizens because they allow scholars to manipulate the conditions that theoretical models identify under carefully controlled conditions" (p.4).

Participants for this experiment included 215 students, faculty and staff members at a large public university within the state of Georgia, the location of the election used for the study. Participant demographic distributions included: 64% female; 12% African-American, 5% Hispanic, 8% Multiracial, 2% Asian, and 63% White; 52.1% were between 18 and 25 years old; 34% Republican and 66% were Democratic; 56% were liberal, 32% were conservative, and 12% self-identified as "neither liberal nor conservative." The online experiment was conducted between September 14, 2020 and September 21, 2020, shortly after Labor Day weekend, which is often considered the start of the general election season (Heckel & Bugda, 2018). As such, voters would likely have begun to pay attention to the upcoming election, but many would still be undecided and not yet exposed to numerous advertisements or news stories about the election. Therefore, the stimulus presented in this experiment would likely be more impactful to participants than if the experiment were conducted closer to election day.

Participants were recruited through the university's daily email newsletter, distributed to students, faculty and staff. Students in some classes were also offered extra credit for completing the experiment but the anonymity of their responses during the experiment was still maintained.

## The election

The focus of this study was a special election to fill the seat of Senator Johnny Isakson (R-GA), who announced his retirement in part because of his ongoing battles with Parkinson's disease (Lesniewski, 2019). Subsequent to Isakson's retirement announcement, Governor Brian Kemp appointed Kelly Loeffler to fill the vacancy. Loeffler was a "businesswoman and political novice" who was also co-owner of the WNBA Atlanta franchise (Booker, 2019).

This election was unique in many ways that made it particularly attractive to use for this study. First, while the election included an incumbent, Loeffler was new to politics. Having only been in the Senate for less than a year she did not bring the typical incumbent advantages to this election. Second, the special election was a jungle primary, where all candidates would run in the same primary election, regardless of party affiliation (Sumenco & Brown, 2019). One implication to the jungle primary was that attention on the election was not focused on one party's primary or the other. As a result, voters from both parties were more likely to be equally interested in the race this early in the election season; had only one party received most of the media coverage, this likely would not have been the case. Even though the jungle primary had all candidates in the same primary election, regardless of the political party, the strategy of candidates during the primary election was to appeal to their respective party's base (Bluestein, 2019; Bluestein, 2020a). As such, the dynamics of the jungle primary election was similar to two separate party primaries, with the respective candidates focused on messaging and strategy similar to that of a traditional primary. Third, the jungle primary featured 21 candidates, but media coverage tended to focus on the top two candidates from each party. As such, during the early stages of this election cycle, both parties seemed to have a competitive "race within the race," with two candidates from each party considered to have a chance to move onto an anticipated runoff election. In addition to Loeffler, Rep. Doug Collins (R), Rev. Raphael Warnock (D), and Matt Lieberman (D) all received media coverage during this early phase of the election cycle. The level of each candidate's media coverage was measured by conducting electronic searches in ProQuest. The search strategy relied on searching the database for articles published in *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, the state's largest newspaper. Separate searches were conducted using each candidate's name and a timeframe of September 14, 2019 through September 14, 2020, representing the twelve months leading up to the beginning of this experiment. Results showed that Republicans Loeffler and Collins had been featured in *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* 204 and 177 times, respectively. Among the Democratic candidates, Warnock and Lieberman had been featured 69 and 46 times, respectively. While the Democratic candidates were featured less frequently than the Republican candidates, their respective levels of coverage were comparable to each other, as were the levels of coverage among the Republican candidates.

## Procedure

Participants completed a pretest questionnaire, which provided information regarding their political involvement, political information efficacy, and their views on political figures including candidates for the Senate race used in this experiment. Participants also indicated their party affiliation, which was used to assign each participant to one of two condition groups.

Self-identified Republicans were randomly assigned to a group that featured an endorsement of either Collins or Loeffler – the leading Republican contenders – while self-identified Democrats were

randomly assigned to a group that featured an endorsement of either Lieberman or Warnock, the leading Democratic candidates.

### **Stimulus/Independent Variable**

For each condition group, stimuli were created to show one of the four candidates being endorsed by a political elite within their respective political party. For this study, “political elite” was defined more broadly than as individuals currently holding a specific office in government or within a political party. Instead, the elites chosen had previously served in elective office, were still featured in political and public affairs news stories, and were viewed favorably by his or her respective political party. Democratic participants were shown an endorsement for one of the two candidates from Stacey Abrams, a Georgia Democratic leader who nearly won the 2018 governor’s election, and who had been mentioned as a possible running mate for Joe Biden (Harris-Perry, 2020). Endorsements were created for Republican participants that featured retired Sen. Johnny Isakson endorsing one of the two Republican candidates.<sup>1</sup>

The mock endorsements were presented as online news articles from two of Georgia’s leading newspapers, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *The Columbus Ledger-Examiner*. For each newspaper, only the only names of the candidates were changed, and candidates’ names did not include any political title (e.g., “Kelly Loeffler,” not “Sen. Kelly Loeffler”). The articles did not name any of the other candidates. Photos were included to create a more authentic-looking article, but the photos featured the United States Capitol, not the candidates or endorsers. This eliminated any potential influence in an endorsement’s effectiveness resulting from the candidate’s appearance, race, or gender. The endorsement articles were presented as “breaking news.” This helped to create a sense that the endorsement had just occurred. It also allowed the articles to be very brief, and not include detailed descriptions or information about each candidate that could also potentially influence participants’ perceptions.

### **Change/dependent variables**

The dependent variables for this study are change variables representing the change in responses to questions asked of respondents before the stimulus treatment (“pre-test”) and after the treatment (“post-test”).

### **Candidate (endorsee) evaluation**

Respondents were asked to evaluate the candidates that were used in this study using a scale of zero (unfavorable evaluation) to 100 (favorable evaluation). Respondents evaluated all candidates in the study, providing the ability to measure the change in a participant’s evaluation of an endorsed candidate as well as the opponent of that endorsed candidate.

### **Endorser evaluation**

Respondents were also asked to evaluate several political elites in both the pre-test and post-test. Included among these elites were the endorsers featured in the study (i.e., Democrat Stacey Abrams and Republican Johnny Isakson). As such, the study captures any changes in the evaluation of an endorser resulting from that person's endorsement of a candidate.

### **Party affiliation**

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<sup>1</sup> Senator Isakson did not endorse any candidate. Representative Abrams did endorse Reverend Warnock, but at the time of this experiment, that endorsement had not been prominently featured in the Warnock campaign.

Respondents were also asked to express their party leanings using a six-point Likert scale. Democratic respondents could identify themselves as "solid Democrat," "Democrat," or "leaning Democrat." Republican respondents could respond in the same manner, with responses reflecting their affiliation with the Republican Party.

## RESULTS

In order to attribute any possible change in the evaluation of the endorsed and non-endorsed candidates to the endorsement itself, first it must be established there are significant differences between evaluations in the pre-test and the post-test. This was achieved through a series of paired-sample t-tests.

To determine whether there were any significant differences between evaluations of the endorsed candidates before the endorsement and the evaluation of the endorsed candidate after the endorsement, a paired-samples t-test was used to examine the differences between the pre-test evaluation of the endorsed candidate ( $M = 45.29$ ,  $SD = 31.92$ ) and the post-test evaluation ( $M = 49.88$ ,  $SD = 32.47$ ). The result of the test was statistically significant,  $t(209) = 3.322$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $d = .23$  and in the direction predicted by the first hypothesis. While the effect size was small, evaluations of the endorsed candidate did increase. Therefore, H1 was supported.

Likewise, a paired samples t-test was used to examine the differences between the pre-test evaluation of the non-endorsed candidate ( $M = 45.77$ ,  $SD = 31.76$ ) and the post-test evaluation ( $M = 42.54$ ,  $SD = 32.24$ ). The finding was statistically significant  $t(209) = -3.06$ ,  $p = .003$ ;  $d = .211$ , and showed a decrease in the candidate's post-test evaluation, as predicted by the second hypothesis. While the effect size was small, evaluations of the non-endorsed candidate did decrease.

Having determined the presence of significant differences in the participants' evaluations of both the endorsed candidate and non-endorsed candidate, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine any causality between the endorsement (stimulus) and the changes in the evaluation of a candidate. A MANOVA is a mathematically modified ANOVA that allows for analysis of the effects of independent variable(s) on two or more dependent variables (Warne, 2014).

The MANOVA was constructed with four variables indicating the changes in the evaluation of each of the four candidates as the dependent variables and a variable indicating the respondents' experimental condition as the fixed factor. The fixed factor had four levels: 1- the respondent saw an article in which Isakson endorsed Collins, 2- the respondent saw an article in which Isakson endorsed Loeffler, 3 - the respondent saw an article in which Abrams endorsed Lieberman, and 4- the respondent saw an article in which Abrams endorsed Warnock.

The model was statistically significant, indicating a causal relationship between endorsement and the evaluation of the candidates,  $F(12, 436.84) = 3.834$ ,  $p = .000$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .767$ . The model explains 8.5% of the change in the evaluation of an endorsed candidate ( $\eta_p^2 = .085$ ) and provides statistical support for H1 and H2 as it attributes the significant differences between the evaluations of the endorsed and non-endorsed candidates to the stimulus (endorsement). Stacey Abrams's endorsement of Matt Lieberman had the largest significant effect and explained 16% of the increase in the Democratic candidate's evaluation. Her endorsement of Raphael Warnock was not as strong but still significant, explaining 5% of the changes in Warnock's evaluation. Johnny Isakson's endorsement of Doug Collins and Kelly Loeffler had a marginal and non-significant effect. Table 1 displays the results of the between-subject tests.



Additionally, the Levene's Test results confirm that the sample did not violate the assumptions of homogeneity, with the exception of the sample of the condition in which participants viewed the articles showing Stacey Abrams's endorsement of Matt Lieberman,  $F(3, 168) = 10.735, p = .000$ . While the Levene's Test for this group was significant, there are compelling reasons that indicate this was not due to problems with sampling methods. Given that all other candidates' results did not violate assumptions of homogeneity, the Lieberman results are most likely not reflective of any weakness in the model, but rather of Lieberman's relative unknown status at the time of this experiment (Bluestein, 2020b).

Table 1  
*Endorsement Effect on Candidate's Evaluations*

Variable	SS	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	F	Sig.	$\eta^2$
Change in Collins evaluation	733.40	3	244.47	1.48	.222	.026
Change in Loeffler evaluation	175.883	3	58.628	.416	.742	.007
Change in Lieberman evaluation	8190.84	3	2730.28	10.639***	.000	.16
Change in Warnock evaluation	3002.23	3	100.74	3.21*	.023	.055

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*  $p < .05$

Further post-hoc analyses were conducted to determine how each candidate's evaluation was affected by the endorsement (See Table 2). The results demonstrate that the endorsement exerted a significant effect on changes in evaluations of the endorsed Democratic candidates. Consistent with the overall model, the effect was positive, indicating that even after a Bonferroni correction, a Democratic candidate—when endorsed by a partisan elite—benefitted from a statistically significant gain in their evaluation among those Democratic respondents seeing the endorsement. The table shows that mean evaluations of Lieberman were significantly higher between participants who saw an endorsement for Lieberman and those who saw an endorsement for Warnock ( $M = 14.75, p = .000$ ). Similarly, the table shows that mean evaluations of Warnock were significantly higher between participants who saw an endorsement for Warnock and those who saw an endorsement for Lieberman ( $M = 10.26, p = .013$ ).

Table 2  
*Endorsement Effect Comparisons With MANOVA Post Hoc Tests*

Dependent Variable	(I) Endorsement	(J) Endorsement	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Bonferroni Sig.
Change in candidate Collins evaluation	Isakson's endorsement of Collins	Isakson's endorsement of Loeffler	6.5517	3.34834	0.312
Change in candidate Loeffler evaluation	Isakson's endorsement of Loeffler	Isakson's endorsement of Collins	1.992	3.09234	1.00
Change in candidate Lieberman evaluation	Abrams's endorsement of Lieberman	Abrams's endorsement of Warnock	14.7522***	3.01415	.000
Change in candidate Warnock evaluation	Abrams's endorsement of Warnock	Abrams's endorsement of Lieberman	10.2657*	3.29102	0.013

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*  $p < .05$

While the overall effect of endorsements on the evaluations of endorsed and non-endorsed candidates was significant and in the predicted direction, post-hoc analyses did not find this effect to be significant for Republican candidates. An Isakson endorsement of Collins slightly boosted his evaluation ( $M = 6.55$ ,  $p = .312$ ) and an Isakson endorsement of Loeffler marginally added to her evaluation ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $p = 1.00$ ), but neither was statistically significant.

To test the impact that an elite endorsement had on the evaluation of the endorser, a paired samples t-test was used to examine the differences between the pre-test evaluation of the endorser ( $M = 60.24$ ,  $SD = 36.29$ ) and the post-test evaluation ( $M = 59.85$ ,  $SD = 36.55$ ). While results show a decrease in the candidate's post-test evaluation, as predicted by the hypothesis, the findings were not statistically significant  $t(209) = -.451$ ,  $p = .653$ . Therefore, H3 was not supported.

Finally, to test the impact that an intra-party endorsement had on voters' views of their respective political party, a paired samples t-test was used to examine the differences between the pre-test evaluation of the respondent's identified political party ( $M = 70.56$ ,  $SD = 25.58$ ) and the post-test evaluation ( $M = 68.52$ ,  $SD = 27.80$ ). However, these findings were not statistically significant  $t(171) = 1.927$ ,  $p = .056$ . Therefore, H4 was not supported.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the impact of endorsements by party elites within the context of a special election for the United States Senate. Consistent with the Meaning Transfer Model, this study examined the overall persuasive process of political endorsements, recognizing the importance of both the source and the audience of such endorsement messages.

Further, the study adds to the existing literature by offering an experimental approach to identifying any causal effects resulting from such endorsements.

Results indicate that such intra-party endorsements do result in certain attitudinal changes among voters. Specifically, candidates benefit from a partisan elites' endorsement, as evidenced by an increased positive evaluation among members of the same political party. The results show a relatively small effect size is attributable to such an endorsement, which endorsers should note before deciding to boast that their endorsement was the lynchpin to a candidate's successful election. On the other hand, many primary elections—particularly in the current polarized environment—are decided by only a few percentage points. Of 58 primaries and primary run-off elections for the U.S. Senate in 2002, nine elections resulted in margins within 8.5%—the effect of an intra-party endorsement found in this study. Of note, one of these nine elections was the Georgia special election: the margin between the two Republican candidates was less than 6%. Overall, the nine elections (two of which were the Texas Democratic primary and run-off) were more than the difference in the balance of power in the U.S. Senate.

Results showed statistically significant changes in the evaluation of Democratic candidates. While the study did not specifically seek to explain potential differences between how Republicans and Democrats responded to partisan endorsements, there are some indications that may help to further understand these differences. First, Minooie's (2020) study of agendamelding found Republicans were more likely to "allow their personal preferences to impact their agenda" instead of social or traditional media. While the Minooie study did not specifically focus on partisan endorsements, the result could suggest a reticence among Republicans to rely on external sources when forming attitudes about policy issues. Secondly, the Republican candidates in this study appear to have been better known prior to the election, as evidenced by the amount of news coverage prior to the campaign. This could suggest that the greater impact of an endorsement on Democratic candidates is less of a party specific phenomenon. Instead, endorsements of lesser-known candidates may have a greater impact on those candidates' evaluations than better known and more established candidates. In fact, Abram's endorsement of Lieberman was the most impactful endorsement in this study as it accounted for 16% of the variance in the change in the evaluation Lieberman, who was the least known candidate in this study.

This study also showed that a candidate experiences a decline in voters' evaluation when their opponent was endorsed, even though the non-endorsed candidate was not mentioned or identified in the stimulus used to inform participants about the endorsement. This suggests that the power of endorsement can extend beyond the endorsee to other candidates as well. However, while the power of an endorsement may impact a non-endorsed candidate, the study provided no support for the idea that endorsements may impact voters' evaluations of the individual making the endorsement. Additionally, the study was unable to provide support that intra-party endorsements have an impact on voters' perceptions or evaluations of their political party, although the results from the study were approaching a level of statistical significance. Both of these issues should be explored further, but the results from this

study do not support the concerns that many have expressed with respect to potential consequences resulting from intra-party endorsements.

This study adds to previous research seeking to understand if and how party elite endorsements impact party primaries. While the study reaffirms previous literature showing the impact that endorsements can have on specific political contests, the study adds to the extant literature in several ways. First, this study approaches the question of intraparty endorsement endorsements through experimental methods, allowing for the ability to identify and measure and causal influences. Results do show such causal influences exist.

Additionally, this study focuses specifically on endorsements within the context of intraparty endorsements. As the literature review has shown, party leaders are becoming less reticent to endorse within a party primary. As such, this study begins to explore the impact that such strategies can have on partisan primaries. Results provide evidence that intra-party endorsements have a positive effect of voters' evaluation of the endorsed candidate. However, the study also shows a separate and significant negative effect on the opponent of the endorsee's opponent. This supports the idea that benefits to the endorsed candidate are not just evident with increased favorable evaluations; their opponents lose favorability, which also adds to the gap between voters' evaluations of the candidates. As intra-party endorsements become a more commonly used tactic, it is important for practitioners as well as scholars to better understand the persuasive process of such endorsements and any resulting implications.

There are some limitations to this study which should be acknowledged. The demographics of the participants skewed to a demographic that is younger than the general population, although previous studies have oftentimes shown similar results, including studies focused solely on younger (e.g. college) aged participants (Chou, 2015; Jackson & Darrow, 2005; Jaia & Roy, 2015). Participants self-identified as Democrats in higher numbers than the general population, but since participants were assigned separate treatments due to their party affiliation, a heavier Democratic participation rate did not minimize Republican responses. Finally, the election used in this study was a jungle primary, which is different than a typically closed primary election. However, the purpose of this study was not to predict the outcome of the election, but rather to explain how intra-party endorsements influence partisans' attitudes. Moreover, as stated earlier, the strategies of the leading candidates during the jungle primary focused on appealing to their partisan base, which was like separate primaries.

## **CONCLUSION**

Findings from this study provide a better understanding of how and when partisan endorsements may influence voter attitudes, but the results also identify additional areas and research questions to explore further. While this study did find some statistically significant findings, some of the inconclusive findings may be further understood with future studies incorporating larger sample sizes. In particular, the number of Republican subjects in this experiment was relatively small, which may have contributed to the lack of statistically significant findings, particularly when examining the effect on an individual Republican candidate, the Republican endorser, or the Republican Party.

Future studies could also build upon the findings from this study to further examine the causal relationship of the intra-party endorsement itself. This study used a generic endorsement as its stimulus; the purpose was to find causal effects of an endorsement rather than effects resulting from specific characteristics of the endorsement message. Having established a causal relationship between the

presence of an endorsement and voters' attitudes, it would be appropriate to see if this causal effect is impacted by certain aspects of the endorsement such as the message's tone (e.g., positive versus negative), the message itself (e.g., issue-oriented vs. personality-focused), or the message's source (i.e., the endorser).

In recent elections, high profile political elites such as President Donald Trump and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have brought more attention to the idea of candidates being endorsed within a party's primary election. Given an increasingly divided and partisan electorate, it is possible that this trend may continue. As such, it is important to gain a better understanding of how this phenomenon works, and to better understand the impact that such endorsements have on the overall electoral process. While a better understanding of intra-party endorsement can benefit candidates as well as political strategists, it is even more important to understand this trend and its impact on a robust, healthy, deliberative democracy.

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