

Deciding about the unknown: The effect of party and ideological cues on forming opinions about the European Union

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Abstract

This article contributes to the literature on political heuristics by reporting two survey experiments conducted in Spain in 2014–2015 on party and ideology cues regarding preferences on a range of European Union and domestic issues in European and general elections. The findings reveal that party cues increase voters' competence to take positions on European Union issues more than ideological ones. Cues increase competence in a similar fashion regardless of the nature of the topic, although the effect of cues that parties provide on European Union issues seems to be stronger than that of cues on domestic policies. Party cueing effects are also consistent across different electoral arenas (national vs. European), and for all types of parties regardless of their age or positions toward the European Union integration process.

Keywords

European Union, ideology, issue voting, party cues, survey experiments

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The influence of the European Union (EU) and its policies on the democratic processes in member states has increased during the last decades (Dolezal, 2012). Its impact has become even stronger with the recent economic and political crisis which began in 2008 (Hobolt and Wratil, 2015). Nevertheless, a great majority of citizens continue to be poorly informed about European integration and they are generally unable to assess how consequential EU decisions are for their daily lives. So, how do individuals form their opinions about the EU? How can voters position themselves competently if they lack basic knowledge about the EU integration process?

One of the most relevant approaches argues that citizens' opinions on the EU are conditioned by the strategies of party elites. According to this top-down approach, citizens profit from cues¹ provided by parties in the form of endorsements when they take positions on issues concerned with EU policies and opinions (Hellström, 2008; Hobolt, 2007; Pannico, 2017; Ray, 2003; Sanders and Toka, 2013). Specifically, such cues allow voters to reduce the costs of gathering and processing information on EU issues and increase 'voter competence' (Hobolt, 2007; Kuklinski and Quirk, 2001), that is, their ability to take positions in line with their voting preferences as if they had full information on the topic.

However, despite these important contributions, a series of problems still remain open. First, there are various types of cues that might be used as shortcuts to form opinions and increase voter competence beyond party endorsements. According to the literature, the main dimension structuring political competition in Europe is the left-right scale (Thomassen and Rosema, 2009; van der Eijk et al., 2005). Therefore, a comprehensive test should contrast the role of party cues with that of the ones provided by ideology, which still play an important role in issue preferences and vote choice. Second, the importance of party cues on EU issues needs to be evaluated against a range of domestic issues. Although this aspect has been overlooked by empirical research, it is decisive if we want to understand whether their importance varies according to the complexity of the issue (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). Third, their effect may depend on the electoral context. European elections are usually considered to be second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), characterized by lower levels of attention, information, and turnout. Therefore, we might expect cues to be more consequential in European elections than in national ones. Another point to be taken into account is that party cueing effects may depend on the type of party (Brader et al., 2012; Coan et al., 2008; Merolla et al., 2016), so parties' reputations and their positions regarding the integration process may actually condition these effects. Finally, despite rising voices lamenting a lack of experimental research to address the topic of cueing on EU opinions and its methodological challenges, with some exceptions, most of the evidence so far presented is still based on observational data (Sanders and Toka, 2013).

We address these questions by using data from a set of original survey experiments repeated across two waves in Spain between 2014 and 2015 (Torcal et al., 2016) in which respondents were randomly exposed to several treatments to evaluate the effect of different cues over a wide range of real-world issues for European

and domestic elections. Spain may be a particularly interesting case to address the above questions. Compared to other European political systems, this country is a relatively young democracy with moderate aggregate levels of party identification. Moreover, its party system has experienced deep changes in recent years with the emergence of brand new political parties entering the electoral arena in a climate of diffused institutional distrust. Finally, some soft Eurosceptic parties have emerged, creating a new scenario on the supply side of the Spanish electoral market.

Arguments and hypotheses

Voter competence and the use of political heuristics on EU and domestic issues

A lack of political knowledge among the electorate is well documented in the literature (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1991). This is particularly the case when people are dealing with complex issues on which they need to seek more information and make an additional cognitive effort to express their preferences, such as topics related to the European Union (Hooghe and Marks, 2005). A lack of detailed knowledge, however, does not seem to prevent citizens from casting their votes or taking a stance on specific policy issues at election times.

The political heuristics literature argues that voters often look for cues to use as information shortcuts to form opinions (e.g. Brady and Sniderman, 1985; Downs, 1957; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Lupia, 1994; Sniderman, 2000; Sniderman et al., 1991). Citizens use endorsements provided by credible external sources heuristically in order to position themselves on specific issues using simple decision rules, rather than a detailed examination of the policy content. Cues are not only essential in configuring political opinions, but they also help voters to reach competent decisions as if complete information were available (Kuklinski and Quirk, 2001: 294–296). Briefly, studies on heuristics switch the interest from the level of political information that citizens have about specific aspects of the political system to their capacity to use cues in order to make decisions like more knowledgeable citizens would.

Building on seminal research by Hobolt (2007: 156–159), which combines classic accounts of the study of competence (Kuklinski and Quirk, 2001) with expectations derived from the spatial model of voting (Downs, 1957), we define voter competence as the capacity to accomplish a specific task, namely deciding whether a proposed EU policy is better or worse than a possible alternative, relying on preferences and the information available. A competent decision on an EU issue will be one that is based on broad preferences regarding EU integration and choosing the policy position with the greatest proximity to the voter's ideal position. In this respect, informational cues may enhance competence, increasing congruence between policy opinions and voter preferences.

Among the set of informational shortcuts available, there is wide consensus about a prominent role of party cues. Political parties are seen as the most

important source of influence since they structure group conflict and they signal to voters where they are located in relation to the various policy options. Briefly, parties allow choices to be made despite constraints being imposed by low levels of political information (Cohen, 2003; Popkin, 1991; Tomz and Sniderman, 2005). Accordingly, knowing the positions of the different parties on certain policy issues is an important determinant of citizens' positions on these issues. This is usually shown in laboratory or survey experiments where the subjects are randomly selected to undergo different treatments in which party cues are manipulated along with policy issues (Brader and Tucker, 2012; Brader et al., 2012; Bullock, 2011; Coan et al., 2008; Kam, 2005; Merolla et al., 2016; Samuels and Zucco, 2013). Overall, the evidence of a party cueing effect on political opinion alignment and citizen competence seems to be clear, although the studies available mainly focus on the context of the United States, where two main parties dominate the political competition and party attachments are usually regarded as the most important elements structuring preferences and behaviors.

Nevertheless, party cues may not be the only available tool that facilitate opinion formation. Indeed, the list of relevant cues that might help in making choices and positioning on policy issues is potentially extensive including ideology and endorsements by experts and leaders (Klar, 2013; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Sniderman et al., 1991). So, what role do cues play regarding voter competence in multi-party systems? Are other types of shortcut important in facilitating voter competence? For several reasons, the most likely alternative for European citizens is political ideology. According to the spatial model of voting (Downs, 1957), the left-right dimension is a powerful tool for organizing political beliefs, making political choices and summarizing parties' positions on the political space. Thus, 'left' and 'right' labels may constitute valuable cues to orient opinions and voting decisions.

In the European context, scholars have considered with skepticism the role of parties and the attachment they create to explain citizens' behavior (e.g. Bartle and Bellucci, 2009; Belgurnd et al., 2005; Johnston, 2006; Thomassen and Rosema, 2009). In European multiparty systems, self-identification with a party may be difficult as more than one party may overlap with a certain ideological family. Hence, people might feel close to different parties, which undermines attachment to a single formation. Moreover, multiparty systems are often characterized by coalitions in which different parties combine in groups in order to accomplish collective goals. This might imply that preferences toward a single party are blurred by preferences for larger political groups. Finally, it has been shown that the predictive power of the left-right self-placement regarding vote choice is strong and stable among European voters (van der Eijk et al., 2005). Thus, European scholars have frequently regarded the left-right dimension as the primary axis of party competition in Europe. For all the above, partisanship is generally seen as less useful for European voters than other informational shortcuts. Among these, cues provided by ideological labels are considered important evaluative elements

that help voters to take a position on certain issues and increase their voter competence.

H1: In the European context, ideological cues have a stronger impact on voter competence than party cues.

The effect of party cues on voter competence could be particularly relevant for policies related to EU integration, as citizens are less familiar with political competition at the European level and need to make more cognitive effort to position themselves on a specific topic. There is indeed robust evidence about the importance of party cueing in individuals' opinions on policies related to the EU (Hellström, 2008; Hobolt, 2007; Pannico, 2017; Ray, 2003). However, we still do not know whether this effect is larger or smaller than the effect party cueing has on domestic issues.

At the same time, EU policies cannot be easily framed into the left-right ideology dimension of political competition (Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Hooghe et al., 2002). According to Hooghe et al. (2002), there is, in fact, a curvilinear relationship between left-right ideology and positions on EU issues, with the extremes of the ideological spectrum tending to be less supportive of European integration. In their opinion, what mainly structures EU-related issues are new forms of political conflict related to nationalist and post-materialist values rather than the traditional tension between 'left' and 'right.' This aspect probably diminishes the importance of ideological cues in forming opinions about the EU, since these labels represent less credible cues in the context of EU policies. Indeed, heuristic processing takes place more commonly when cues are perceived as reliable and valid, so that some shortcuts may be more effective than others because of their reputational value (Chen and Chaiken, 1999; Druckman, 2001; Merolla et al., 2016). Thus, individuals may tend to overlook ideological cues when they are attached to EU policy proposals.

H2: The effect of party cues on voter competence is stronger for EU issues than for domestic issues.

H3: The effect of ideological cues on voter competence is stronger for domestic issues than for EU issues.

The roles of the type of election and parties

The use of information shortcuts might depend on a set of different factors. The effect of party cues seems to vary according to individual characteristics, such as the level of political knowledge and education (Cohen, 2003; Kam, 2005; Pannico, 2017), the salience attached to a certain issue (Maholtra and Kuo, 2008) and the level of trust people have in the source of the cue (Coan et al., 2008). A more neglected set of factors pertains, instead, to aspects of the political system.

More polarized competition among parties helps to clarify their positions and, in turn, their cueing effects (Levendusky, 2010). Moreover, party cueing may depend on the democratic tradition of the national context and the degree of instability of the party system (Brader and Tucker, 2012).

In this article, we explore this last set of factors, first of all by considering whether the party cueing effect varies according to the type of election. Specifically, in an electoral context in which the levels of information and attention to the issues at stake seem to be lower, citizens' competence might depend more on the cues at their disposal. European elections have often been described as second-order election, with political campaigns characterized by lower turnout and debates focused on domestic politics while EU issues play a minor role (Reif and Schmitt, 1980).

H4: The effect of party cues on voter competence is stronger in the context of European elections.

A second potentially relevant moderator of party cueing effects is related to the age of parties. It is plausible to expect party cueing to strengthen over time as citizens become familiar with parties' labels and actions (Coan et al., 2008). As a result, parties gradually acquire reputation, as citizens have greater chances to evaluate the consistency of their policy positions and actions. On the other hand, citizens may not have this opportunity with new emerging parties, in particular in younger democracies or less stable party systems. In brief, following this argument, the older and more established a party is, the stronger its cueing effect will be (Brader et al., 2012; Merolla et al., 2016).

H5: The effect of party cues on voter competence is stronger for traditional parties than for new ones.

Apart from the age of parties, it is also relevant to consider whether party cueing effects depend on the party's reputation and credibility with respect to its positions on specific policies. This is an important factor to be taken into account since, as discussed above, EU-related issues are not easily assimilated within left-right ideology. This has forced mainstream parties to take more ambiguous positions on some of the most important issues regarding the EU integration process (de Vries and Hobolt, 2012: 263; Green-Pedersen, 2012: 126–127) due to the potential electoral damage and internal division they can produce among their voters (De Sio et al., 2016). This strategy on the part of mainstream parties has given an electoral advantage to Eurosceptic parties, willing to 'own' critical positions toward the EU (Petrocik et al., 2003) and emphasize problems related to integration across different elections. It is plausible to expect that voters may give less credibility to cues coming from pro-EU parties than to Eurosceptic political forces.

H6: The effect of party cues on voter competence regarding EU issues is stronger for Eurosceptic parties than for mainstream pro-EU ones.

Data and methods

We test our hypotheses using a set of survey experiments included in the CIUPANEL dataset (Torcal et al., 2016), conducted in 2014 and repeated in 2015 on a sample of the Spanish population. Our approach profits from a strict control of the environment and randomization of treatments to reduce the role of confounding variables. Unlike previous research, in a between-subject design, we contrast the role of ‘party cues’ with that of other important shortcuts in European party systems, such as ‘ideological cues’. Moreover, we consider policy issues resembling existent positions to mimic real world choices and covering the European election held in May 2014 and the general election held in December 2015. Our design allows us to test the roles of various cues on issues of differing complexity for a broad range of old and new parties with varying positions in European and national politics.

Context of the experimental design

There are several reasons to consider Spain a useful case for our purpose. In 2014, Spanish levels of political knowledge on EU issues were still low when compared to other EU countries, with, for instance, less than 60% of people knowing the number of EU member states (Eurobarometer, 2014). However, some features should in principle run against a strong party cueing effect. Specifically, the country showed only a moderate aggregate level of party identification, with around 55% of people feeling close to a certain party in 2014 (European Social Survey, 2014). More importantly, the combination of the strong economic recession that occurred in 2008 together with political scandals and increasing distrust in the political authorities and parties accelerated the pace of crisis, taking the party system through a profound process of restructuring and allowing new political parties to enter the electoral arena (Cordero and Montero, 2015).

In the 2014 European election, a new party, *Podemos* (P’s), unexpectedly obtained 8% of the vote share and five seats in the European Parliament. Since then, P’s has become one of the main actors in the Spanish party system and, in the 2015 general election, (jointly with its regional partner organizations) it gained about 21% of the vote. In the 2015 general election, a second new party, *Ciudadanos* (C’s), also obtained representation in the national parliament for the first time with 14% of the vote share. Moreover, in the period the research was conducted there was a third relatively young party founded in 2008, *Unión Progreso y Democracia* (UPyD), which in 2015 lost all its representatives. In principle, such volatility should have reduced voters’ chances of familiarizing themselves with the new political parties and, thus, we should expect their informational cues to produce less voter competence.

The economic crisis also fuelled an existing conflict over the territorial model of the state (Muñoz and Tormos, 2015). Since its democratic transition, Spain has been characterized by the presence and consolidation of statewide parties together

with a significant number of small regionalist/nationalist political formations. Parties supporting the independence option have been more conspicuous in the Basque Country and more recently in Catalonia, making the territorial model of the state a central topic in the national agenda. These debates have also included the role the upper house (Senate) should play in the legislative process and various mechanisms to make its representation more territorially determined. Finally, although Spain used to be among the most pro-EU countries in the continent, political distrust in the EU has risen (Torcal, 2014).

Experimental protocol

Our design partially mirrors a protocol used by a preceding study (De Sio et al., 2014). It consists in randomly assigning subjects to three different conditions. In the control group, the respondents were asked to select one from several policy options without any informative cue on any possible party or ideological position. In the party cue treatment, instead, the same policy positions were labeled with the parties that endorsed the specific options. Finally, in the ideological cue treatment the same policy positions were labeled with the specific endorsing ideological family. Balance and randomization tests give successful results, as reported in the Online appendix. We implemented this survey experiment at two different times: after the 2014 European election, in which we included both party and ideological cues, and before the 2015 general election, including only the party cue treatment.

The issues selected draw on a set of policy positions related to salient problems in the country on which parties took ideologically divisive positions during the period considered. Specifically, we covered preferences on ‘Reform of the Senate’, ‘Reform of the State of Autonomies’, namely the role of regional institutions versus the central government, and finally positions on the ‘role of the European Central Bank (ECB)’. Figure 1 displays the original vignette for the 2014 European election. As can be seen, issues regarding the ECB include different positions ranging from maintaining the status quo (‘keeping the ECB as it is’) to a more critical position (‘abolishing the ECB’ in its current configuration), to promoting EU integration (via ‘Eurobonds’ or ‘expansionist reforms’). The descriptive statistics related to the experimental questions can be found in the Online appendix.

The general aim of this study is to compare the effect of party and ideological cues specified in terms of labels attached to certain policy positions. It should be noted at this point that in multiparty systems, ideological families might include several party options. Therefore, to have a more comprehensive view we need to account for as many parties as are incorporated under each overarching ideological term while maintaining parsimony. Following this rationale, we cover a broad set of political formations, such as the center-left *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), the more radical left-wing and former communist *Izquierda Unida* (IU) and the center-right to right-wing *Partido Popular* (PP), among the more traditional parties. In this set, we also consider positions and cues for the main Catalan regional nationalist parties—*Convergència i Unió* (CiU, center-right) and

No cue	Party cue	Ideology cue
State of Autonomies Let's talk about some important issues on which the recent political debate has focused. One important issue is related to the State of Autonomous Communities and the Basque and Catalan situation. Which one of the following proposals is closer to your own position?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I agree with defending the current State of Autonomous Communities and even reducing it a little• I agree with the proposal of a Federalist Reform of the State.• I agree with a Confederation• I agree with the independence of certain territory of the State• Don't know	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I agree with defending the current State of Autonomous Communities and even reducing it a little <i>as proposed by the PP</i>• I agree with the proposal of a Federalist Reform of the State <i>as proposed by the PSOE</i>• I agree with a Confederation <i>as proposed by the IU</i>• I agree with the independence of certain territory of the State <i>as proposed by the CiU and ERC</i>• Don't know	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I agree with defending the current State of Autonomous Communities and even reducing it a little <i>as proposed by the Right</i>• I agree with the proposal of a Federalist Reform of the State <i>as proposed by the Centre-Left</i>• I agree with a Confederation <i>as proposed by the more progressive Left</i>• I agree with the independence of certain territory of the State <i>as proposed by the Nationalist groups</i>• Don't know
Senate Another important issue is related to the Reform of the Senate. Which one of the following proposals is closer to your own position?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I agree with maintaining the Senate as it is• I agree with abolishing the Senate• I agree with a Senate of territories• I agree with a Senate that represents the Autonomous Communities• I agree with a Senate that represents the national diversities of the State• Don't know	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I agree with maintaining the Senate as it is <i>as proposed by the PP</i>• I agree with abolishing the Senate <i>as proposed by the UPyD</i>• I agree with a Senate of territories <i>as proposed by the PSOE</i>• I agree with a Senate that represents the Autonomous Communities <i>as proposed by the IU</i>• I agree with a Senate that represents the national diversities of the State <i>as proposed by the PNV and CiU</i>• Don't know	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I agree with maintaining the Senate as it is <i>as proposed by the Right</i>• I agree with abolishing the Senate <i>as proposed by the Center</i>• I agree with a Senate of territories <i>as proposed by the Center-Left</i>• I agree with a Senate that represents the Autonomous Communities <i>as proposed by the more progressive Left</i>• I agree with a Senate that represents the national diversities of the State <i>as proposed by the Nationalist groups</i>• Don't know
European Central Bank Another important issue is related to the European Union and the European Central Bank. Which one of the following proposals is closer to your own position?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I agree with keeping the European Central Bank as it is• I agree with abolishing the European Central Bank• I agree with a European Central Bank that absorbs the national debts of the Member States by means of Eurobonds• I agree with a European Central Bank that promotes growth policies• Don't know	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I agree with keeping the European Central Bank as it is <i>as proposed by the PP</i>• I agree with abolishing the European Central Bank <i>as proposed by the IU</i>• I agree with a European Central Bank that absorbs the national debts of the Member States by means of Eurobonds <i>as proposed by the UPyD</i>• I agree with a European Central Bank that promotes growth policies <i>as proposed by the PSOE</i>• Don't know	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I agree with keeping the European Central Bank as it is <i>as proposed by the Right</i>• I agree with abolishing the European Central Bank <i>as proposed by the more progressive Left</i>• I agree with a European Central Bank that absorbs the national debts of the Member States by means of Eurobonds <i>as proposed by the Center</i>• I agree with a European Central Bank that promotes growth policies <i>as proposed by the Center-Left</i>• Don't know

Figure 1. Original vignette—(post-) 2014 European election. *Note:* In the experiment for the 2015 general election, the party labels IU and UPyD were replaced by P's and C's, respectively. For the issue about autonomies, P's was associated with "I agree with securing the right of regional governments to hold public consultations over the territorial organization of the State" and C's with "I agree with favoring the reform of the State of Autonomous Communities, clarifying the competences between the central administration and the Autonomous Communities". See the Online appendix for the protocol for the second experiment. In the experiment, text format for party and ideological labels was not emphasized in italics. CiU: *Convergència i Unió*; ERC: *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*; IU: *Izquierda Unida*; PNV: *Partido Nacionalista Vasco*; PP: *Partido Popular*; PSOE: *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*; UPyD: *Unión Progreso y Democracia*.

Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC, left-wing)—together with the *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV, center-right).² An additional purpose is to study whether the party cueing effect varies across elections or according to the characteristics of the parties. Therefore, we include new parties such as the centrist UPyD in the 2014 European elections, and in the experiment for the 2015 general elections the centrist C's (which electorally substituted the UPyD) and the radical left-wing P's.

For the ideological cues, we mention that each position is supported by one of the following ideological labels: 'the Right', 'the Centre', 'the Centre-Left', 'the more progressive Left', and 'the nationalist political groups' from the Basque country and Catalonia. Figure 2 shows the locations of the parties considered on a two-dimensional ideological space using information on perceived party positions reported by CIUPANEL respondents in 2015. Correspondences between party labels and ideological families are largely confirmed (PP with Right; UPyD and C's with Centre; PSOE with Centre-Left; IU and P's with the more progressive left; CiU, ERC and PNV with nationalist groups). This is also in line with figures reported by the Chapel Hill and Parliaments and Governments (ParlGov) database's expert surveys (Döering and Manow, 2016) (see the Online appendix).

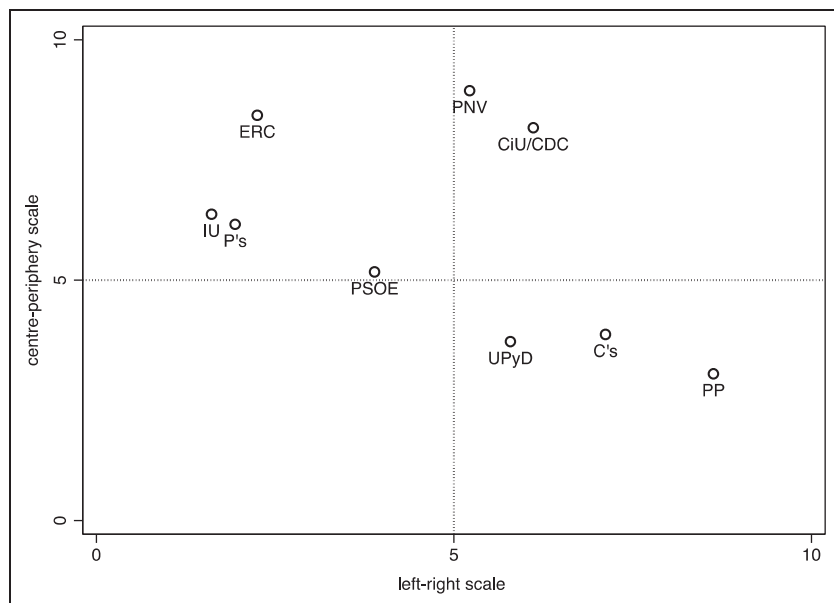


Figure 2. Spanish parties in a two-dimensional ideological space in 2015. *Note:* Own elaboration based on the CIUPANEL data set (pregeneral election wave 5, December 2015, information for center-periphery scale is from the postregional election wave 4, May–June 2015). C's: Ciudadanos; CiU/CDC: *Convergència i Unió/Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya*; ERC: *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*; IU: *Izquierda Unida*; P's: *Podemos*; PNV: *Partido Nacionalista Vasco*; PP: *Partido Popular*; PSOE: *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*; UPyD: *Unión Progreso y Democracia*.

Policy and ideological proximity between IU and P's and between UPyD and C's justify the former parties being safely replaced by the latter in the experiment for the general election. However, the proximity is less in the case of UPyD and C's as the latter partially readjusted its positions towards the right before the general election. Following seminal studies, it can be considered a centrist or a center-right party (Orriols and Cordero, 2016).

According to the 2014 Chapel Hill expert survey (Bakker et al., 2015), PP, PSOE, and UPyD were pro-European, as on a scale measuring positions towards European integration from one (anti-EU) to seven (pro-EU) they showed values equal to 6.8, 6.7, and 6.7, respectively. On the other hand, IU and P's displayed more neutral values of 4.6 and 4.4, respectively. In any case, both parties have recently criticized European policies and voted against measures for increased integration.³ In line with previous work (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016), we consider these two parties to adopt 'soft' Eurosceptic positions.

Sample and participants

The data set consists of a nonprobabilistic online longitudinal panel sample of repeated individuals collected across six waves. The sample is composed of citizens aged 18 or older and with access to the internet either at home or at work. Specific quotas were employed to obtain the sample (gender, age, size of urban area, and autonomous community). The respondents were recruited by active invitation among registered online panelists. Self-registering was not allowed. Although this is not a probability sample, the distribution of basic sociodemographic variables and of other partisan and ideological characteristics in our sample approximates the same parameters obtained by the National Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) during the same years. In our sample, we only find a lower propensity to declare an intention to vote for the more traditional parties before the general election in 2015. In addition, our sample is skewed toward the more educated than the general population (National Institute of Statistics—INE—Census data 2014–2015) (see the Online appendix). The available studies evaluating how experimental treatment effects obtained from convenience samples compare to effects produced by representative population samples have revealed considerable similarities, bolstering confidence in the utility of the former type (e.g. Mullinix et al., 2015). In any case, we also run models applying weights for education levels and the results do not change substantially, limiting problems of external validity. We confine our analysis to waves including the experiments relevant for this study, wave 2 (post-2014 European election) and 5 (pre-2015 general election, in which the experiment was run on a subsample).

Variables and models

Following De Sio et al. (2014), we create a dependent variable measuring whether the policy positions chosen by our respondents are congruent with their relative

party preferences. Individual voter competence is a dichotomous variable which takes the value one when the respondent chooses the option endorsed by her or his preferred party—that is, if the conditions for congruence are met—and zero otherwise. We identify respondents' party preferences by using voting choices in the experiment realized in the post-election survey after the 2014 European election and the probability of voting for a certain party (we pick the one with the highest probability) in the experiment conducted in the pre-electoral survey before the 2015 general election. Thus, in our analysis we focus on respondents who expressed a party preference. To evaluate the cueing effect of party and ideological labels, we estimate a series of logistic regression models using the following general specification:

$$\Pr(y_i = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(X_i\beta) \quad (1)$$

where we model the probability of success ($y = 1$) in each observation i , namely the voter's capacity to express a competent decision, as choosing the same position as the preferred party. This is linked to the linear predictor ($X_i\beta$) via the inverse of the *logit* function. The linear predictor ($X_i\beta$) is a combination of an intercept, β_0 , and other covariates gauging the different treatments, that is, the cues provided: $\beta_1 x_{1,i} + \beta_2 x_{2,i} + \dots + \beta_m x_{m,i}$. In our case, the covariates are dummy variables resulting from a categorical measure which identifies whether the respondent is assigned to the control group (the reference category) or he/she received either a party cue (policy endorsed by a party) or an ideology cue (policy endorsed by an ideological family), resulting in the following equation:⁴

$$\Pr(\text{Competence}_i = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{party cues}_i + \beta_2 \text{ideological cues}_i) \quad (2)$$

To test whether the effect of the treatments varies with topics and types of election, we evaluate whether the coefficients differ significantly by performing Wald tests. Furthermore, to assess whether the effect of party cues varies across types of party we allow for our cue treatment to interact with the type of party (old vs. new; pro-EU vs. Eurosceptic). For the sake of simplicity, we mainly display graphical results showing post-estimations (see complete results in the Online appendix).

Results

The first step in the analysis is to estimate and compare the effects of the two types of information shortcuts included in our experiments: the party and ideological cues. We do this by regressing our variable measuring voter competence on the independent variables representing the experimental treatments, keeping as reference category our control group (no cues). In the left graph of Figure 3, we display the average marginal effects of the party and ideological treatments for the 2014 European election. As can be observed, the level of voter competence among

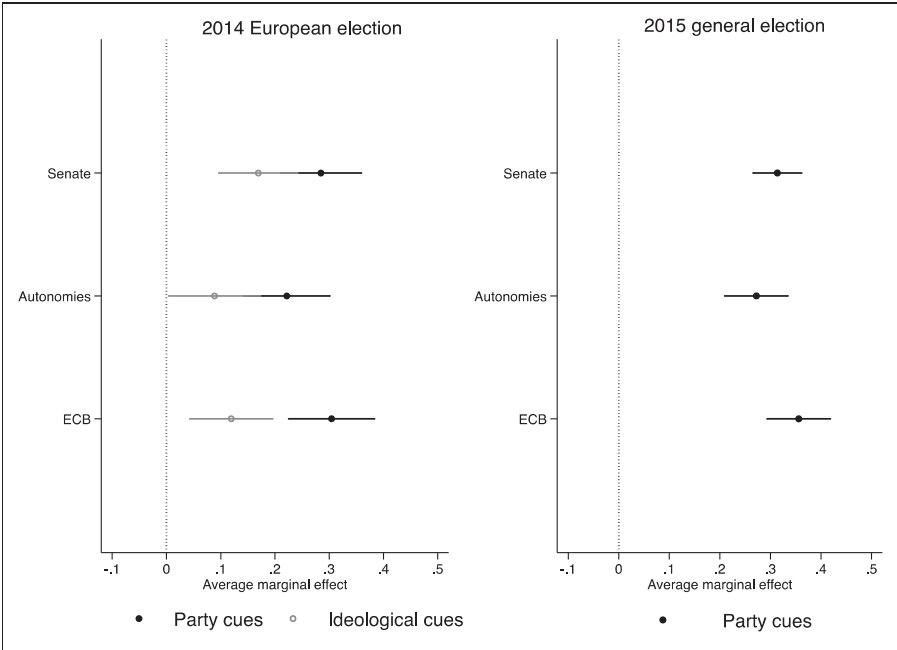


Figure 3. Average marginal effects of party and ideology cue treatments by type of issue—(post-)European election (May 2014) and (pre-)general election (December 2015). *Note:* The x-axis reports the marginal effects of the experimental treatments (party and ideological cues) on voter competence by type of issue (logistic regression). The lines on both sides of the points represent 95% confidence intervals. ECB: European Central Bank.

individuals who received an information shortcut is significantly greater than that among those in the control group. These results confirm that both cues foster congruence between individuals’ policy positions and their party preferences.

However, party cues seem to have stronger effects than ideological cues for all the issues considered. For instance, the percentage of respondents choosing the policy position adopted by their preferred party increases by about 30 percentage points for the ECB policy issue (standard errors (SE) = 0.04; $p < 0.001$; $N = 771$) when a party cue is provided. This is equal to 22 points for the State of Autonomies issue (SE = 0.04; $p < 0.001$; $N = 768$) and 29 for the Reform of the Senate (SE = 0.04; $p < 0.001$; $N = 821$). On the other hand, the cueing effects are quite smaller for ideological labels, as they only increase competence by 12 percentage points when respondents had to position on the ECB issue (SE = 0.04; $p < 0.01$; $N = 771$), 8 points for the State of Autonomies (SE = 0.04; $p < 0.01$; $N = 768$) and 17 for Reform of the Senate (SE = 0.04; $p < 0.001$; $N = 821$). Then, the differences in the effects of party cues and ideological cues are always significant at least at $p < 0.01$ (the full results are in the Online appendix).⁵ In sum, our findings confirm a prominence of party cues over ideological cues, suggesting that parties are better able to

structure the set of choices for citizens as they provide identifiable brands (Sniderman, 2000). Thus, our results do not support the hypothesis that ideology could be a more powerful informational cue to increase voter competence than party identification in European multiparty systems (*H1* fails to be supported), an assumption that has been widespread among European political scientists.⁶

Do the effects of party and ideological cues hinge on whether the respondents are dealing with EU or domestic policy issues? In order to answer this question, we need to compare the effects of party and ideological cues between national and European topics. As can be clearly seen in the left graph of Figure 3, the effects do not seem to vary dramatically. Indeed, if we consider the party cue treatment and take the effect for the EU issue as a benchmark, it is nonsignificant when contrasting it with the other two topics. The differences are also nonsignificant if we create an aggregate average index for the domestic issues.⁷ When considering ideological cues, the effect cannot be distinguished by using the type of issue as a criterion (see the Online appendix).

By considering the experiment carried out during the 2015 Spanish general election, we can evaluate the party cueing effect in a different election contest, and this reinforces our previous conclusions. As can be seen in the right graph of Figure 3, party cues increase voter competence for all the considered issues: by about 36 percentage points ($SE = 0.03$; $p < 0.001$; $N = 820$) for the EU issue, 27 points for the State of Autonomies ($SE = 0.03$; $p < 0.001$; $N = 899$) and 34 points for Reform of the Senate ($SE = 0.03$; $p < 0.001$; $N = 846$). On the other hand, if we test differences in the effect of party cues across issues using the EU issue as the point of reference, we now find significant differences ($p < 0.05$) when we compare it to the effect for the State of Autonomies issue or when we create an aggregate index for domestic issues ($p < 0.10$).⁸ Although these last estimates are not very precise, they suggest that when individuals need to position themselves on less familiar topics, such as more technical problems concerning the EU, they seem to have a greater tendency to rely on cues. This is particularly the case for party cues (though results are mixed these provide some support to our *H2*). Conversely, ideology plays a more marginal role and its effect does not seem to be related to the type of issue (*H3* fails to be supported).

Does the effect of party heuristics depend on the type of election? If we compare the results and test the differences in the effects of party cues between the two experiments, we fail to find significant results (see Table 1). In other words, the impact of party cues seems to be consistent across elections (*H4* is not supported). Additionally, party cueing is not driven by any specific party. If we break down the party treatment effect by the distinct voting choices of our respondents (see Figure 4),⁹ we find, in fact, that the cueing effect does not substantially vary across the parties considered in this study.¹⁰

Our analysis concludes with an evaluation of whether features related to parties moderate the cueing effects. Specifically, we have hypothesized that the cueing effect produced by old and more established parties (in Spain: PP, PSOE, and IU) should be different to that produced by the new parties (UPyD, P's, C's).

Table 1. The effect of the party cue treatment across election contexts (Wald test of significant differences in the two election periods).

	Effect (European x)	Effect (General y)	(x)–(y)	(χ^2)	p-Value
<i>Party cue treatment effect</i>					
European Central Bank (European-General)	1.365	1.542	–0.177	0.51	0.477
Autonomies (European-General)	1.023	1.123	–0.100	0.17	0.680
Senate (European-General)	1.358	1.525	–0.167	0.44	0.509

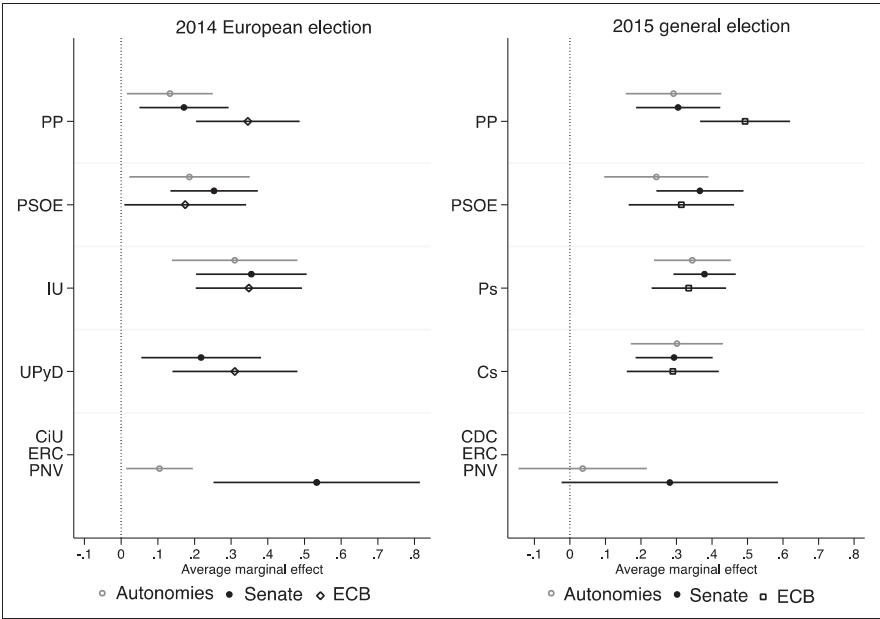


Figure 4. Average marginal effects of party cue treatment by party and type of issue. *Note:* The x-axis reports the marginal effects of the party cue treatment on voter competence by party and issue (penalized logistic regression). The lines on both sides of the points represent 95% confidence intervals. C's: Ciudadanos; CDC: Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya; CiU: Convergència i Unió; ERC: Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya; IU: Izquierda Unida; PNV: Partido Nacionalista Vasco; PP: Partido Popular; PSOE: Partido Socialista Obrero Español; UPyD: Unión Progreso y Democracia. ECB: European Central Bank.a) New vs. traditional b) Pro vs. soft-Eurosceptic.

The two upper graphs in Figure 5, plot the marginal effects of a model in which we interact our treatments with a dummy variable distinguishing between old and new parties the graphs clearly show that the cueing effect does not seem to be conditioned by party age and this applies to both the second-order European election

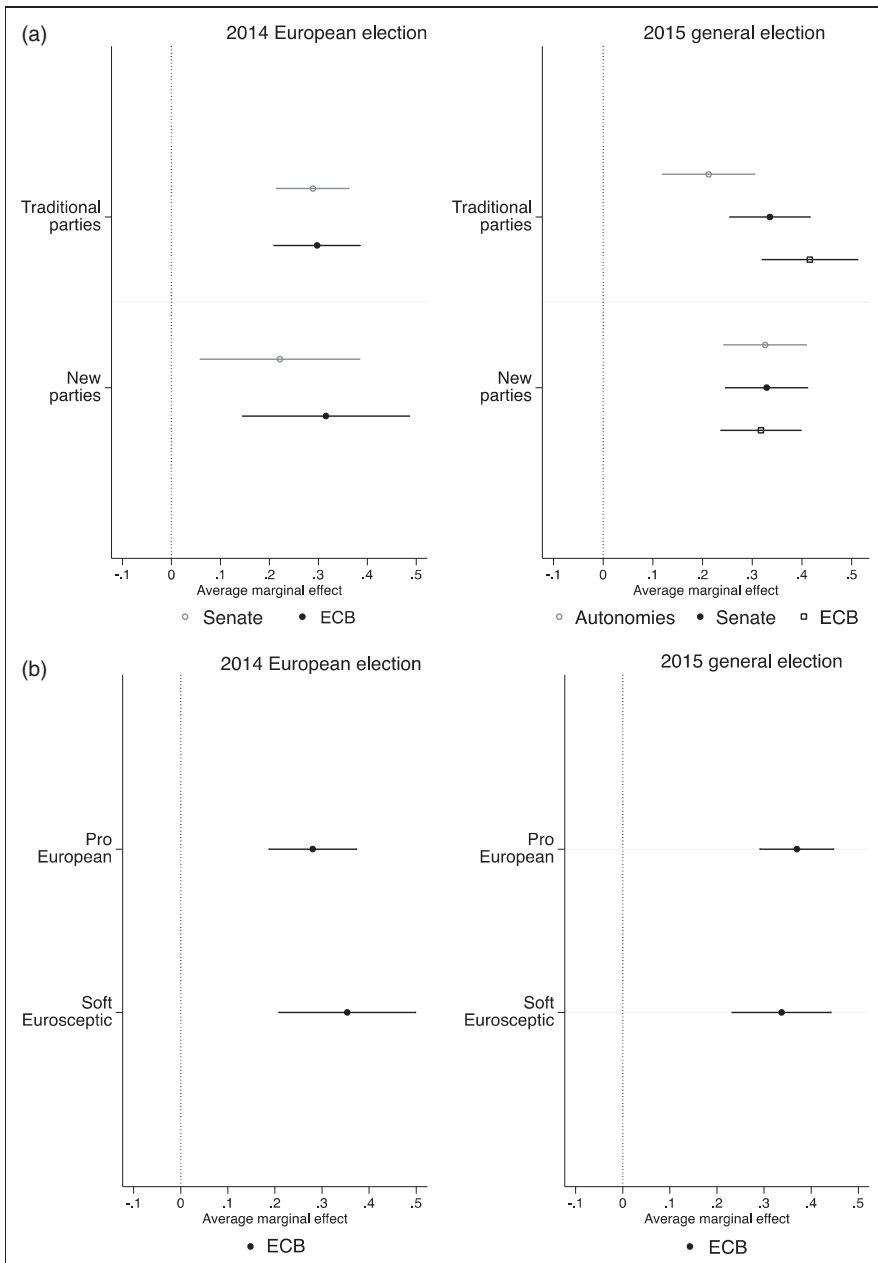


Figure 5. Average marginal effects of party cue treatment by party age, EU position and type of issue.

Note: The x-axis reports the marginal effects of the party cue treatment on voter competence by party age, EU position and type of issue (logistic regression). The lines on both sides of the points represent 95% confidence intervals. The traditional parties are PP, PSOE, IU, and the nationalist parties (only for the Senate issue) while the new parties are UPyD (in the 2014 European election) and C's and P's (in the 2015 general election). (a) New versus traditional. (b) Pro versus soft-Eurosceptic. ECB: European Central Bank.

and the first-order general election. Therefore, we also fail to find support for our fifth hypothesis (*H5*).

For the 2014 European election experiment, the effects among the old parties (PP, PSOE, and IU) are not different to that related to the younger UPyD. This conclusion is also confirmed in the experiment carried out for the 2015 Spanish general election. Again, we find no differences in the effect of our party cueing treatments between the brand new parties (P's and C's) and the old ones (PP and PSOE). In other words, if cues are clearly attached to precise positions on the issues at stake, there is no difference in the cueing effect depending on party age (Conroy-Krutz et al., 2016).

Following this discussion, it is important to know whether the cueing effect might be moderated by the relative positions of parties with respect to the European Union. To achieve this goal, we run similar models, this time interacting our cue treatments with a dummy for each of the two types of political force: mainstream and soft-Eurosceptic parties. The two bottom graphs in Figure 5 shows that the party cueing effect on EU issues does not depend on parties' political platforms regarding EU integration. Hence, our final hypothesis is not supported, suggesting that when cues are clearly presented in the form of endorsements the advantage that certain parties have for some specific issues may be reduced. In our case, the cueing effect for pro-EU parties is just the same as for soft Eurosceptic parties (*H6*) (the full results are available in the Online appendix).

Discussion and implications

Recently, increasing attention has been paid to the role of party elite strategies in influencing citizens' opinions on the EU. This debate has acquired central importance since the economic recession started in 2008 and with the rise of Eurosceptic parties that has followed (Hobolt and Wratil, 2015; Hooghe and Marks, 2007). Party endorsements should provide basic shortcuts to overcome a lack of knowledge on specific issues (Hellström, 2008; Hobolt, 2007; Pannico, 2017; Ray, 2003). In this respect, party cues contribute to shape public opinion on the EU and increase voter competence, that is, individuals' abilities to take positions on issues in line with their voting preferences.

This article's contribution lies in contrasting the effect of party cues with other information shortcuts which are important in European context, namely ideological cues. Moreover, it has studied the effect of both party and ideological cues across a broad range of EU and domestic issues. Finally, it has evaluated whether the effect of party cues varies according to the election context and the type of party. The study has tried to achieve these goals by using a research design based on survey experiments considering real-world issues in Spain and covering the 2014 European election and the 2015 general election.

The Spanish case can be considered an ideal setting, as it has experienced a deep process of change in the party system with the appearance of new political forces showing different positions toward the European Union. Additionally, certain

characteristics of the Spanish political system led us not to expect a strong party cueing effect. Compared to other European political systems, Spain has comparatively moderate aggregate levels of party identification. Thus, given our results in favor of the role of party cues, we may feel confident in expecting our findings to apply to other countries with higher levels of party identification. Hence, our study provides a robust test whose findings may apply to other southern European countries or even beyond this area.

With respect to the impact of cues on opinion formation and voter competence, individuals are more prone to use cues provided by parties than those attached to classic ideological families. This might come as a surprise since the left-right framework has usually been considered the main dimension structuring political competition in Europe. This has been considered to summarize positions on a wide range of issues and much of the available research has tried to demonstrate that it is one of the most important predictors of voting behavior in Europe. Nevertheless, when both party and ideological cues are clear and attached to specific issues in an experimental setting, the effect of the former is greater. This might be due to the fact that ideological labels are more abstract and subsume different factors at the same time, such as policies, parties, and values, leaving room for interpretation and demanding more cognitive effort (Bauer et al., 2017). Conversely, party labels may be better suited to cue opinion. Since they provide rich and clear cognitive categories (Sniderman, 2000), they might be a less costly device than ideological labels. This is an interesting finding which challenges common knowledge on political cues in the European context.

Additionally, we have observed that cues increase competence in a similar fashion regardless of the nature of the topic, although the effect of those provided by parties seems to be stronger for more complex EU issues than for domestic policies. This seems to support the assumption that when people have to take a position on more complex issues they are more likely to profit from the availability of party cues (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). In any case, our results are not fully conclusive, so further research is needed in this direction. Another interesting finding is that the effect of party cues on voter competence seems to be consistent across diverse election contests. Finally, when party cues are evident and available their effect is the same regardless of factors related to the age of parties or their position towards EU integration. This finding complements available studies (Brader et al., 2012; Conroy-Krutz et al., 2016) and calls for more empirical research on the contextual factors which moderate the effect of party cues, by showing that when cues are clear and distinctive, other contextual conditional factors may play a minor role.

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available for this article online.

Notes

1. We understand a ‘cue’ to be any ‘message that people may use to infer other information and, by extension, to make decisions’ (Bullock, 2011: 497).
2. CiU, a federation of two parties, *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (Democratic Convergence of Catalonia, CDC) and *Unió del Centre Democràtic* (Democratic Union of Catalonia, UCD), has held the presidency of the Catalan regional government for most of the democratic period. The two partners split in 2015 due to differences over the Catalan secessionist agenda. The UDC disappeared some months afterwards and CDC re-founded as PDeCAT (*Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català*—Catalan European Democratic Party).
3. See www.votewatch.eu/blog/amigos-y-rivales-top-20-votes-of-the-spanish-parties-in-the-european-parliament/
4. The equation applies only to the case of the experiment for the 2014 European election, since in the one for the 2015 general election only control and party cue treatments were included.
5. The differences are still significant if we run a one-sided test. The results are available on request.
6. The models with treatment effects for the European election were replicated on the same sample weighted by education with no substantial differences in the results (see the Online appendix). The prominence of party cues over ideological shortcuts is also confirmed by a replication of the experiment conducted after the 2015 regional elections. The results are reported in the Online appendix. As expected, the effect of cues for the EU issue is mediated by political knowledge of the EU.
7. Since the variable for the role of the ECB is dichotomous and the index for the domestic issues is continuous, we decide to adopt an ordinary least squares model in order to perform this comparison.
8. The results for the models for the general election replicated on the weighted sample are in the Online appendix.
9. To overcome ‘separation’ in our data, in this case we run a penalized logistic regression (see Firth, 1993).
10. Only the treatments for CDC, ERC, and PNV are non-significant for the State of Autonomies issue but significant at $p < 0.10$ for the Senate issue in the 2015 general election. See the Online appendix.

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