Ambivalence at the ballot box: The role of the political context on voting indecision*

Lluis Orriols **
University of Girona

Álvaro Martínez
University of Sheffield

A substantive portion of the electorate declares in pre-electoral surveys that they have not decided their vote yet. However, little has been done in trying to understand who these voters are and how they finally decide their vote. The paper tries to advance the literature by disentangling under what conditions voters are more likely to be undecided. While the traditional approach to the study of electoral indecision has been to characterize which individual traits make voters more likely to be undecided, this article has provided consistent evidence showing that key elements of the political context may affect voters in the electoral contest. Using long-term harmonized data from Spanish pre-electoral surveys over thirty years, we find that voting indecision is influenced by two different types of contextual factors. First, there are some political contexts that reduce voters’ cognitive costs to decide their vote: i.e. the level of electoral competitiveness and the number of parties competing in the elections. Second, there are other political contexts that increase voters’ social or expressive costs i.e. the level of government popularity since costs of expressing the preference for the party in government decreases when its public image is undermined.


**Corresponding author: Dr Lluis Orriols, Departament de Dret Públic. Campus Montilvi. 17071, Girona (Spain). E-mail: lluis.orriols@udg.edu
1. Introduction

A minor but relevant portion of the electorate in democratic countries arrives at the last weeks of the electoral campaign without having made up their minds about which party to vote for. The electorate who delays its vote choice until the late stages of the political campaign represents more than one out of five voters in most consolidated democracies and its numbers has been increasing over the last decades (Dalton et al 2000). Although there are well-grounded suspicions that surveys tend to over report the number of true undecided voters, the existence of such percentage of respondents who do not declare their vote intention in pre-electoral surveys generate significant uncertainties on predicting the electoral outcomes. This is particularly true if we take into account that a significant proportion of this electorate does not finally abstain in the Election Day.

The study of who undecided voters are and how they end up voting has attracted the attention of many political scientists. And this is so because this electorate is particularly important for the strategies that political parties and leaders develop during electoral campaigns. Indeed, its relevance stems from the idea that a necessary condition (although clearly not a sufficient one) for political campaigns to influence the electoral outcome is to have voters with some degree of uncertainty about their final decision. There is no doubt that undecided voters are a particularly strategic target for parties during electoral campaigns as they area more persuadable group.

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1. This portion of the electorate represent 23 percent of the US electorate (Nir and Druckman 2008), about 20 percent in Germany (where, for instance, in the 2005 elections 9 percent of voters decided in the election day itself) and around 15 percent in Spain in recent elections.

2. It is possible that undecided voters are more likely to be persuaded by political messages. Yet, there must also be exposed and received them. No campaign can be successful with persuadable voters who are inattentive to political messages (Zaller 1992).
The academic interest in undecided voters is generally focused on studying when and how these voters end up deciding their vote choice. Yet, too often the traditional approach has been to treat undecided voters as a stable, clearly distinguishable electorate. Certainly, in this regard undecided voters are too often conceptualized in much the same way as party identification or other enduring political attitudes.

The literature gives a fairly consistent profile of the main socio-economic and political traits of the undecided voters. The existing research usually characterizes them as individuals with lower levels of education, weaker political preferences and lower interest in politics. Indecision is also correlated with demographics: women and younger voters are more likely to arrive at late stages of the campaign without a decision about whom to vote for (Fournier et al. 2004). Among all the above factors, the standard conclusion is that political preferences, and in particular the lack of party identification, is the most correlated with being undecided.

In sum, according to the literature, undecided voters may be shortly described as apolitical people “who care little and know less” (Chaffee and Rimal 1996: 269). Yet, most research fails to consider that voters’ uncertainty may also depend on the particular conditions surrounding the voting decision. Indeed, it is a rather strong

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3 Most of the literature on this field has been interested in two different topics: (a) the time of their vote decision and (b) what determines such decision. Regarding the first topic, research has found that the volume of undecided voters follows an electoral cycle. As for the second, Chaffee (1996) and Fournier et al (2004) suggest that late deciders are more vulnerable to campaign events. Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous (1994) find that late deciders in the US are less predictable than decided voters and that they are also less influenced by the conventional factors that traditionally influence vote choice. Finally, Lavine(2001) and Kosmidis and Xezonakis (2010) find that the determinants of vote choice of decided and undecided voters significantly differ: while the former group are more likely to be affected by the candidate’s personal traits, the latter take the economy more into consideration.

4 See for instance, Chaffe and Choe (1980) for the 1976 US presidential elections, Kosmidis and Xezonakis (2010) for the 2005 UK general election (yet they do not find undeciders have a significant lower interest in politics), Barisone 2001 for the French and Italian case in the 1990s, Martinez and Orriols (2012) for Spain (1986-2011) and Lisi(2010) for the Greek and Portuguese cases in 2000s. Contrary to most literature, Irwin and Van Holsteyn (2008) consider that undecided voters are a more sophisticated group (with higher levels of education and higher interest in politics). Also Fournier et al. (2004) find for the Canadian case that undecided voters have not higher levels of education than their decided counterparts and they are only slightly less interested in politics and less attentive to media coverage.
assumption to treat voters’ indecision as a stable political trait, in the line as we treat ideology or party identification. Probably, the firsts authors to acknowledge that voting indecision is contingent upon the political context were O’Keefe and his colleagues. In their study of the Ohio elections, they concluded: “difficulty of voter decision making appears primarily to be a function of circumstances of a particular campaign rather than a characteristic of certain voters per se” (1976: 328). Using panel data, the authors found that only 5 percent of the electorate declared not to have a clear vote decision in both 1972 and 1974 elections. Albeit there were common attributes among these voters (less educated, less politically knowledgeable, younger and less attentive to politics), undecided voters were not the same group of individuals from one election to another.

In sum, is it reasonable to consider electoral indecision as a result of certain voters’ personal attributes? Or does voting indecision stem more from specific characteristics of the political context? In this paper, we argue that it is misleading to consider electoral indecision uniquely as the result of certain stable personal traits of the electorate. Thus, we will try to convince the reader in the following pages that being undecided is also contingent upon the political context of each election.

In order to show that indecision is an attribute that depends on the circumstances that surrounds voters’ choice, we study the contextual determinants of being undecided in Spain from 1982 to 2012 by taking into account all those elections in different levels (in particular, EU, National and Regional) where pre-electoral studies are available. In total, we have been able to collect data for 135 elections, although some of them lack the necessary information to be included in some of our analysis. Using Spain as single case study over time introduces two key features for the appropriate study of the electoral behavior of undecided voters. On one hand, an important degree of regularity in the institutional and political contexts in each of the electoral arenas analyzed over
time. On the other hand, high comparability for most of the pre-electoral surveys used as they are carried out by the same opinion poll institution and are based on a similar methodology for designing the questionnaires and gathering the data across time.

The paper is structured as follows. In the following section we review the existing literature and introduce our hypotheses. In section three we describe our dataset with the 135 Spanish pre-electoral surveys, the variables we employ to test our hypotheses and the methods used. In section four we report the results. Finally, in section five we end the paper with some concluding remarks.

2. Voting indecision as a situational characteristic

There are a variety of factors that may explain why some individuals cannot (or do not want to) report their vote intention when asked in pre-electoral surveys. Among others, indecision may come from indifference, ignorance or lack of information, cross-cutting pressures, or refusal of expressing vote intention in public. In this paper we structure the relevant determinants of voting indecision by making use of Adam Berinsky’s theory about why people refuse to express political opinions in surveys. In his work “Silent Voices” (2004), Berinsky considers that individuals face some costs when they have to come up with an opinion and express it in public. When these costs are high, people may be unable or may refuse to report their opinion. In particular he specifies two different types of costs: the cognitive and the social ones.

Regarding the cognitive costs, individuals have sometimes difficulties in translating their preferences and interests into an opinion about a particular issue. Berinsky employs Stimson and Carmines’ distinction of hard issues and soft issues to explain the cognitive costs of coming up with an opinion. There are some issues (hard ones) that are more technically difficult and are less familiar to the general public and other issues
(soft ones) that do not entail much sophistication and expertise to form an opinion.\(^5\)

Good examples of ‘hard issues’ that bear high cognitive costs are attitudes related with tax policy. Indeed, although most individuals have clear personal interests in this topic, it is not always obvious for many how to translate those interests into a specific policy proposal. Some degree of specialized and technical knowledge is required in order to understand the implications and trade-offs of any tax policy design and how it matches to one’s interests.

The role of cognitive costs on individuals’ likelihood of expressing an opinion is the most recurring factor mentioned by the literature (i.e. Krosnick et al 2002; Kosmidis and Xezonakis 2010). Yet it is important to take into consideration the second type of costs: the social ones. These costs appear when individuals have some reservations in expressing their opinions in public since they consider they may not be socially desirable.\(^6\) The existence of social costs of expressing an opinion is related with the well-known Noelle-Neumann’s ‘spiral of silence’ (1984). According to this theory individuals tend to keep their opinions for themselves when they perceive that these are not the prevailing ones in society. People refuse to express or discuss any issue when they think they are in minority because they fear that it will lead them to social isolation.

Clear examples of issues with high social costs are racial related ones. In this case, social pressure may prevent some people to express racist attitudes in public. According

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\(^5\) Berinsky also considers that cognitive costs in surveys are related with the difficulty that individuals might have in translating their preferences and interests in simplified close-ended survey questions. Although this is the case of many of the political attitudes asked in surveys it is more difficult to think that this also applies to the wording of the vote intention question.

\(^6\) This is consistent with Brehm’s seminal work on why people participate in surveys (1993). This author posits three influential factors: (i) possibility of being contacted by the interviewer; (ii) eligibility (being the target of the interview i.e. age) and (iii) compliance (accepting to participate). Social costs are related with the latter factor.
to Berinsky’s estimations for the American case, public opinion is more conservative in racial issues than we might think at a first glance. And this is so precisely because non-respondents tend to hold less racial-tolerant opinions than those who publicly express their views. Another well-studied example is related with the propensity of individuals to avoid recognizing in surveys that they did not vote. As it has been acknowledged by several studies, social desirability makes individuals to over-report vote intention or recall. Non-voters over-reporting are often explained arguing that it is the best response in order to generate good impression to the interviewer and to avoid the shame of letting others know they did not fulfilled a sort of moral obligation. (Silver et al 1986; Bernstein et al 2001).

In sum, when someone feels that some of her opinions are socially undesirable and considers that to some extent they might be censured this constitutes a cost for the individual to express her views. Of course, under these circumstances individuals may lie and express a social desirable opinion. Yet, an easy alternative is just to skip the question and give a ‘don’t know’ response.

Cognitive and social costs are linked with the two different stages of expressing an opinion in public: the attitude formation and the attitude expression. The former is related with factors such as individuals’ cognitive abilities, the technical complexity of the issue or the information available; the latter is largely dependent on the social norms and the personal costs that individuals estimate of expressing their opinions in public.\(^7\)

In this paper we aim to apply this conceptual framework to the case of vote intention and seek unveiling why some people abstain to report their voting intention. Yet,

\(^7\)As Berinsky suggests: “individuals may come to a don’t know answer by two very different but still plausible routes: either after they first attempt to form an opinion about a particular political controversy or when –if successful in coming to a judgment- they express their answer to the survey interviewer. In the first case, the respondent fails to answer the question because of cognitive costs; in the second case, question abstention results from the social costs.” (2004:p.25)
instead of focusing on the individual traits that determine the cognitive and social costs of expressing an opinion, we move to the contextual elements that may influence voters’ propensity of expressing their vote preference. The literature has already studied how, for instance, individuals’ political sophistication and interest in politics are related with not being able to express their vote intention in surveys. However, much less is known about how contextual factors may enhance or hinder the cognitive and social costs of expressing vote intention.

In the case of the cognitive costs we focus on some contextual factors related to voters’ chances and incentives to gather information about the electoral contest. Information is a key element for voters to make up their minds. As Zaller puts it: “The impact of people’s value predispositions always depend on whether citizens possess the contextual information needed to translate their values into support for particular policies or candidates” (1992: 25). The availability of such information does not only depend on individuals’ attributes (such as education or interest in politics), it is also largely determined by the context in which they face the decision. In particular we study the following factors: the level of competitiveness of the electoral race, the number of parties competing in the elections and the type of election (first or second-order election).

(i) We hypothesize that competitive elections with uncertain results reduce the number of undecided voters. There are two related arguments behind this proposition: firstly, close races tend to generate more interest among the electorate. They increase voters’

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8 In another work Berinksy already recognized the importance of taking political context into account: “While we need to pay attention to and account for the social context surrounding sensitive issues when gauging public opinion we must also pay attention to changes in that context over time. The social norms and conventions that govern discourse in society evolve over time and as those norms change, the way in which respondents react to the survey interview will change as well” (2004: p. 51-2). This author finds that individuals with racially conservative opinions tend to hide their opinions nowadays. Yet this has not been the case in the past, where social desirability on these issues was less important.
feeling that their vote may make a difference and, therefore, they have more incentives
to gather information about the electoral race (Downs 1957, Riker and Ordeshook
1968). Indeed, recent evidence has shown that competitive elections may be crucial for
late deciding voters as the electoral campaign exposes voters to essential information for
making up their minds and even abandon their first preferred option if this has no option
to win (McGregor 2012). And secondly, competitive elections stimulate parties’
campaign expenditure and efforts. In settings where there is no clear winner parties may
be encouraged to invest more time and money because they expect higher returns (i.e.
greater chances of influencing the electoral outcome) (Cox and Munger 1989; Aldrich
1993; Hill and McKee 2005). In sum, highly competitive elections generate more
interest among the electorate as well as increase the information available, reducing
voters’ cognitive costs of making up a decision. Our expectation is consistent with the
well-established finding that competitive elections are correlated with higher levels of
turnout (i.e. Cox and Munger 1989). Probably, these higher levels of turnout in
competitive elections are preceded by a significant reduction of the number of
undecided voters: in competitive elections voters have higher incentives to both forming
a political preference and going to the polling station in the Election Day.

(ii) We hypothesize that party systems with few number of parties are less cognitive
demanding than others where voters have many political options to choose from.
Probably, two-party systems (one party in the right and another in the left) are relatively
easier contexts for voters. In these settings, there are no much political options to bring
into consideration when deciding whom to vote for. On the contrary, multiparty systems
with different parties on each side of the political spectrum (or even with different
cross-cutting cleavages) make voters more difficult to make up their minds. Thus, our
second hypothesis is that undecided voters increase with the number of parties in the party system.

(iii) Finally, we also expect second order elections to be correlated with higher levels of undecided voters. Second-order elections are perceived as less important and with less at stake than the first-order ones. This leads all political actors to be less interested in this type of elections: voters are less attentive to the information on these elections and political parties have fewer incentives to campaign (Norris 1997). There is some evidence compatible with this claim. Eisinga et al (1998) find that there is a correlation between the type of election and the timing of voting. Concretely, their results show that Dutch voters make up their mind earlier in first-order elections (General Elections) than in the second order ones (European Parliament, Provincial States and City councils). The authors also find that the final number of undecided voters end up being higher in second order elections.

(iv) In the case of social costs we hypothesize that voters are influenced by the general state of opinion when deciding to express their opinions in public. In particular, we study the influence of government’s reputation or popularity on voting indecision. When the government’s image is perceived as negative by the society, incumbent’s party sympathizers are more likely to respond ‘don’t know’ when asked for their vote intention (regardless their own opinion about the incumbent performance). Analogously, when government’s reputation is high, we expect those who sympathize with non-incumbent parties to become more uncertain about their vote intention. In both cases the same logic applies: following the social climate voters try to avoid sanctions by hiding their true preferences.

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9 While undecided voters begin to make up their minds about nine weeks before the General Elections, they did not decide their vote until one week before Provincial States elections and four weeks in the EU and City Councils elections.
The literature already provides us some anecdotal findings consistent with our hypothesis. Studying the Spanish case, Urquizu (2006) shows that the “don’t know / No answer” option was used by many right-wing voters during the first years of democracy in order to hide their true preferences. The argument behind this finding is that conservative voters preferred to hide partisan preference to the main party on the right (the PP) because many party leaders were linked with the Francoist dictatorship. During these first years of democracy, the conservative PP was stigmatized with a negative image and some voters decided not to declare their vote in order to avoid the risk of social sanctions. The idea that some of those who affirm to be undecided are actually hiding their vote has also been studied in other countries (see for instance Arcuri et al 2008).10

An alternative explanation to account for the influence of the general state of opinion on voters’ indecision is related with the existence of cross-pressured environments. The early studies of electoral behavior of the Columbia and Michigan schools already found that cross-pressured voters have weaker political preferences and tend to show lower levels of political participation (Campbell et al. 1960). The interest on how cross-pressures affect political preferences and behavior is still present nowadays. For instance, Diana Mutz (2002) finds that exposure to dissonant messages make voters to become less confident with their political choices. Similarly, more recently, Therriault et al. (2011) also finds that cross-pressures are related with political indifference. Following this argument, it is also possible to think that incumbent’s sympathizers become cross-pressured when government’s popularity is perceived as poor by public opinion making them to be more uncertain about their vote choice.

10 In fact, experiments show that when surveys allow respondents to answer their vote intention in a secret ballot box, the number of undecided voters is substantially reduced (Perry 1979). The results of these experiments indicate that not all respondents who answer ‘don’t know’ are truly undecided voters. Some of them may be actually refusing to express their preferences in public.
In sum, the different arguments of the last hypothesis evolve around the same argument: the inconsistence between voters’ own political preferences and those of the general public mood may lead to be more likely for voters to be undecided.

3. Data, variables, and methods

Data and variables

The empirical analysis draws on a unique dataset that comprises all available pre-electoral surveys of the different elections held in Spain in the period 1982-2012. We have been able to gather information on 135 elections (and over 340 thousand respondents), although we lose a number of them due to the lack of relevant information for estimating some of our statistical models. In particular, the dataset collects information from the following electoral contests: 9 General Elections, 6 European Parliament Elections, and 120 Regional elections. The period covered extends for over thirty years of democratic elections in Spain. Besides, as mentioned in the introduction, all surveys were carried out by the public agency Centre for Sociological Research (CIS). This allows us to have a consistent survey methodology over time and across elections. It is particularly important that all surveys are face-to-face interviews, since non-response rate is highly sensitive to the interview method. For the case of pre-electoral surveys this is likely to have reduced the number of undecided voters thanks to the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Berinsky 2008).

In addition to the harmonized individual-level survey information, we have included contextual-level variables through the thirty years period covered by our data in order to test our hypotheses about the role of the political context on voting indecision. In what

11 Some surveys lack relevant variables such as the left-right ideological scale, vote recall in previous elections, or government performance evaluation. As a result, our multilevel models are based on 113 elections (and over 230,000 respondents) and 88 elections (and about 200,000 respondents), depending on the hypotheses being tested.
follows, we describe the dependent and independent variables used in our empirical analyses.

**Dependent variable:** following previous research, we measure voter indecision as those respondents who fail to provide an answer in the vote intention item in the pre-electoral surveys. Thus, we consider undecided those who respond “don’t know” as well as those who abstain to respond. We characterize undecided voters in this way since some of our hypotheses (i.e. the one related with the social costs of reporting vote intention) apply to both categories (“don’t know” and “no answer”) (Berinsky 2008). Yet, the main conclusions of this paper hold if we only focus on those who explicitly report to be undecided (i.e. provide a “don’t know” answer). We treat as decided voters not only those who report a party preference, but also those who respond they will not vote on the Election Day. Again, our results do not significantly change if we decide to exclude non-voters from our analysis and only consider as decided voters those who have the intention to vote for any of the available parties.

**Independent variables:** our hypotheses related with the cognitive costs require proxy measures for electoral competitiveness and the number of parties competing in the elections. We measure electoral competitiveness in two different ways. Firstly, we measure it as the margin between the two main parties running in the elections: the smaller the margin, the greater the competitiveness. This is the standard measure in the literature, especially that focused on American politics (i.e. Mayhew 1974, Ferejohn 1977). Probably, this measure is particularly suitable for majoritarian electoral systems (where there are usually two big parties competing for just one seat), but its

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12 Kosmidis and Xezonakis (2010) consider that: “An undecided voter is an individual who is unable to form a vote intention when interviewed at a time point prior to Election Day”. For Eisinga et al. (1998) the ratio of undecided voters is measured as: “the [people] not supporting any particular party as a proportion of the total number of responses to the vote intention question”. (p.121).

13 In the results section we report the minor differences between these different ways of characterizing undecided voters.
applicability becomes more dubious in proportional systems (like Spain). Hence, we also use an alternative measure of competitiveness suggested by Vanhanen (1997) for proportional settings. It is measured as the vote share of all parties except the winner (thus, the higher the value, the more competitive is the election).

The number of parties competing in the elections is measured with the standard Effective Number of Parties (ENP). This measure provides information about the level of fragmentation of the party system and it is constructed by weighing all parties by their electoral strength. The formula is the following:

\[ N = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} P_i^2} \]

where \( n \) is the number of parties competing in the elections with at least one vote and \( P_i \) is the vote share of each party.\(^{14}\)

For testing our hypothesis of social costs we need a measure of incumbent’s popularity (or performance) and a measure of government sympathizers. In both cases we have measured them using alternative procedures in order to get more robust and reliable results. In the case of incumbent’s popularity we have three different measures: (i) the average evaluation of the leader of the incumbent party (using a scale from 0 –very bad– to 10 –very good–), (ii) the average evaluation of government performance (using a scale of 1 –very bad– to 5 –very good). (iii) and finally, we also take an objective measure of government performance: the evolution of the unemployment during the mandate prior to the elections. In all cases we expect a government with a negative image (and performance) to be positively correlated with a higher number of undecided voters among incumbent party sympathizers and negatively correlated with non-

\(^{14}\)For example, an ENP=3 means that the party system fragmentation is as if there were three parties of equal size.
incumbent parties sympathizers. Not all surveys have the two subjective proxies of the
government’s popularity. Consequently, the number of observations varies depending
on which measure we use in our analysis.

Most surveys included in our dataset do not have any measure of party identification.
Hence we need to find alternative proxies for government sympathizers. Considering
the information available in the surveys, we can create two different proxies: (i) we use
vote recall in previous elections and we consider incumbent party sympathizers those
who voted for that party in the past. The problem with this proxy is that some voters
may be hiding both their vote intention and their vote recall. To overcome this problem
we use an alternative strategy based on dividing the left/right ideological scale in three
spaces: those placed on the incumbent’s ideological side, moderate and non-ideological
voters, and voters in the opposite of incumbent’s ideological side. The ideology of the
incumbent party is taken from the average position that traditionally voters give to these
parties.15

Besides to the above variables, the models include some individual and contextual -
level control variables. At the individual level we include respondents’ education, sex,
age, employment status, left-right self-placement and their evaluation of the government
(using either the leader’s evaluation or government performance, depending on which
variable we use at the contextual level). This latter variable helps us to estimate the
effect of the average perception of government’s popularity in society controlling for
the individual perception of each respondent. At the contextual level, we include the
control variable “years of democracy”. Elsewhere we have found that, contrary to the
general pattern in developed democracies, in Spain there has been a progressive

15 For instance, the ideological space of PSOE is the left (less than 5), AP/PP is the right (more than 5).
reduction of undecided voters with the consolidation of the democratic system (Martinez and Orriols 2012).

Methods

In order to test our hypotheses we apply multilevel techniques to our data. The combination of individual and contextual-level variables into a single analysis requires disentangling individual and contextual-level variation for a proper estimation of standard errors. This is what a multilevel regression adds to a standard one-level regression which only includes a single residual term (Snijders and Bosker 1999).

Of all possible options of adding random elements to model variation between groups we use the simplest one: a logistic random intercept model, which only adds a single random parameter for each of the political context variables introduced at the aggregated level. In a multilevel regression the intercept is composed of an average value for the groups \( \gamma_{00} \) and a random one which reflects the variation across groups \( (U_{0j}) \).

\[
\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + U_{0j}
\]

To this basic formulation, one can add group-level variables to explain variation in the intercept:

\[
\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10}x_{1j} + \cdots + \gamma_{q0}x_{qj} + U_{0j}
\]

Thus, our final model specification including the political context variables will be as follows:

\[
\log \left( \frac{\pi_{ij}}{1 - \pi_{ij}} \right) = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{1j}x_{1j} + \beta_{1j}x_{1j} + R_{ij} + U_{ij}
\]
where the random effects are $R_{ij}$ (the unexplained individual-level residual, and $U_{0j}$ (the group-level one). $B_{ij}$ is a fixed effect that can be interpreted as a regular coefficient in a standard regression. Accordingly, $X_{ij}$ is the vector of individual and contextual-level fixed effects that will be used to explain the likelihood of being an undecided voter.

4. Results

In Table 1 we study our first set of hypotheses related with the cognitive costs associated with having a party preference. We argue that some electoral settings facilitate more voters to make up their minds about which party to vote for than others. In particular we take into consideration three different contextual factors that may influence voters’ cognitive costs: the electoral competitiveness, the number of parties running in the elections and the type of election (first or second order elections).

[Table 1 about here]

Regarding the electoral competitiveness hypothesis, we have argued above that close elections with uncertain results increase both voters’ interest and the volume of available information. As a result the cognitive costs of deciding whom to vote for are reduced. Our results are compatible with this argument. In model 2 (of table 1) we use the classic indicator of electoral competitiveness (the margin between the two main parties) and in model 3 we use the alternative measure, more suitable to multiparty systems: the sum of the vote share of all minor parties. These two different measures of electoral competitiveness are statistically significant at $p<0.01$ in the expected direction: competitive elections are associated with lower levels of undecided voters.
Similarly, the number of parties running in the elections has the expected effect on voting indecision. The results show that voters’ likelihood to be undecided is positively associated with the number of parties. This result holds whether we adjust the number of parties by their relative electoral strength or by the seat share in the chamber. In both cases, our results are compatible with the hypothesis that voters have more difficulties to make up their minds when they have to choose among a large number of parties.

The last factor of the political context that we argue may influence the cognitive costs of the voting decision is the type of election. Our hypothesis is that there are more undecided voters in second order elections than in the first order ones. The causal mechanism is similar to that of the electoral competitiveness hypothesis: second order elections generate less interest and so less information is available to voters. Our results do not support this argument. There are no significant differences between National elections (first order) and regional and EU elections (second order). It may be argued that a better measurement for this hypothesis could be the proximity between first and second order elections which allows considering contamination between electoral arenas as an intervening factor on voters’ decisions. Indeed, some Spanish regional elections were held very close to (or even occasionally at the same day of) the National General Elections. Presumably the number of undecided voters should be smaller in these electoral contests. In fact, the results are slightly more compatible with our hypothesis if we measure the distinction between first and second order elections as the number of days that separates them. The coefficient of this alternative measure is statistically significant in the expected direction at p<0.10). However, in overall we do not find robust evidence about the importance of the type of the elections on voting indecision. In sum, we have found evidence of our two first hypotheses. Both the

16 The coefficient is not reported in the table, but results are available upon request.
number of parties competing in the elections and the level of electoral competitiveness have an impact on voters’ odds of being undecided. In Figure 1 we illustrate the change of the predicted probabilities of voting indecision across different values of the effective number of parties and the level of competitiveness. The figure shows that despite being statistically significant, these two variables have a rather modest effect.

![Figure 1 about here](image)

Some individual-level variables are consistent with findings from previous research (see Table 1). For instance, women tend to be more undecided than men. Generally, women are more prone to choose the “don’t know” option in political-related surveys (Barisone 2001). Ideology also shows the expected effect: ideological voters, and among these the extremist ones, are more likely to have their vote decided in pre-electoral surveys. Yet, contrary to previous findings, the Spanish right-wing voters are not more likely to be undecided than the left-wing ones (Urquizu 2006). The propensity of conservative voters to hide their vote behind the “don’t know” and “no answer” categories during the first years of democracy appears to have progressively vanished (and even reversed).

Surprisingly, education does not have a clear effect on voting indecision. However, the importance of education emerges when we characterize undecided voters only as those who provide a “don’t know” answer. In that model, voters with lower educational attainment are more likely to be undecided.

Our control variable ‘years of democracy’ is not statistically significant. Although there has been a general increase of the number of undecided voters in developed democracies, the opposite has occurred in Spain. In the 1986 Spanish General elections, around 40 percent of voters arrived at the electoral campaign without having decided
their vote. However, this percentage dropped to 25 percent in 2011. Yet, this time trend in Spain disappears once we control for our individual-level control variables.\footnote{The effect of years of democracy is statistically significant at p<0.01 in a model with no control variables.} This suggests that the reduction in the number of undecided voters in Spain is explained by the progressive changes in the distribution of educational attainment and the ideology of the population.\footnote{For instance the percentage of non-ideological voters (who are more likely to be undecided) has substantially reduced during these three decades of democracy in Spain (see de la Calle et al. 2010).}

So far we have found that the number of parties and the electoral competitiveness are two significant contextual factors that influence voters’ indecision. We now test our final hypothesis related with the social costs of expressing a party preference. To do so, we have done an interaction between our three different measures of government reputation and our two proxies of incumbent party sympathizers. Having different proxies of these two factors will allow us to draw more robust conclusions.

[Table 2 about here]

The results of the models with these six different interactions are reported in Table 2. All models are compatible with our expectations, no matter which proxy is used. Results show that when there is a general perception that the government’s performance is poor, incumbent’s sympathizers tend to be more undecided. This is true for models that measure government popularity using voters’ subjective perceptions (either average evaluation of the leader of the incumbent party, or the average evaluation of the government performance) as well as for models that use an indirect objective measure of performance such as unemployment growth during the last term in office. Moreover, conclusions do not substantially change depending on how we characterize incumbent
sympathizers: either using vote recall or the ideological self-placement of voters in the ideological scale.

In order to facilitate the interpretation of these interactions, in Figure 2 we have estimated key predicted probabilities. All graphs show the same pattern: the effect of incumbent reputation among government sympathizers follows the opposite trend found for the average public. Let us focus, for instance, in the upper right graph. When the average evaluation of the incumbent is close to 0, we find more undecided voters among the electorate placed on the same ideological side of the incumbent party. Yet when the incumbent is popular (with evaluations close to 10) the opposite takes place. In these circumstances, we find more undecided voters among those who hold and ideology opposite to the incumbent’s party.

[Figure 2 about here]

In sum, all models of Table 2 are largely compatible with our fourth hypotheses since governments’ popularity has the expected effect on voters’ indecision among sympathizers and non-sympathizers. Finally, it is worth mentioning that although the individual-level control variables are not reported in the table, the models also include individuals’ perceptions of the incumbent reported in the pre-electoral surveys. Hence, the models estimate the effect of governments’ reputation in society while controlling for the individual opinions on the performance of the government.

5. Conclusions

This article has shed light on an overlooked but important phenomenon in the electoral behaviour of advanced democracies: the role of the political context on voting
indecision. While the traditional approach to the study of voting indecision has been to characterize which individual traits make voters more likely to be undecided, this article has provided consistent evidence showing that key elements of the political context may affect voters’ indecision in the electoral contest. Using long-term harmonized data from Spanish pre-electoral surveys corresponding to National, European and Regional elections over thirty years of democratic elections results show that electoral competitiveness and the number of parties running in the elections are two factors influencing how easy is for voters to decide for whom to cast their ballot. Also we have found some evidence that closeness between first and second order elections reduces the number of undecided voters. All these factors of the political context, we have argued, relate with the cognitive costs of the voting decision.

As for the effect of the political context on the social costs of voting, our results confirm that general perceptions on the performance of the incumbent are related with the number of undecided voters among its loyals. Concretely, when such perceptions are negative we find more undecided voters among its supporters whereas the opposite applies when the general evaluation of the incumbent’s performance is positive. Interestingly, the important role of the political context on voting indecision appears to be independent of the traditional sociodemographic characteristics of voters associated with their ambivalence at the ballot box. Future comparative research should extend the generalizability of these findings to varying characteristics of the political context.
Table 1. Voter indecision and the cognitive costs of reporting a vote intention

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<th>Model 1 Coef.</th>
<th>Model 2 Coef.</th>
<th>Model 3 Coef.</th>
</tr>
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<td>S.E.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.02 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.02)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>0.01 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.02)</td>
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<tr>
<td>University (medium)</td>
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<td>-0.06* (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.06* (0.02)</td>
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<td>University (high)</td>
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<td>0.03 (0.02)</td>
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<td>Sex (female)</td>
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<td>0.18** (0.01)</td>
<td>0.18** (0.01)</td>
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<td>0.005** (0.00)</td>
<td>0.005** (0.00)</td>
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<td>-0.01 (0.02)</td>
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<td>0.02 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.02)</td>
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<td>Other situation</td>
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<td>0.12 (0.09)</td>
<td>0.12 (0.09)</td>
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<td>Incumbent evaluation*</td>
<td>-0.04** (0.00)</td>
<td>-0.04** (0.00)</td>
<td>-0.04** (0.00)</td>
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<td>Moderate left</td>
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<td>0.48** (0.02)</td>
<td>0.48** (0.02)</td>
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<td>1.13** (0.02)</td>
<td>1.13** (0.02)</td>
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<td>Moderate right</td>
<td>0.50** (0.02)</td>
<td>0.50** (0.02)</td>
<td>0.50** (0.02)</td>
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<td>Extreme right</td>
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<td>-0.19** (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.19** (0.03)</td>
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<td>1.58** (0.02)</td>
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<td>0.28** (0.00)</td>
<td>0.28** (0.00)</td>
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<td>-0.02** (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.02** (0.01)</td>
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<td>-0.04* (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.04* (0.02)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average incumbent evaluation</td>
<td>0.12* (0.03)</td>
<td>0.11* (0.05)</td>
<td>0.11* (0.05)</td>
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<td>Years of democracy</td>
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<td>0.004 (0.004)</td>
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<td>-0.06 (0.12)</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.12)</td>
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<td>-0.28 (0.22)</td>
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<td>_constant</td>
<td>-2.17** (0.03)</td>
<td>-3.41** (0.43)</td>
<td>-2.40** (0.52)</td>
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| Number of observations   | 242080      | 242080      | 242080      |
| Number of groups         | 113         | 113         | 113         |
| Wald Chi2                | 12585.93    | 12605.17    | 12603.51    |
| Prob> chi2               | 0.00        | 0.00        | 0.00        |

Multilevel logistic regression maximum likelihood estimates. * significant at p<0.1 * significant at p<0.05 ** significant at p<0.01.
Table 2. Voter indecision and the social costs of reporting a vote intention

<p>|                             | Model 4          | Model 5          | Model 6          | Model 7          | Model 8          | Model 9          |</p>
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<th>Coef.</th>
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<th>Coef.</th>
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<td>0.16**</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>0.09*</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>0.11*</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>0.68**</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
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<td>Average Government performance</td>
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<td>(0.03)</td>
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<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>-0.05*</td>
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<td>0.01</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
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<td>-0.05**</td>
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<td>-0.05*</td>
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<td>Incumbent voter in previous election</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
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<td>-0.81**</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>2.70**</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
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<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>0.98**</td>
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<td>Av. Inc. Supp x Incumbent voter</td>
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<td>(0.01)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Av. Gov. Perf. x Incumbent voter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Av. Inc. Supp x Same ideol. side</td>
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<tr>
<td>Av. Inc. Supp x moderate&amp;non-ideol.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment x Same ideol. side</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment x Opposite ideol. Side</td>
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<tr>
<td>Av. Gov. Perf. x Same ideol. side</td>
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<tr>
<td>Av. Gov. Perf. x moderate&amp;non-ideol.</td>
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</table>

Multilevel logistic regression maximum likelihood estimates. * significant at p<0.1 * significant at p<0.05 ** significant at p<0.01.

Note: The table does not report the individual-level variables included in the model (see table 1). Information is available upon request.
Figure 1. The effect of left/right ideology, effective number of parties and electoral competitiveness on the probability of being undecided

Note: Predicted probabilities using Model 2 of Table 1 keeping all remaining variables at their mean.

Figure 2. The effect of incumbent reputation on the probability of being undecided

Note: Predicted probabilities using the Models 4, 5, 7 and 8 of Table 2 keeping all remaining variables at their mean.
References


