



# 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 data set 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.

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## 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

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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 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 attached 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 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

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