Dissertation Abstract, Oliver A. McClellan

My dissertation, "Understanding Political Leaders: Modern Experimental Evidence," examines the role political leaders play in influencing their supporters' beliefs and actions in modern American politics. Using experimental and survey methods in three separate analyses, the dissertation argues for a greater degree of citizen critical engagement with politics than that found in prominent recent studies of elite influence on public opinion.

The first dissertation chapter presents the results of a large, nationally representative survey experiment conducted in January 2020, just prior to the beginning of the Democratic presidential primary elections. This survey experiment was designed to assess 1) whether partisan supporters of individual politicians side with the politician or their party when the two take different sides on an issue, and 2) whether taking such counter-party policy stances comes at a cost for politicians. Democratic supporters of Joe Biden and Republican supporters of Donald Trump side with their politician, not their political party, when the two take opposing positions. The magnitude of persuasive effects varies across policies; however, subjects sided with the politician for all ten tested issues. Critically, politicians pay a penalty for this heterodoxy: respondents felt less warmly toward, and stated they were less likely to vote for, the cued politician when the politician's counter-party positions were revealed. Heterogeneity in these evaluation treatment effects manifests both by issue examined and by respondents' education level. While the general patterns of persuasion and evaluation effects were similar for Donald Trump and Joe Biden supporters, Donald Trump supporters hold both President Trump and the Republican Party responsible for intraparty policy disagreements, while Biden-supporting respondents felt no less warmly toward the Democratic Party when intraparty policy disagreements were highlighted. Evaluation penalties were increased among subjects who saw multiple treatments, suggesting evaluation penalties for counter-party positions increase with treatment dosage. Personal appeals are essential to these results: persuasive effects were reduced and evaluation penalties strengthened when personalized content was removed from the treatment text.

The second chapter examines candidate selection in a non-partisan context. It compares persuasive and evaluative effects for each of the major candidates in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary election among their supporters. I present evidence that citizens regard political figures and policy issues with more discernment than many recent studies find. Supporters of counter-party candidates like Bernie Sanders do not negatively judge their candidate for taking counter-party stances, while supporters of party-line candidates like Joe Biden do withdraw electoral support when Biden's counter-party positions are highlighted. Supporters of all candidates, however, use the information they are given about their favored candidates when selecting among hypothetical presidential candidates, demonstrating the power political leaders have to guide the selection of other political representatives.

The third chapter recontacts supporters of unsuccessful 2020 Democratic primary candidates just prior to the 2020 general election. This chapter observationally gauges the extent to which supporters of unsuccessful primary candidates adopted the policy preferences of the victorious candidate, Joe Biden, during the 2020 general election campaign. It also assesses the durability of the persuasive effects estimated in previous dissertation chapters. In doing so, the third chapter assesses the role both successful and unsuccessful primary candidates play in shaping electorate preferences over the course of multiple election cycles. This follow-up survey is fully funded and will be conducted prior to the 2020 general election.