From Political Conflict to Partisan Evaluations: How Citizens Assess Party Ideology and Competence in Polarized Elections

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Abstract

Recent comparative electoral research shows that both ideological and competence voting are influenced by the degree of party system polarization. However, while the former association is uncontroversial, investigations on the latter have led to contradicting results. This study takes one step back, arguing that polarization rather affects how voters perceive party ideological positioning and competence. Building on literature linking elite polarization to mass partisanship, the study argues that party identification is a strong moderator of party evaluations in polarized elections. Hypotheses are tested with multilevel logit models on a pooled dataset of European Election Studies from 1994 to 2009. Results show that partisans are more likely to view their preferred party as the most competent and ideologically close when the environment is polarized, while there is no such effect for non-partisans.

1. Introduction

The question how people evaluate political parties or candidates has been the core focus of the studies on voting behavior since the early years of the discipline. A related body of research seeks to explain how these evaluations vary across political contexts. This perspective is important as it helps understanding how the political environment can affect the individual-level mechanisms that regulate citizens' political behaviors.

A question that captured the attention of several scholars in the last decade is how context can influence the impact of party ideological positions and competence on voters' preferences. Scholarly literature has been suggesting that ideological evaluations and competence assessments are in part influenced by the same contextual conditions. In particular, what is found to be a relevant moderating factor for both these antecedents of voting behavior is the degree of polarization of the party system. However, there is not much agreement about the sign of the effect. While higher polarization has been found to foster policy and ideological voting (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Dalton 2008; Lachat 2008, 2011; van der Eijk et al. 2005), evidence of its impact on competence voting has been so far controversial. On the one hand, following the original conception of "valence issues" proposed by Stokes (1963, 1992), greater ideological consensus (and thus lower polarization) has been argued to increase the importance of competence assessments for party evaluations (Green 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008). On the other hand, further empirical research has found the opposite relationship (Clark and Leiter 2014; Pardos-Prado 2012).

Understanding the logic behind these controversial findings is important for two reasons. First, accepting different explanations of the impact of polarization on the relevance of competence considerations for the citizens implies drawing different substantial conclusions regarding the way in which voters evaluate parties in polarized elections. A stronger effect of competence attributions on the vote is interpreted in the valence framework as an indicator of the fact that there is agreement over the

policy goals to be pursued (Green 2007; Sanders et al. 2011). Thus, to observe this association growing stronger as a function of party polarization can lead to the conclusion that there can be "valence beyond consensus" (Pardos-Prado 2012) or, more generally, that polarized elections make voters more likely to reward or punish parties based on their performance. If this is coupled with the greater importance of ideology and policy-based considerations documented by other studies (Lachat 2008, 2011), the final, normative, message that can be read from this body of research is that proper "responsible electorates" emerge from polarized political environments.

A second reason for dealing with this controversy is that it raises the suspect that the heightened relevance of both ideology and competence in polarized elections could be in part explained by a third, lurking factor. In this respect, the candidate suggested in this paper is party identification. I argue that accounting for partisanship in this context is very important for two major reasons. First, partisan cues have been repeatedly shown to induce a significant bias in the way in which people perceive and evaluate political objects, including party performance and ideologies (Bartels 2002, 2008; Carsey and Layman 2006; Evans and Andersen 2004, 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2011). Second, some single-country and comparative studies show that polarized elections are associated with greater mass partisanship (Hetherington 2001; Schmitt 2009; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). Given these premises, it is argued here that the more a system is polarized, the higher the impact of partisanship on perceptions of party ideology and competence. This leads to opposite implications, in respect to those discussed above, regarding how voters evaluate parties in polarized elections. In particular, this mechanism pictures polarization as a situation of increased partisan *conflict*, where feelings of loyalty are what really guides citizens' evaluations.

This article proceeds as follows: in the next two sections I first discuss the literature that links party polarization to valence voting, and the puzzling findings that show a positive association between the two, and secondly, I report a mirror discussion of the literature on polarization and issue/ideological

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voting. In the following two sections, I first review literature on the meaning of ideological labels and discuss the implications of these definitions for our understanding of ideological polarization, then I link polarization with party identification. Finally, I provide individual-level evidence using a pooled data set of European Election Studies spanning from 1994 to 2009.

Results of multilevel logit models show that (1) higher polarization is positively associated with the probability that citizens have a party identification, and, for those who have it (2), that they will evaluate as ideologically closest and most competent the same party that they feel attach to. Moreover (3) in more polarized elections, the probability that the perceived most competent party is also the ideologically closest is significantly higher for partisans, but not for non-partisans.

The contribution of these findings to the literature on the electoral consequences of party polarization is both substantive and methodological. Substantively, they suggest that, in polarized elections, citizens have higher incentives to rely on partisan cues as they evaluate parties, both on ideological and on valence-based grounds. This has two major consequences for our understanding of how voters evaluate parties in polarized elections: first, for the scholars interested in the dispute between valence and positional voting, it suggests that to observe a larger effect of competence is not necessarily related to the fact that parties agree on ideological grounds, but quite the opposite. Second, it suggests that in more conflictual political environments even the presence of a largely rational behavior such as ideological/policy voting can be confounded with an expression of partisan loyalty. From the methodological point of view, these findings suggest that, as polarization increases, so does the collinearity between ideological and competence assessments. Thus, studies interested in comparing the relative strength of these two predictors of the vote in a comparative perspective should take into account in their explanation the fact that their overlap is systematically related to some characteristics of the political context.

2. Valence with or without consensus?

The concept of "valence" is used in psychology to indicate a set of positive or negative emotions attached to a certain object (Frijda 1986, p. 207), and it is first introduced in political science by Stokes (see 1963, 1992). The main strength of the concept lies in its clear reference to a vertical distinction between positive and negative evaluations, opposed to the conception of a horizontal space where parties can take different positions that are attractive to different groups of voters (as with "positional" issues). Stokes describes valence issues as issues that "merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate" (1963, p. 373). Positive valence is associated with good past performance and with the ability to deliver positive conditions in the future, i.e. with perception of *competence*. In Stokes' view, the same issues can be regarded as positional or valence, depending on whether they offer alternative preferences or not. The extent to which they belong to one type or another is an empirical matter, and it mainly depends on how the political actors compete. Thus, the take-home messages that subsequent research built on are essentially two. First, for issues to be considered "valence", there needs to be ideological agreement. Second, when voters evaluate parties on valence issues, competence becomes the distinctive criterion.

Following research has been investigating the evaluations of parties and candidates on two fronts. The first and more prolific studies the electoral effects of policy-related valence factors. These are the factors considered in this present study as well. The second front is focused on nonpolicy-related components, e.g. leader or candidate attributes such as honesty and integrity. These traits are generally referred to as as character-based valence factors (Clark 2009; Clark and Leiter 2014). Both these factors have been proven to exert a significant influence on voters' preferences, although in both cases the moderating effect of party polarization leads to contradicting results.

The assumption that competence attributions become more important as party ideological positions converge is also derived formally by Green (2007) and empirically tested for the UK by Green and

Hobolt (2008)[1]. Here the greater importance of competence evaluations is accounted "by difference" with the decreasing effect of spatial considerations on the vote, due to the ideological convergence of the major parties since the rise of the "New Labour". The model shows that, as parties converge towards a similar position, the distances between a voter and the different parties become more and more similar. As a consequence, the parameter associated with ideological proximity weakens (Green 2007). Substantively this means that when party positions become more and more similar, citizens find it increasingly difficult to choose between them based on positional considerations. Thus, "when policy distances between parties are modest, we can expect vote choice to be largely determined on the basis of which party is best trusted to deliver on this particular issue dimension" (Green and Hobolt 2008, p. 463).

This mechanism is based on the assumption that ideology and competence are a zero-sum game (Pardos-Prado 2012). While this assumption builds in part on Stokes' claim that issues can occur in both valence and positional form, depending on how controversial they are, the model neglects the fact that competence may still be taken into consideration when parties' ideological stands diverge. As Pardos-Prado points out, party polarization "can increase voters' and media interest in all aspects of political competition, including party competence" (2012, p. 344). In fact, comparative evidence shows that competence evaluations have a stronger impact on party preferences in *more* polarized elections, and their effect even correlates positively with the impact of ideological proximities (Pardos-Prado 2012). Furthermore, Sanders et al. (2011) show that people's perceptions of competence are in turn influenced by positional policy considerations. This suggests that voters may evaluate a party as more competent *because of its position*. These findings put into question the hypothesized advantage that

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[1] Policy-related valence factors are generally studied in the framework of the "issue ownership" theory. This is the body of literature where Green's (2007) and Green and Hobolt's (2008) studies are placed. The two important elements of valence in this model are *issue salience* and *competence attributions*. Parties are assumed to compete by increasing the salience of the issues on which they have a competitive advantage (i.e. the issues on which they are perceived as most competent). Voters are assumed to seek for the most competent party in handling the issues that they find more important. For more on this see e.g. Budge and Farlie (1983), Petrocik (1996) van der Brug (2004).

competence considerations should have as party policy differences become less relevant, and, ultimately, the independence between these two types of evaluations.

Similarly contrasting results are found by scholars interested in character-based valence factors. Buttice and Stone (2010) show that in, US Congressional elections, the effect of candidates' character qualities is strong when their ideological differences are minimal, and decreases when differences grow. On the other hand, results of Clark and Leiter's (2014) cross-country study show the opposite, i.e. the more dispersed parties' ideological positions are, the stronger is the effect of party competence, integrity and unity.

These controversial findings leave an open question when it gets to ultimately define the impact of party polarization on competence voting. While theoretical reasons why these two phenomena should be inversely related to one another are based on the very nature of valence issues (Green 2007; Stokes 1963), explanations for the opposite effect are lacking. Results of the empirical analyses do not, admittedly, follow the hypothesized direction (Clark and Leiter 2014) or they are taken as support for the argument against the assumption of a zero-sum game between ideology and competence (Pardos-Prado 2012). However, even allowing for a persistent importance of competence when parties diverge positionally, none of these accounts explain why in more polarized elections the effect of valence considerations should be systematically stronger. In fact, this relationship resembles the one, more established in the literature, between party polarization and the importance of positional issue or ideological considerations.

3. An Uncontroversial Story: Issue differentiation and issue salience

The model of party convergence and competence voting formulated by Green (2007) is the mirror image of a more widely investigated "salience effect" relating party polarization with issue or ideological voting. This mechanism builds on the Downsian spatial proximity model (Downs 1957),

and in particular on the importance of the *utility differential* that voters perceive from two or more parties holding policy positions that are different from one another. In this view, the more the parties' positions diverge over a given topic, the more the topic is likely to become salient for the voters. In other words, when parties are polarized on some issue or ideological dispute, odds are that such a dispute will stand out among the criteria used by the citizens to evaluate parties and get to their vote choice.

There are two types of argument in the literature that build on this mechanism. One focuses mainly on the meaningfulness of the alternatives supplied to the voters, i.e. on the extent to which the electoral success of one party instead of another corresponds to a different expected policy outcome (Dalton 2008, Wessels and Schmitt 2008). A second argument focuses on the contextual factors that make policy voting easier. As parties differentiate themselves from each other for strategic reasons, they should emphasize their differences during the campaign, referring more often to policies in their communication. This will increase the availability of policy-related information in the voters' mind, that they will use to evaluate parties (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008, 2011).

Both these explanations ideally refer to a between-issue comparison, where different policy dimensions are used as counterfactuals for different levels of party differentiation. Yet many studies interested in the effects of polarization in a comparative perspective measure it on a single general left-right scale (see e.g. Dalton 2008; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008; van der Eijk et al. 2005). This is also the case of the two comparative studies that find a positive effect of polarization on valence voting (Clark and Leiter 2014; Pardos-Prado 2012). While this might be the best way to effectively compare party positions across countries, literature on the meaning and the function of left-right ideologies suggest that the observed levels of left-right polarization may reflect something more than pure policy differentiation.

4. The implications of left-right polarization: more than policy differences?

I sustain in this section that party polarization, as measured on the left-right, is rather a measure of political *conflict*. To be sure, policy differentiation implies unavoidable contrast between supporters of the different sides. However, the claim here is rather that high left-right polarization implies a situation where conflict spans across issue domains, affecting party images by providing them with strong ideological profiles and identities. This view builds on a body of research focused on the meaning of ideology and the function of ideological labels, and can provide a key to read the observed effects of ideological polarization on citizens' behavior.

The substantive content of the labels "left" and "right" has been found to be rather variable (Schmitt and van der Eijk 2009). While the most common use in modern political discourse relates them to different preferences regarding the role of the state in the economy, the semantic emptiness of these labels makes the left-right a rather flexible construct (Sartori 1976). This view is endorsed by many comparative studies, which generally assume that the left-right is a "super-issue", which reflects what ever is the political conflict taking place at a given election (Inglehart 1990).

Other studies have been interested in conceptualizing the ideological labels from a psychological point of view. One perspective sees ideologies as *belief systems,* i.e. as coherent sets of core values that provide an underlying structure for people's attitudes and preferences (Converse 1964, Jost 2006). Another perspective argues that ideological labels are better understood as *self-identifications*, i.e. as a form of group identity driven by the evaluation of the major political objects (Conover and Feldman 1981; Levitin and Miller 1979). Here, being "left", or "liberal", implies defining the self as a part of a specific social group. When the group identity is salient, it can influence the way in which people evaluate political objects, such as issues, parties or candidates, introducing a set of cognitive biases. These will include a tendency to evaluate more positively objects related to the in-group, and more negatively objects related to the out-group (see Iyengar et al. 2012; Turner et al. 1994).

Both accounts imply reading left-right polarization as a more encompassing phenomenon than a mere expression of policy differences. If ideologies are defined as belief systems, then ideological polarization should imply a type of political conflict that spans across issue domains, where the sum is more important than the parts. As Baldassarri and Gelman point out, polarization "constitutes a threat to the extent that it induces alignment along multiple lines of political conflict and organizes individuals and groups around exclusive identities, thus crystallizing interests into opposite factions" (2008, p. 409). In other words, while the issue salience effect discussed in the previous section drives people's attention from the policy domains where parties agree towards those where parties disagree, ideological polarization might rather consolidate the structure of issue preferences into proper identities.

The second view suggests that, for polarization to be an indicator of political conflict, the left-right does not even need to have a strong substantive content. While people are not always aware of their meanings, ideological labels have nevertheless a strong impact on their evaluations and behaviors (Levitin and Miller 1979). Thus, parties can be perceived as polarized not necessarily because of their policy positions, but because of a particularly hostile tone of the debate, or because in their discourse they appeal more often to ideological identities (for a description of this process in Hungary, see Palonen 2009).

5. From left-right polarization to partisanship

Both ways to conceptualize the left-right discussed above lead to a definition of polarization as a situation in which politics is essentially perceived as an "adversary enterprise" (Schmitt 2009). This should have some implications for the way in which voters in more polarized contexts deal with politics. In particular, polarized political environments should motivate citizens to confront politics in a more *partisan* way. This implies *taking a side*, i.e. stating their partisan attachment to a political actor,

and responding to every implicit or explicit call for evaluation of political objects following their *partisan loyalty.* This should be reflected, among other things, in the perception of greater ideological proximity and competence of the party that they are attached to.

The first phenomenon has been studied by scholars of US politics, assuming a top-down mechanism from the political elites to the public opinion (Zaller 1992). As Hetherington argues, "[b]ecause greater ideological differences between the parties on the elite level should produce a more partisan information stream, elite polarization should produce a more partisan mass response" (2001, p. 622). Besides ideological distance, other explanations linking party polarization to partisanship in the US look into conflict extension across issue domains (Layman and Carsey 2002) and a bigger ideological cohesion among the elites (Brewer 2005).

To be sure, the capability of party identification to capture political identities may vary considerably between the US and other European contexts. For instance, in West Europe, encompassing political identities are more often associated with other group-related characteristics, such as social class or religion, while party identities are often said to play a weaker role (Shively 1979). However, feelings of partisan attachment can also be fueled by relatively short-term factors, such as a particularly intense type of competition. As Schmitt contends "[t]he more ideological conflict there is between parties, the more politicized and mobilized a society will be and the more partisanship we expect to find" (2009, p. 76). The general idea is that, as elites set the tones of the political debate, citizens will confront political stimuli in a way that resembles their representatives' behavior. In fact, the few comparative studies relating polarization to partisanship show a connection between the two (Berglund et al. 2005; Schmitt 2009; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). This suggests that the way in which parties compete plays a relevant role in influencing people's tendency to feel attached to a particular party. This expectation leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: In elections characterized by higher degrees of party left-right polarization, citizens are more likely to state their attachment to a political party.

This hypothesis is the first step in the discussion of the impact of polarization on citizens' political behavior. A second step is to assess whether party polarization is also related to the extent to which partisan attachment influences citizens' perceptions of ideological proximity and feelings of party competence. For what concerns the former, past research shows a considerable impact of party identification on people's perceptions of party policy stances, both in the US and in European contexts (see Carsey and Layman 2006; Evans and Andersen 2004; but see also Milazzo et al. 2012). When it gets to assess whether this connection is moderated by polarization, evidence is lacking. US scholars provide evidence that the amount of partisan "sorting", i.e. the correlation between ideological self-placement and party identification, increases as a function of party polarization (Levendusky 2009). On the other hand, scholarly literature did not produce so far any comparative evidence supporting the same phenomenon.

I argue here that the same reasons why polarization should increase partisan attachments across political contexts should account also for a stronger presence of a partisan perceptual bias. If a higher conflictual political context given by polarization mobilizes the voters to the point to trigger their feelings of partisan attachment, this should also make them more confident in relying on *partisan cues* at the same time. Thus, as a consequence of H1, we should expect the association between partisanship and ideological proximity to be higher in more polarized contexts:

H2: In elections characterized by higher degrees of party ideological polarization, partisans are more likely to perceive the party they support as the most proximate on the left-right.

Perceptions of party competence should reflect the same pattern. Literature on partisanship provides abundant documentation of the cognitive mechanisms and the situations in which partisan cues induce biases in people's evaluation of party or government performances (Bartels 2002, 2008; Evans and Andersen 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2011). If such cues are more relevant when parties are more polarized, we should expect the association between partisanship and perception of competence to be stronger in more polarized elections:

H3: In elections characterized by higher degrees of party ideological polarization, partisans are more likely to attribute competence to the party they support.

If the hypotheses H2 and H3 are correct, in more polarized elections, partisans should end up evaluating party ideology and competence in the same way, i.e. the party perceived to be the ideologically closest and the one perceived as the most competent should be the same. However, to make sure that the effect of polarization on voters' evaluations is effectively moderated by their partisan attachment, we need to take into account also the *counterfactual* situation, namely those citizens who are not attached to any party. If the hypothesized mechanism is correct, for non-identifiers the chance that ideological and competence evaluations lead to the same party should remain essentially constant, regardless of the level of polarization. Thus, the last hypothesis states the effect of polarization on voters' perceptions of ideological proximity and competence to be moderated by partisanship:

H4: In elections characterized by higher degrees of party ideological polarization, partisans are more likely to attribute competence to the most proximate parties on the left-right. The same effect should not apply to non-partisans.

Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical expectations outlined in this section, and compares them with what has been found by previous literature. While previous studies mainly focused of the moderating effect of polarization on the determinants of the vote, this studies focuses on the prior step, i.e. on how the observed effects can reflect an increased partisan bias in more polarized elections. The next section provides comparative empirical evidence to quantify the extent of this phenomenon.
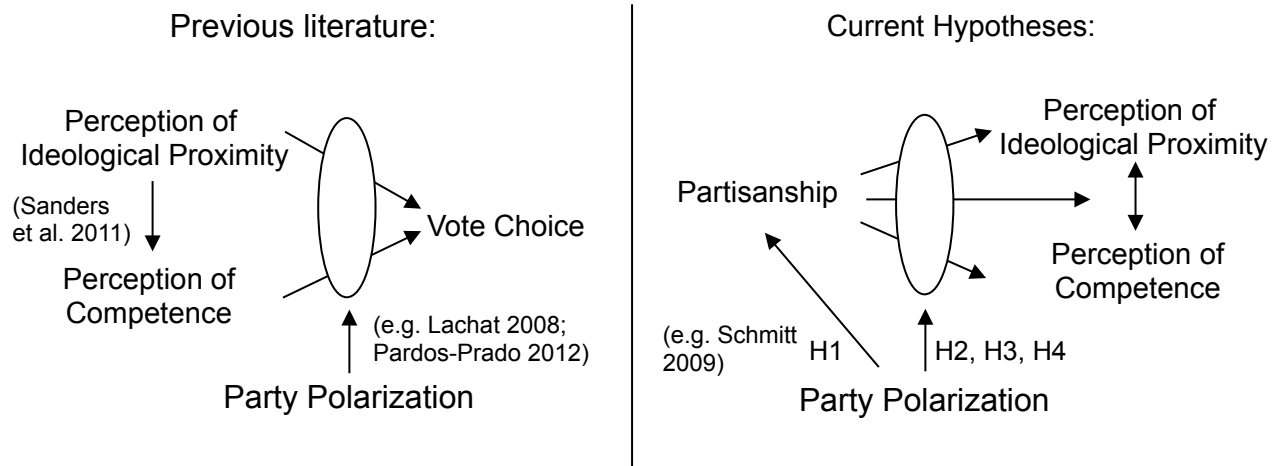

Figure 1 – Previous findings and current theoretical expectations.

6. Data, model specification, and results

The empirical analyses conducted in this study are based on four waves of the European Election Study (EES), from 1994 to 2009[2]. Among the varieties of data offered, EES provides a cross-country post-election survey conducted on national representative samples in all the EU member states where European Parliament elections are held[3]. Because of the uniform structure of the questionnaires, EES data are particularly fit for investigating cross-contextual variations in voting behavior and macro-micro relationships. In fact, several studies rely on these data (among those cited here see Lachat 2008,

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[2]   Belgium, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Malta (all 2004) are excluded from all the analyses due to missing variables. The total number of elections considered is 81. Cyprus (2009) and Northern Ireland (1999) are excluded from the analyses with perceptions of party competence for the same reason.

[3]   For more information, see http://www.ees-homepage.net/

Pardos-Prado 2012). The pooled data set used here contains all the waves on which such studies are based on.

European Parliament elections are generally considered to be *second-order*, i.e. more likely to be influenced by national-level issues and patterns of competition than by topics that are directly related to European governance (Reif and Schmitt 1980). This should not represent a problem here, as all the questions on which this study is focused refer to national parties and national issues. The only problem that may affect the comparability of the results regards the varying distance in time across countries from the closest national elections, i.e. from contexts where the campaign is necessarily more intensive. For this reason, a variable indicating the distance in months from the closest first-order election is included in all the models.

The three main concepts that this study is based on are *partisan attachment*, *competence attribution* and *ideological proximity*[4]. The first consists in two pieces of information: a simple dummy indicating whether the respondent states that he/she feels "close to a particular party" (used to test H1) and, in case of affirmative answer, a further variable indicating which one[5]. Competence attribution is measured in a similar way: first, the respondent is asked about what he/she thinks is the most important problem facing the country at the moment of the interview, then a following question asks which party is the most competent in dealing with it. This information is used to compute a dummy variable telling whether the party indicated is the same that the respondent feels attached to (to test H3)[6]. Finally, ideological proximity combines information about respondents' self-positioning and perceived

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[4] See Appendix 1 for the question wordings of the relevant variables.
[5] In some studies, a follow up question is asked to try to retrieve some respondents who either answer negatively or do not know. However, because such question is not present in all the EES waves, it was ignored in this operationalization. For a similar reason, i.e. the non comparability of the scales used across different waves, the analyses performed here can not account for the variation in strength of partisanship.
[6] The 1994 study has a slightly different question wording, i.e. the first question asks for the most important *issue*. Although some studies have been pointing this out as an important difference (Jennings and Wlezien 2011), the main concern regards the comparability of the information about the problems/issues themselves, rather than the follow-up question about the most competent party. However, to make sure that this difference does not bias the results, all the models that include competence assessments have been run without including 1994, obtaining similar results.

positions of the relevant parties on a left-right scale. These measures are used to calculate individual distances between the respondents and, first, the party that they indicate as the one they feel attached to (if any) and, second, the one they indicate as the most competent (if any). Two dummies tell whether each of the two distances correspond to the smallest individual distance from a party[7]. Such indicators are used to test, respectively, H2 and H4[8].

Party polarization is operationalized using the sample mean perceptions of the party left-right placements as unique party positions, and applying a formula based on a weighted standard deviation:

$$Pol = \sum |\bar{x} - x_i| * w_i$$

Here x refers to the ideological center of the party system, and it is calculated as the weighted mean of all the party positions x_i. The weights w_i are the party vote shares, normalized by the total share of the parties considered in each study[9].

Figure 2 shows the bivariate relationship between polarization and frequencies at the election level of the four dependent variables. Because all the measures are dichotomous, the y-axes of the figure report the percentage of respondents who score one within each election cluster. The plots reinforce the

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[7]   Some respondents perceive more than one single party as ideologically closest. For those people, the probability that the closest party corresponds to the one they identify with and the one they perceive as most competent should be greater. To account for potential biases given by those cases, the models including the left-right closest party have been rerun including a variable counting the ties as a control. The results remained substantially untouched.

[8]   An alternative operationalization would imply recalculating the distances using "objective" party positions, i.e. using for each party the sample mean placement. This type of operationalization should reduce some known perception biases in party and individual self-placements, such as *projection* or *persuasion* effects (Brody and Page 1972). However, rather than biases, such misperceptions are part of the effect hypothesized in this study. Interestingly, all the analyses lead to substantially similar effects if rerun with variables computed using objective distances.

[9]   Esteban and Ray (1994) developed an index of polarization willfully focused on capturing the conflict potential of large-n populations. When applied to party systems, the index is equivalent to a sum of weighted pairwise distances between the parties, with the possibility to put additional emphasis on party sizes by the means of an extra parameter. While the Esteban and Ray index is successful in capturing the presence of large and homogeneous clusters in big populations, when it is used to measure party polarization it shows a rather high correlation with the number of parties. On the other hand, when the extra emphasis on party sizes is reduced to zero, the index correlates even more strongly with the standard deviation based index used here. The models presented here have been rerun using the Esteban and Ray index to measure polarization, leading to very similar results.
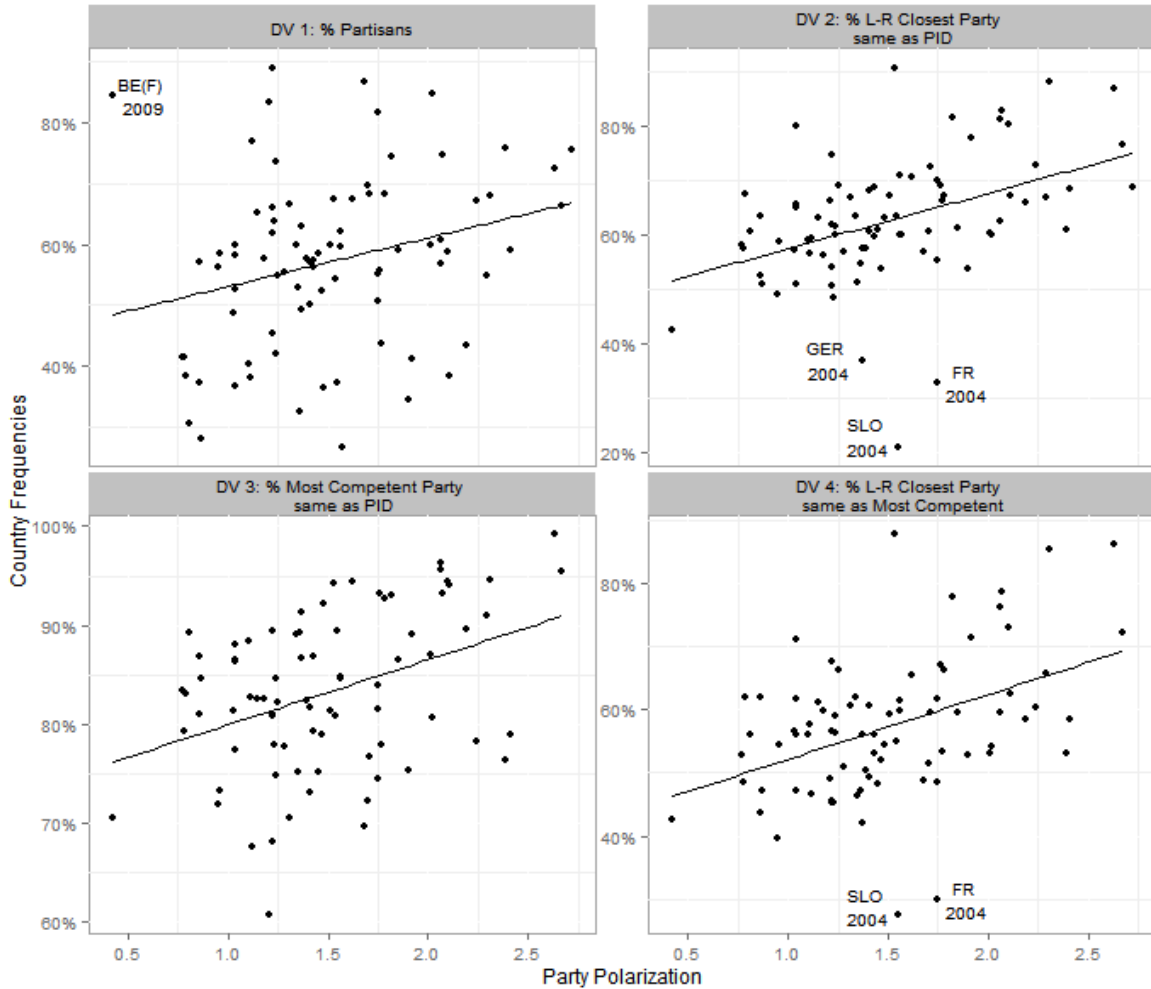
Figure 2 - Scatter plots with polarization and election-level frequencies of the dependent variables.

expectation that the relationship between polarization and the probability to score one in each of the four indicators is indeed positive. However, the figure also shows the presence of some rather severe outliers which could potentially bias the results. The most evident case is Belgium (Flanders) in 2009, where a very low degree of polarization is associated with almost 85% of respondents defining themselves as attached to a party, as shown in the top-left plot of the figure. Other cases, such as Slovenia, France and Germany (all 2004) fall in the middle of the distribution on the x-axis, and therefore are less problematic for the estimation of the effect of polarization at level-2. However, the presence of these outliers is likely to bias the *intercept*, rather than the slope of the independent variable

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at the context level. To make sure that none of these cases will drive the coefficients of the relevant predictors in the multivariate models, they will be controlled for in the models by adding a set of dummy variables identifying them[10].

Although the relevant context discussed in this study is the election, the presence of several elections for some countries requires that the individual-level analyses are specified with a hierarchical structure set on three levels. Thus, individual respondents are nested within elections that in turn are nested within countries. While the predictors included in the models are mostly at the individual or at the election level, the choice to add an additional level is made to control for the non-independence between observations belonging to the same country, which may be affected by common sources of correlation that go beyond the single electoral context. This implies accounting not only for the presence of multiple surveys for the same nation, but also for those cases where different samples (e.g. East and West Germany in 1994) or different political systems (e.g. Belgian Flanders and Wallonia) belong to the same county[11].

Hypothesis 1 refers to the individual probability that respondents state their attachment to a certain party, and therefore is tested on the full sample. On the contrary, Hypotheses 2 and 3 are tested only on the sub-sample of respondents who score 1 on the partisanship dummy. For each of the first three models, the focus is on the main effect of polarization, which is expected to be positive. Thus, in all three cases the equation specified is for a simple random-intercept model. Hypothesis 4 requires a slightly more complex specification, as the slope of polarization with the overlap between the most competent and the closest party is expected to be positive for partisans only. In this case, the main

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[10] Alternative models estimated without the dummy variables lead to similar effects, but also to considerably lower model fits.

[11] Note that this type of specification, which by estimating different country intercepts controls for correlation within country units, leads to the most conservative results. The analyses were replicated using several other model specifications, including nesting only at the election level and only at the country level (both rather usual practices in many published comparative articles), and always produced similar results, some times with even smaller standard errors. However, the specification reported here is the one producing the best fit in the most of the models.

effect of partisanship is expected to vary across elections as a function of the degree of polarization. This requires specifying a random-slopes model, where the slope for partisanship is set free to vary across elections. Because the four dependent variables are dummies, all the models are logistic regressions.

Controls at the individual level include age and interest for politics, which may both affect the individual propensity to be a partisan. Given the inevitable association between party polarization and voters' ideological dispersion, individual left-right extremity is included to control for sample composition. Controls at the election level include the effective number of parties, and the time distance in months from the closest national election. Finally, to control for the presence of less established party systems that may have systematically fewer partisans, a country-level dummy

	Model 1 Partisan Attachment		Model 2 L-R Closest party same as Partisanship		Model 3 Most Competent party same as Partisanship		Model 4 L-R Closest party same as Most Competent	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Individual Level								
Age	0.013 ***	(0.001)	0.001	(0.001)	0.003 ***	(0.001)	0.002 **	(0.001)
Gender (1 = Female)	0.003	(0.018)	-0.028	(0.023)	0.025	(0.033)	-0.022	(0.023)
Left-Right extremity	0.315 ***	(0.007)	0.303 ***	(0.009)	0.082 ***	(0.012)	0.269 ***	(0.009)
Interest for politics	1.833 ***	(0.035)	0.113 ***	(0.043)	0.130 **	(0.064)	0.086 **	(0.044)
Partisan Attachment							-0.098	(0.116)
Election Level								
Effective N of Parties	0.054	(0.054)	-0.089 ***	(0.029)	-0.153 ***	(0.038)	-0.118 ***	(0.026)
Time from National Election	-0.009	(0.009)	-0.012 **	(0.005)	0.006	(0.006)	-0.008	(0.005)
Post-Communist country	-0.369	(0.231)	-0.270 **	(0.110)	0.283	(0.177)	-0.137	(0.099)
Polarization	0.520 ***	(0.177)	0.368 ***	(0.091)	0.470 ***	(0.131)	0.126	(0.088)
Polarization × Partisan							0.278 ***	(0.076)
Belgium (Flanders) 2009	1.869 ***	(0.574)	-0.378	(0.389)	-0.357	(0.388)	-0.166	(0.396)
France 2004			-1.452 ***	(0.374)			-0.978 ***	(0.319)
Slovenia 2004			-2.177 ***	(0.435)			-1.379 ***	(0.395)
Germany 2004			-1.087 ***	(0.383)				
Intercept	-2.303 ***	(0.397)	0.096	(0.211)	1.255 ***	(0.296)	0.052	(0.194)
Var Intercept Election	0.234		0.125		0.082		0.077	
Var Attachment							0.031	
Var Intercept Country	0.192		0.000		0.120		0.000	
AIC	71765		45598		24239		45419	
BIC	71874		45726		24337		45572	
N Respondents	63630		36806[a]		26200[a]		35191	
N Elections	81		81		79		79	
N Countries	27		27		27		27	

[a] Sub-sample including only partisans   *** = p < 0.01; ** = p < 0.05

Table 1 - Multilevel models results

identifying post-communist countries is included. Results are reported in Table 1.

Model 1 shows that the association between party polarization and the probability that citizens feel attached to a party is positive and significant ($p < 0.01$). To have a clear idea of the substantive relation between the two, Figure 3 shows how the predicted probability simulated using the model coefficients varies when party polarization goes from the minimum to the maximum value, holding other predictors constant at their mean value. The probability that citizens state their party attachment increases on average by 25%, rising from about 50% in elections with the lowest party polarization to 75% in highly-polarized contexts.
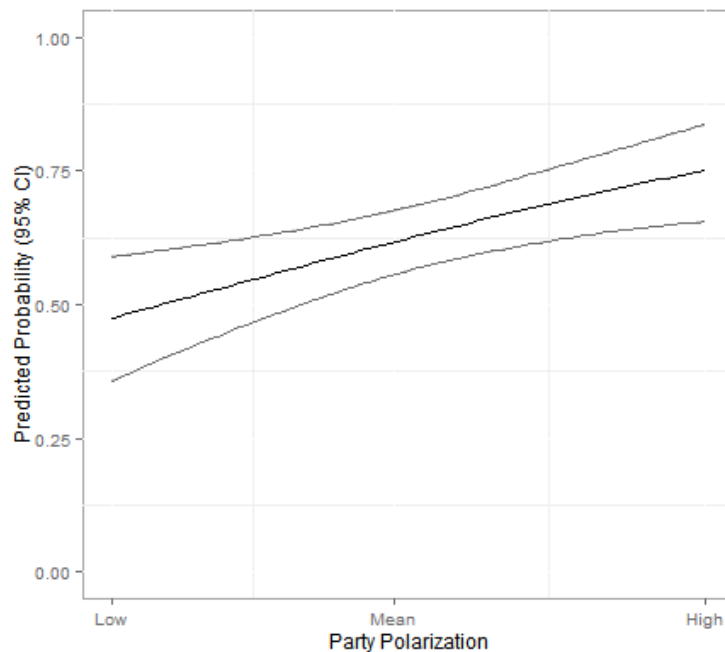

Figure 3 - Predicted probability of individual partisanship and polarization.

Models 2 and 3 tell a similar story, as polarization is positively associated with both the probability that partisans perceived the party they are attached to as the ideologically closest, and the probability that they indicate it as the most competent. Taken together, results of Model 1 and Models 2 and 3 confirm, first, what found by previous studies regarding the main effect of a polarized electoral context on

citizens' propensity to be partisan, and second, the hypotheses formulated here about the increased likelihood, in more polarized elections, that ideological and competence evaluations are performed following a partisan logic, i.e. indicating the party that the citizens feel attached to as the most ideologically similar to their own position and as the most competent.

To draw substantive conclusions from the coefficients of Models 2 and 3 as they are is rather difficult, because, next to the problem of interpreting the rough values of the linear predictor in logit models, the results refer to a specific sub-sample of the population, i.e. the partisans. This represents a problem insofar as the size of the partisan share of the population varies as a function of polarization as well, as the results of Model 1 show. Thus, a meaningful summary of the conclusions should take into account, first, the effect of polarization on the probability to be a partisan and, second, the probability that the party supported overlaps with ideological perceptions and competence assessments.

To provide such a summary I combine Model 1 with, respectively, Model 2 and 3 using statistical simulation. The procedure takes three steps. First, I predict the probability to be a partisan using the coefficients of Model 1. Second, I use this predicted probability to draw a single random trial from a binomial distribution. Third, if the number drawn is 0 (meaning that the observation is predicted to be a non-partisan) the probability is saved as it is. Conversely, if the number drawn is 1, there will be a further random draw, using this time the predicted probabilities obtained, respectively, from Models 2 and 3. The procedure is repeated a large number of times. At every round, a new predicted probability is simulated from the three models, using both the coefficients and the standard errors to take into account the uncertainty of the estimate. This routine is embedded in a further loop that repeats it for several levels of polarization, holding the effects of the controls constant at their mean. The resulting plots are shown in Figure 4[12].

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[12]   Because Model 3 is based on 79 elections instead of 81, the conditional probabilities simulated for Model 3 are based on a version of Model 1 which includes exactly the same elections. This implies that the substantive results shown on the right plot of Figure 4 do not involve Cyprus (2009) and Northern Ireland (1999).
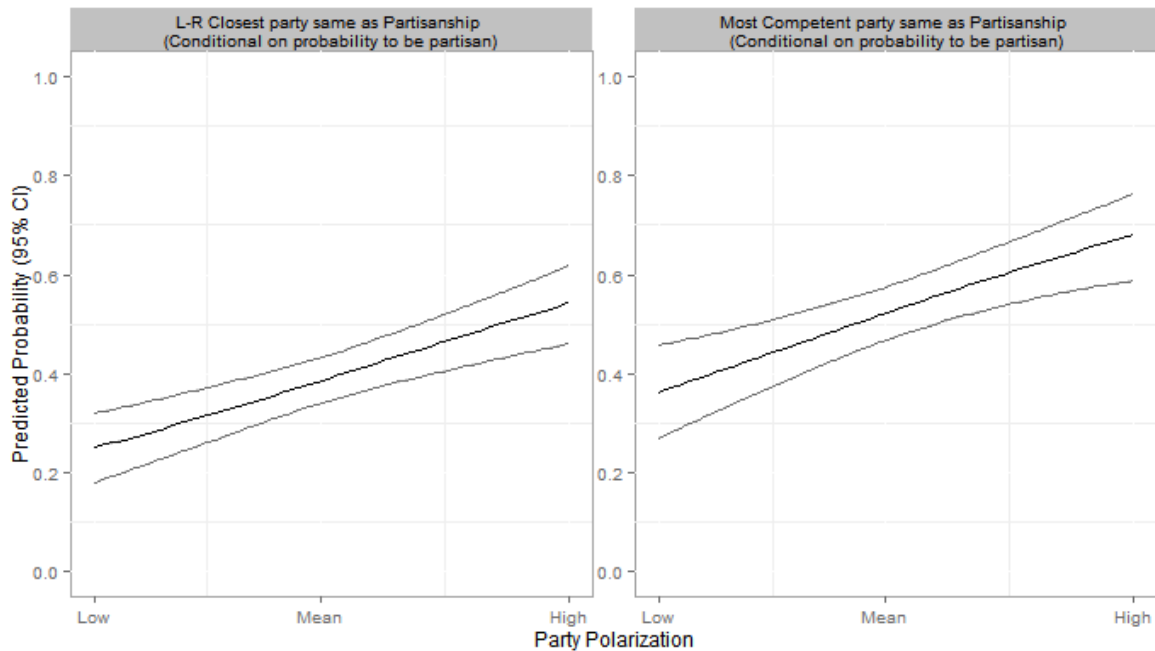
Figure 4 - Conditional predicted probabilities of partisan evaluation of ideological proximity and competence.

The interpretation of the two plots in Figure 4 is straightforward. The left chart shows that, for an average citizen, the party perceived as the ideologically closest is the same he/she is partisan of in 30% of the cases in systems characterized by low polarization, and in 50% of the cases in highly-polarized systems. This implies that, in very polarized elections, the half of the times we observe a citizen voting ideologically, we can not really distinguish it from partisan voting. The situation gets somewhat worse as we move to competence assessments. As Figure 4 shows, the party indicated as the most competent to deal with the most important problem in the country, is in almost 70% of the cases, the same one a citizen is partisan of in highly-polarized elections. This proportion drops to 40% in elections where polarization is low. This has implications for both the evaluation of valence models based on competence voting and for the interpretation of aggregate perceptions of competence, used to assess which parties "own" which issues (see e.g. Petrocik 1996).

Before passing to a more detailed discussion of these results, an inspection of the coefficients of

Model 4 confirms both the expectations formulated in Hypothesis 4. Here the dependent variable is the probability that the party mentioned as the most competent *and* the ideologically closest are the same. According to the hypothesis, the effect of polarization on the overlap between these two types of perceptions is meant to be moderated by whether citizens are partisan or not. Figure 5 shows the distribution of predicted probabilities for partisans and non-partisans.
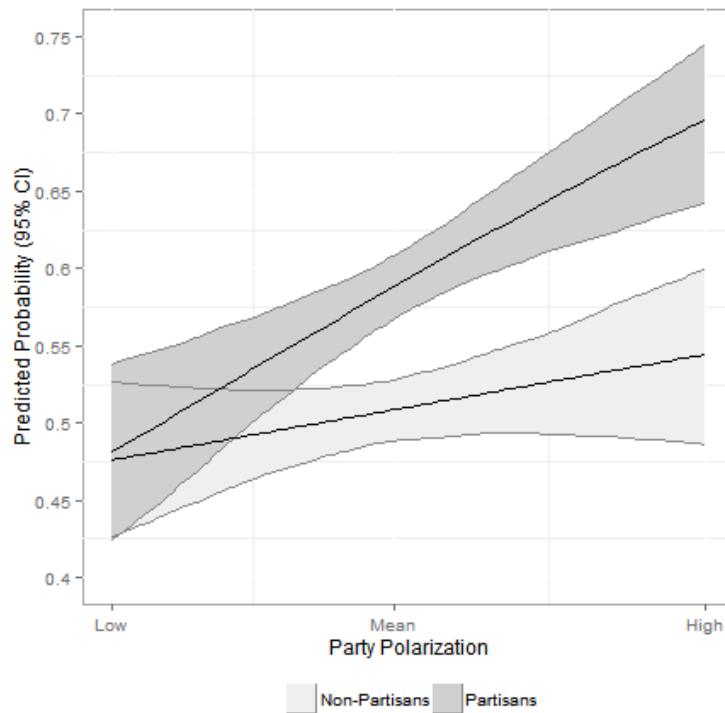

Figure 5 - Overlap between ideological and competence perceptions for partisans and non-partisans.

As the figure shows, the probability that competence and ideological perceptions overlap for non-partisans is always around 50%, regardless the level of party polarization. However, for partisans this probability goes up to 70% in highly-polarized elections. Moreover, the difference between partisans and non-partisans is not significant for lower levels of polarization, indicating that in those contexts

partisans and non-partisans evaluate parties essentially in the same way. To sum up, all four the effects hypothesized in the previous section find empirical support. In more polarized elections people are more likely to be attached to a political party, and partisans are more likely to perceive the supported party as the ideologically closest and most competent. Moreover, the results show no change for non-partisans, confirming that the mechanism by which polarization influences citizens' evaluations is moderated by their partisan attachment.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

Much comparative electoral research is concerned with the impact of characteristics of the political context on citizens' party preferences. In particular, the impact of two factors is known to be significantly influenced by the level of party polarization at the time of the elections: spatial/issue and valence/competence considerations. However, while the studies focused on the former set of considerations always led to the same, uncontroversial, conclusions, investigations on the latter have produced contradicting results.

This study takes cue from this puzzle, and argues that polarization has something to do with the way in which people perceive parties to be more or less ideologically similar to them, and more or less competent, in the first place. In particular, this paper argues that, in polarized contexts, citizens are more likely to be attached to a certain party, and thus to perceive it as ideologically closest and to evaluate it as most competent. Empirical findings support these expectations, showing that, in highly-polarized systems, partisanship predicts which party is perceived as the ideologically closest in more than 50% of the cases, and which party is perceived as the most competent in almost 70% of the cases. Moreover, further analyses show that the probability that the party perceived to be the most competent is the same as the one perceived to be the ideologically closest grows as a function of polarization for partisans, but not for non-partisans. This indicates that the impact of party polarization on citizens'

party evaluations is moderated by their partisan attachment.

This study makes three important contributions to the literature on the impact of the political context on people's behavior. First, it suggests that, when politics is polarized, citizens have higher incentives to rely on partisan cues as they evaluate parties, both on ideological and on valence-based grounds. Interestingly, the overlap with partisanship results from the analyses to be larger for competence assessments than for ideological proximity. A straightforward way to interpret this result is that competence assessments are more likely to reflect people's party identification than perceptions of ideological proximity. This could be driven by the method of measurement: in the data used for this study, party competence is assessed via one single question, while ideological proximity requires information about both the respondent's own positioning and where he/she perceives the parties to be placed. Thus, if these perceptions derive in part from an expression of partisan loyalty, this should be reflected more in the former than in the latter. However, this could also imply that competence assessments are more likely to be influenced by other types of evaluations. Recent studies have relied on different techniques, such as cross-lagged models on panel data, experiments and cognitive interviews, to show that valence considerations often reflect other types of evaluations (see Evans and Chzhen 2011; Therriault 2013; Wagner and Zeglovits 2013). While these studies have all been conducted in homogeneous contexts, the results of this paper suggests that the extent to which this phenomenon takes place can be related to some features of the political context, such as party polarization.

The second contribution of this study is related to the methodological implications of the findings. Essentially, the results show that, as party polarization increases, ideological and competence considerations become less and less distinguishable from one another. Thus, research focused on comparing the relative strength of these two predictors of the vote in a comparative perspective should take into account in the explanation, and possibly in the measurement, the fact that their degree of

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collinearity is systematically related to some characteristics of the political context. If ignored, this aspect could lead to observe biased effects in case the two measures are included together in the model and interacted with polarization. This methodological point has also a substantial counterpart, as it implies that observing a larger effect of competence may not be necessarily due to the fact that parties agree on ideological grounds, but quite the opposite. If competence assessments reflect other types of considerations, their effect on the vote, at least based on the measure included in most surveys, should not be expected to be a zero-sum game with ideology.

A third contribution of this study regards our understanding of political behavior in polarized contexts. The findings show that, when parties are polarized, citizens are more likely to state their attachment to a party, to regard that party as competent, and to perceive it as ideologically similar to them. This suggests that some normative implications, mainly drawn from the assumption that higher policy differentiation encourages citizens to evaluate parties and candidates on more substantive grounds, should be revised. To be sure, if all parties offer the same thing, then the vote choice can be hardly regarded as meaningful (Wessels and Schmitt 2008). However, when polarization is high, the meaning of the vote choice can be reduced to nothing more than an expression of partisan loyalty. Thus, following the suggestion of Schmitt and Freire (2012), the relationship between polarization and the competitiveness of elections is better described with a bell-shaped pattern. When polarization is too low, and parties are barely distinguishable from each other, voters will be likely not to care about who wins the election, as the policy outcome will be similar. On the other hand, when polarization is too high, voters will be less sensitive to other parties' appeals, giving parties less incentives to adjust their policies according to where the most of the citizens stand and, ultimately, to behave competently.

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Appendix 1 – Question Wordings

Most important Issue:
2009, 2004, 1999:
What do you think is the most important problem facing [country] today?
1994:
Which of the following issues do you consider the most important?

Party Competence:
2009, 2004:
Which political party do you think would be best at dealing with [MIP]?
1999:
Which political party do you think is most likely to do what you want to be done on [MIP]?
1994:
Which party would you think would be best at... ?

Left-Right Self Placement:
2009, 2004, 1999:
In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right". What is your position? Please indicate your views using [scale]. Which number best describes your position? (for 1994: *How would you place your views on this scale?*)

Left-Right Party Placements:
2009:
How about the (Party X)? Which number from 0 to 10, where 0 means "left" and 10 means "right" best describes (Party X)?
2004: wording not explicitly reported in the codebook.
1999:
And about where would you place the following parties on this scale?
1994:
And where would you place each of the following political parties of [COUNTRY] on this same scale?

Party Attachment:
2009, 2004, 1999, 1994:
Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular party? If so, which party do you feel close to?

For 2009 wordings, the UK questionnaire has been used as example.

Appendix 2 – Variables Description

Variable	Coding	Mean	S.D.
Age	Age in years	47.41	17.02
L-R extremity	Most moderate (0)--most extreme (4)	1.41	1.41
Interest for Politics	No interest (0)--High interest (1)	0.48	0.30
Partisan Attachment	Not Partisan (0)--Partisan (1)	0.58	0.49
L-R Closest party same as Partisanship	0,1	0.63	0.48
Most Competent party same as Partisanship	0,1	0.81	0.39
L-R Closest party same as Most Competent	0,1	0.57	0.50
ENEP	Effective number of electoral parties	4.71	1.55
Weeks from N.E.	Distance in weeks from the closest first-order election	14.76	8.11
Post-Communist country[1]		0.20	0.40
Polarization		1.52	0.48

[1] Unique values