Survey questions about party competence: insights from cognitive interviews

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Abstract
Voter assessments of party competence have become a key explanation of electoral decision-making. However, there are at least three potential problems that might arise when asking respondents for their opinion on issue-specific party competence: lack of comprehension, a lack of stable attitudes and the use of satisficing strategies. We tested a series of issue-specific competence questions in 20 cognitive interviews carried out in Austria in 2011. The transcripts of these interviews show us whether these three problems are evident in how respondents describe and explain their survey response. In particular, we find clear evidence that many people (1) may hold no or only weak opinions on issue-specific party competence and (2) may make use of distinct but related concepts, particularly salience and position, when answering questions about competence. We provide recommendations for researchers and survey designers based on our findings.

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Voter perceptions of party competence have become an important way of explaining electoral choices and election outcomes. Voters are said to distinguish between parties and politicians in terms of who they think is competent or who has performed well, and those parties and politicians are then endorsed and rewarded in the voting booth (e.g., Fiorina 1981, Miller and Wattenberg 1985, Mondak 1995, Fournier et al. 2003, Besley 2005, Belluci 2006, Green and Jennings 2011a, b). Competence distinctions between parties are argued to take on particular importance in determining electoral decisions in countries and periods where large disagreements on the direction of policy are less prevalent (Clarke et al. 2004, 2009, Green 2007, Johns et al. 2009). Competence is also part of how parties compete: over time, parties develop reputations for competence on certain issues, and such parties have been said to ‘own’ and campaign particularly heavily those issues (Budge and Farlie 1983, Petrocik 1996, Petrocik et al. 2003, van der Brug 2004, Belanger and Meguid 2008, Green and Hobolt 2008, Clark 2009).

Given the perceived importance of competence to vote choice and party competition, measuring voter assessments of party competence on key issues has become commonplace in election surveys. For example, the most recent surveys carried out by the American, British, Canadian, European and Irish election studies thus all include detailed questions on perceived issue-specific party competence. However, we know very little about how valid the responses to these questions are. When asked to assess the competence of a party or a politician on a specific issue, how do participants in a survey arrive at an answer?

Based on existing research on individual attitudes and survey response strategies, we suspect that there may be three important problems in measuring issue-specific party competence. Each of these may reduce measurement validity as researchers can no longer be certain what the responses recorded in the survey actually reflect.
The first potential problem is comprehension, the first stage of the response process (Tourangeau 1984, Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988, Tourangeau et al. 2009). Individuals may vary in what they think the terms used in the question mean. While some will have the same understanding as the researchers, others may interpret the words differently. Therefore, respondents may have a different understanding of ‘competence’ than researchers have.

The second problem is the lack of stable attitudes. Many voters do not have clear and strongly held opinions on detailed political matters (Converse 1964, Krosnick 1988, Zaller and Feldman 1992, Chong 1993). Views on issue-specific party competence are a good example of a relatively detailed political judgment. As a result, we cannot expect voters necessarily to have a well-formed idea of how competent parties are on specific issues (Green and Jennings 2011a). The essence of this problem is that voters may give a response to the question even if they lack a stable or well-formed attitude (Converse 1964).

The third problem is the use of satisficing strategies (Krosnick 1991). Answering surveys can be a demanding task, and respondents may not be motivated to engage in the cognitive effort required to answer a question thoroughly. As a result, they may use a satisficing instead of an optimizing response strategy. This means that they make use of other, more easily accessible opinions as cues or heuristics to guide their response. Satisficing strategies are easier for respondents than their alternative, namely optimizing response strategies. They may be used particularly often (but not only) when respondents lack a stable attitude but nevertheless choose to provide a response. Three useful heuristics for issue-specific party competence are: party competence on other issues (Green and Jennings 2011a); the importance of the issue to the party and the position it takes; and party attachment in general (Rahn et al. 1994).

Identifying measurement issues of opinions on party competence is important for several reasons. First, party competence has become a key explanation of party success and failure, as noted...
above. As a result, we need to ensure that we measure these attitudes well. If voters fail to understand the relevant questions in the same way as researchers, if they lack stable attitudes and if they use satisficing strategies, then we need to be aware of these problems. This will also help researchers to improve questions on party competence in future surveys. Second, problems with the measurement of competence may also affect the validity of conclusions based on analyses that make use of these questions (Goerres and Prinzen forthcoming). For example, if answers to party competence questions are formulated based on general party affect, then we must be careful in claiming a unidirectional causal link from competence to vote choice (Johns 2010).

In this paper, we use the results from 20 cognitive interviews used to pre-test a series of competence questions for the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES). We use this information to study three key stages of the survey response process: comprehension, so what voters understand by the term ‘competence’; information retrieval, so which considerations respondents retrieve from their memory; and finally judgment, so how respondents combine these considerations to reach an overall evaluation (Tourangeau 1984, Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988, Tourangeau et al. 2009). We find that two problems are particularly prevalent: voters often do not have strong pre-formed attitudes on issue-specific party competence, and they make use of related concepts such as salience and position to provide an answer. In the conclusion, we suggest several ways of addressing these measurement issues in party competence questions.

This paper begins by discussing the concept of party competence and how questions on issue-specific competence have been asked in voter surveys. We then describe in detail the potential problems with measuring voters’ attitudes on competence. After presenting the cognitive

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1 As we discuss below, we do not use our cognitive interviews to examine the fourth stage, response.
interviewing method, we assess the results of our research and conclude with recommendations for researchers and survey designers.

The concept and measurement of issue-specific party competence

One way in which voters can assess parties is in relation to political issues such as the economy, law and order, the environment or immigration. On these issues, voters may ask how competent a party is or would be in dealing with them. In other words, voters may assess whether a party is able to deliver desired outcomes (Stokes 1963). Can it deal effectively with the issue and handle it well (Belluci 2006)? It is argued that voters will be more likely to endorse parties that they believe are competent at implementing their promises and at bringing about positive outcomes. They may also reward parties for past competence in dealing with key issues (Fiorina 1981). Overall, there is a clear conception in the academic literature of what is meant by issue-specific party competence: the party’s ability to deal effectively with a political issue or problem.

Voter opinions on issue-specific party competence are measured in similar ways in many academic surveys. In Table 1, we list the relevant questions from five recent English-language election studies: the 2009 American National Election Study (ANES); the 2010 British Election Study (BES), the 2008 Canadian Election Study (CES), the 2009 European Elections Study (EES) and the 2002-2007 Irish National Election Study (INES).

These surveys show that there are three main types of issue-specific competence questions. First, they can ask about past party performance. For example, the ANES asks whether respondents approve or disapprove of the way the federal government handled the war in Iraq, the war in

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2 Our paper focuses on issue-specific competence assessments of political parties. We do not consider overall competence assessments of political parties (e.g. Green and Jennings 2011a) or of candidates (e.g. Mondak 1995, Besley 2005). Such overall competence assessments measure voters’ summary judgements of parties or candidates.
Afghanistan and terrorism. The 2010 BES similarly asked voters to assess how well the Labour government had handled each of a series of issues including immigration, health care and the war in Afghanistan. Second, they can ask about hypothetical (or future) party competence. Some surveys thus ask respondents to say how well they think a government formed by the current opposition would handle or would have handled the issues. This is done in the BES, ANES, INES and CES surveys. Finally, respondents can be asked which party is generally most competent at dealing with an issue. An example is the popular question inquiring which party would be best at handling the issue or solving problem identified as the most important by the respondent; a version of this question is included in all five surveys studied.

However, there are also other ways in which voters are believed to assess parties relative to issues. In particular, the issue voting literature highlights two further types of assessments: position and salience. That is, voters can also connect a party to an issue by having some perception of the party’s position (Downs 1957, Grofman 1985, Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989, Kedar 2005) or by having some belief regarding how important the issue is to the party (RePass 1971, Budge and Farlie 1983, Krosnick 1988, Belanger and Meguid 2008). In terms of issues, voters are therefore generally seen as making up to three assessments: party position, party salience and party competence. As we will see, opinions on salience and position may influence how voters answer competence questions.

**Sources of error when asking about party competence**

Survey questions measuring issue-specific party competence can be seen as attempts to record a particular respondent attitude. Research into survey response has theorized that answering such attitude questions proceeds in four steps (Tourangeau 1984, Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988,
Tourangeau et al. 2009). First, respondents need to understand the question (comprehension) and thus locate the attitude addressed by the question. Then, they need to retrieve the information required to answer this question (retrieval). For attitude questions, the information needed includes various kinds of considerations, beliefs, feelings or impressions. Retrieval also means selection: the more accessible a consideration is, the more likely it is that it will be retrieved (Zaller and Feldman 1992). Next, respondents have to judge how to answer the question (judgment). In attitude questions, this refers to how considerations are combined in order to reach an overall conclusion. And finally, participants in the survey have to respond by assigning their answer to a value on a response scale (response).

In these four steps, there are at least three potential sources of error when measuring competence: differing understandings of the question; a lack of stable attitudes; and satisficing strategies. First, respondents may differ in what they understand by the words used in the question. Personal definitions of words such as ‘competence’, ‘good job’ and ‘handling an issue’ may vary across respondents. If this is the case, this introduces a measurement error into voter assessments of competence. This problem will primarily affect the first stage of the response process, comprehension.

Second, respondents may not have an unambiguous or strong attitude about the issue asked about, or they may even not have an attitude at all but nevertheless give an answer to the question. This is the well-known problem of the lack of stable attitudes among individuals (Converse 1964, Zaller and Feldman 1992, Fabrigar et al. 2005). As Zaller and Feldman (1992: 579) argue, ‘most people simply do not possess preformed attitudes at the level of specificity demanded in surveys.’ While some scholars argue that unstable attitudes are not in fact as predominant as claimed by

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3 Biemer and Lyberg (2003) argue that there are five stages, as they include record formation or encoding as the first step preceding comprehension.
Converse and Zaller and Feldman (e.g. Achen 1975), it is clear that many respondents have only weakly pre-formed opinions on at least some issues, and this may affect measurement at each stage of the response process. At the comprehension stage, the question would fail to address an existing attitude structure (Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988). At the retrieval stage, respondents may either not have any prior opinions to select from (Converse 1964) or have multiple and complex considerations on the issue (Zaller and Feldman 1992). In the former case, there is no information for respondents to retrieve, and they may be likely to use satisficing strategies (see below). In the latter case, the retrieval of information can become a random process, with final judgments then settling on a choice between or combination of these considerations. For example, Chong (1993) used cognitive interviews to show that, on the issue of civil liberties, people first gave top-of-the-head answers if they were not particularly familiar with the issue. However, they often changed their opinion after thinking about the question at greater length. If respondents only have a weak attitude or none at all, then survey measurement will become unstable (Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988). We do not expect issue-specific competence assessments to differ from other voter attitudes in their lack of stability: they require quite detailed knowledge and awareness of politics and ask respondents to provide a simple summary response on a broad topic. As a result, competence questions may create situations where we cannot be sure whether the responses people give actually reflect an opinion they truly hold.

The third problem arises from how respondents react to the fact that answering questionnaires can be a demanding task. According to Krosnick (1991), they engage in satisficing, which means that they simply give the first satisfactory answer they come up with. In other words, they choose to answer a question without taking the trouble of careful consideration and judgment. Their answer may not be optimal but still good enough to satisfy their norms. Satisficing may be especially attractive when voters lack stable attitudes, as the question will then be quite demanding
for survey participants. Many respondents may give a response instead of saying that they don’t know or have no opinion (Converse 1964). For example, Bishop et al. (1980) found that a third of respondents in one survey gave an opinion on a completely fictitious legislative act. However, satisficing is a strategy that is also attractive even when respondents have an attitude, but one that is not immediately accessible and would require cognitive effort to retrieve.

Particularly relevant to questions about party competence is that one satisficing strategy is to make use of other opinions to ease the response task. These other opinions can function as heuristics or information shortcuts that make the task of opinion formation and survey response less demanding (Tversky and Kahnemann 1974). Using heuristics can be a problem at two stages of the response process: at retrieval, because respondents may choose to sample information using heuristics rather than based on careful evaluation of the question, and at judgment, because respondents may choose heuristically derived answers rather than those based on competence itself. Three particular heuristics may be used by voters to provide an answer to competence questions: issue transfer, concept transfer and party affect.

Issue transfer occurs when respondents use a general evaluation of party competence as a cue to guide their opinion about specific party competence on other issues (Green and Jennings 2011a: 5). This general competence evaluation is based on the issues that are salient to voters or on which the party has a strong reputation. While voters are quite likely to have formed some general evaluation of party competence, they do not ‘possess information to evaluate government or potential party performance across [specific] areas of policy’ (Green and Jennings 2011a: 5-6). In answering questions about specific policy areas, voters may therefore make use of their more
general evaluation of party competence. The consequence of this will be that there is consistency across issues in how voters assess the competence of political parties.\footnote{The problem of issue transfer only applies to issue-specific assessments of party competence and not to general assessments.}

Voters may also make use of another heuristic in assessing issue competence: \textit{concept transfer}. This means that respondents use information from related but distinct concepts to provide an answer to a question. Studies in marketing show that consumers often use price as a heuristic or cue for the quality of the product (Leavitt 1954, Rao and Monroe 1989). This is not irrational, but reflects the belief that the laws of supply and demand would lead products to be priced according to their quality. Similarly, voters may make use of other concepts and indicators in order to formulate an opinion on competence.

One such heuristic may be issue importance. Parties differ in how much time they spend talking about an issue, and voters may think that a party will rationally decide to address topics more if it is competent on them. Such issue salience may also indicate whether a party is committed to the policy area and willing to put a lot of its resources into addressing it. In sum, salience can thus be a useful heuristic for voters if they wish to estimate party competence, so voter assessments of competence may actually reflect voter assessment of the salience of an issue to a party.

Another concept transfer heuristic may be party position. Ideally, positions would be a separate dimension of how parties can be evaluated relative to issues. However, parties’ positions are difficult to remove entirely from how they are assessed in terms of competence. This is because it is clearly possible to think about competence in terms of positions. For example, a voter may be asked which party would be best at handling the country’s economy. If that voter believes that what the economy really needs is another stimulus package, she may regard politicians and parties who instead advocate further cuts in spending as incompetent, even though the disagreement is at least
partly positional. Voters are unlikely to believe that parties advocating what they see as the ‘wrong’ solutions are competent actors.

A final heuristic voters may use as a satisficing strategy is party affect. Campbell et al. (1960) famously argued that partisanship acts as a ‘perceptual screen’ through which we perceive the world. At the very least, party attachment colors how we respond to survey questions (Rahn et al. 1994), though there is evidence that partisanship shapes our beliefs and actions even beyond the survey context (Gerber and Huber 2010). In other words, competence and vote preferences may be associated, but not because the former shapes the latter (Johns 2010: 156). Instead, our broader party preference may influence our beliefs about party competence or, more simply, how we answer competence questions. As a result, Johns (2011) stresses that it is always important to control tightly for partisan bias when assessing the influence of such assessments on vote choice.

**Method: cognitive interviewing**

We use information from cognitive interviews in order to examine these potential sources of error. Cognitive interviewing is one of many methods used in testing questionnaires in order to evaluate specific questions (Presser et al. 2004; Campanelli 2008). The usefulness of cognitive interviewing arises from its ability to shed light on the cognitive processes during survey response. Here, we are particularly interested in the first three stages of the response process, namely comprehension, information retrieval and judgment.

To document these stages, two methods are widely used in cognitive interviews: thinking aloud and verbal probing (Biemer and Lyberg 2003, Willis 2004, Willis 2005, Beatty and Willis 2007). Although there has been some debate regarding the relative merits of the think aloud and verbal probing techniques, it is now standard practice to combine both approaches (Beatty and Willis 2007). The think aloud technique encourages respondents to verbalize their thoughts, so they
are asked to say out loud whatever they are thinking of while trying to find an answer to a question. In contrast, verbal probing relies on explicitly formulated additional questions that aim at gaining more insight into the respondent’s thought processes. For example, a respondent may be asked why she gave a particular answer or what she takes certain words in the question to mean. The think aloud technique has been found to be particularly useful in understanding the process of information retrieval, while it is better to use verbal probing to gather information on comprehension (Willis 2004). This is why we used both the think aloud and the verbal probing techniques in our cognitive interviews. Specifically, we asked respondents to think aloud before providing their response to the questions and then used additional, verbal probing questions after the respondent answered the survey question to gain more information about the thought processes underlying the response.

In these interviews, we asked four groups of questions about issue-specific competence. The questions asked concern past, hypothetical and general issue-specific performance (see Table 1). We present the questions we tested in Table 2. We asked the standard question on which party would be best at handling the issue that the respondent identified as being the most important. We also asked three further questions about party competence on two specific issues, immigration and education. For each topic, we asked which party is the most and which is least competent (general issue-specific competence); which party did the best and which did the worst job since the last election (past performance); and which party is likely to do the best job in the coming years and which is likely to do the worst (future/hypothetical performance). We chose immigration and education because they differ in their general salience to Austrians and in their prominence in the media. Immigration is of very high salience in Austrian politics, as evidenced by the large share of the vote that is won by radical-right parties, while education is moderately salient, with topics such as school and university reform regularly making headlines.

Table 2 about here
We carried out 20 cognitive interviews between July and September 2011. The cognitive interviews were carried out in order to test survey questions for the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) 2013. Since many questions required pre-testing through cognitive interviews, we split the questions into two pre-test questionnaires so as to keep the length of the cognitive interviews to a manageable length of less than one hour. As a result, we have 10 respondents for question 1 and another 10 for questions 2 to 4. Since interviewees were not sampled but recruited, we cannot claim representativity. Nevertheless, we were careful to recruit people from all over Austria, targeting in particular people with lower levels of education and a low interest in politics, as these are the ones who are more likely to have unstable attitudes (Zaller and Feldman 1992) or use satisficing strategies (Krosnick 1991). Recruiting strategies included announcements in supermarkets and job centers as well as contacting target persons within our own social networks. Our final set of interviewees is made up of 13 women and 7 men, aged between 17 and 76, of different educational and social backgrounds. Table 3 presents basic information on the interviewees. Interviewees were given 20 Euro for the interview. It is important to note that our findings cannot tell us anything about responses to party competence questions in general (Goerres and Prinzen forthcoming). While any problems we uncover may apply only to a small number of people, they are equally likely to apply to a large proportion of potential respondents. When they are not based on representative samples, cognitive interviews mainly tell us whether and what kinds of problems arise during survey response.

In the beginning of the interview, respondents were ‘trained’ to use the think aloud technique. They were asked to describe what they were thinking when asked ‘How many windows does your flat or house have?’, which is similar to the cognitive pre-test-procedure used for the ANES 2006 (DeBell et al. 2009). All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, and the resulting text is the data for our analysis. All translations were carried out by the researchers.
The analysis was carried out by the authors. In doing so, we collected responses that were relevant the following questions.

- **Comprehension:** How are the terms used understood (handling an issue, a party being competent, a party doing a good or a bad job)?\(^5\) Do they mean to respondents that parties have the ‘ability to deliver results’? If not, what do they take the terms to mean?

- **Lack of stable attitudes:** Are there signs of unstable or weak attitudes, such as admitting a lack of knowledge or struggling to provide an answer?

- **Satisficing strategies:**
  - **Issue transfer:** When assigning competence to a party on an issue, does the respondent talk about other issues or about the party’s general competence?
  - **Concept transfer:** In giving an answer, does the respondent refer to concepts such as salience or position?
  - **Party affect:** Does the respondent refer to a general disposition towards the party?

When respondents mixed competence with related concepts such as salience or position, it is not always straightforward to decide whether this was due to a different comprehension of competence or a satisficing strategy. We addressed this as follows in the analysis: (1) we interpreted references to salience and position as indicators of problems in comprehension if they occurred when respondents were specifically asked for their comprehension of the key terms; (2) we interpreted references to salience and position as indicators of concept transfer when respondents used such references when explaining why they had chosen a specific party, in particular if they had provided a valid definition of the concept before.

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\(^5\) We included specific probings for all three terms.
Results

In the following, we present the results for the three potential problems, comprehension, a lack of stable attitudes and satisficing strategies. For each problem, we report our findings for the various question wordings we used.

Comprehension

First, we use our interviews, and in particular the verbal probings, in order to assess how respondents understand the concepts of ‘competence’, ‘handling an issue’ and ‘doing a good/bad job’. To do so, we show how respondents replied to our verbal probings that asked what they take the terms to mean.

Many interviewees connect competence and handling an issue with relevant characteristics such knowledge and ability. Both terms then mean that a party is generally an expert on the specific topic. Some examples are as follows:

RB4: Competent means for me to have actual knowledge, well-founded knowledge. That means knowing statistics and having personal experience with the issue and not just via newspaper articles […].

RB6: Competence means I have some knowledge and some ability […].

RB7: If I am competent this means that I have the ability to achieve something, to work on it, to talk about it.

RB10: Well, the people, those responsible know what they’re talking about, perhaps they are from the sector they represent – which doesn’t mean that only someone who was a teacher could be a good education minister, for example.

RA2: To handle an issue, to me, means to concern oneself with it.

RA8: To handle an issue, to me, means to collect all possible information, background knowledge, and to respect the position of others.
Beyond knowledge and expertise, respondents also link competence to realism and pragmatism. Parties are seen as competent when they set realistically achievable goals that can actually be implemented, and they are incompetent when they make promises that they know will be impossible to realize. Here are some examples from respondents:

RA7: To handle it? Yes, to handle it: that they really take care of things and not only talk, that they really do something that will be implemented. That they don’t just promise things before the election, but that it is actually implemented.

RA9: [To handle an issue means] that to come to a result you cooperate no matter which party you belong to, and that you come to a result.

RB8: Please: From the FPÖ there is no statement that has any relationship with reality on any topic, no matter which one – except for ‘foreigners out’, that’s their only slogan.

RB9: [The FPÖ is least competent on immigration] because the party does not offer or aim for any realistic solutions.

This realism and pragmatism is often akin to a dispassionate, objective analysis of the situation, as in this response given by interviewee number 9.

RB9: Competent means for me: [The party] has a clear analysis of the current situation and how it should be, and a clearly formulated decision on what to do. [The SPÖ is most competent on education] because the party wants to renew our education system and make it fit for the present age.

Knowledge, realism and dispassionate analysis are all conceptually close to competence. In a general sense, we have evidence that these respondents do have a good understanding of what competence means and what a competent party would look like. In particular, when we asked for which party was doing the best job for a specific issue, respondents’ comprehension of ‘a party doing a good job’ was very close to the theoretical concept.

However, some respondents confuse ‘competence’ with salience:

RB2: Well, [competent on immigration means for me] that they campaign the most on it, that they work hard for immigrants.
RB6: [I think], that the Greens for example deal with it most frequently and thus are most competent.

This confusion was most obvious when we used the word ‘competent’ but hardly occurred when respondents were asked about handling an issue or doing a good/bad job.

However, there are also different understandings of competence that do not correspond with the concept of issue competence. Some respondents thus link ‘handling an issue’ to electoral success.

RA1: [to handle an issue means] that the party is able to take the chance to win voters here. RA5: To handle an issue, in principle, means how you sell yourself in the end. [...] on election day, that the votes are there again.

To sum up, although many respondents have an understanding of competence that is at least similar to the theoretical concept, some clearly confuse the concept with that of salience, while some have a completely different understanding of competence. The problem seems least prevalent with the wording ‘which party is doing a good/bad job’.

Lack of stable attitudes

However, there is strong evidence in our interviews that respondents do not have a clear opinion on which party is actually the most or least competent on each issue. In other words, unstable and weak attitudes appear to be an important problem in how voters respond to issue-specific competence questions. Here are some examples where respondents freely owned up to having little knowledge of the matter:

RA9: [On which party is best at handling the most important issue:] I can’t say that right now at all.

The same respondent defines competence differently at another place of the interview, as “trying somehow to change things through initiatives”.
RB1: [On the best job on education:] Since the national parliamentary election? Well, now you can…that’s very difficult. It’s…I feel not much has changed.

RB3: I don’t really have much of an idea, but I think that is right given what little I read in the newspaper.

RB5: I haven’t paid enough attention recently [to answer that].

RB8: Well there I have to go through all the parties and look at education…and I can only answer it in relation to what I hear subjectively in the media and because I don’t know the party program. … So when I say competent, then it’s their impression on me, that they leave a positive impression.

Some responses also indicate that respondents do not simply see one party as the most competent. Instead, their attitudes are more complex, and they may see several parties as relatively competent at dealing with an issue. Such responses also reveal that interviewees do not have strong preformed opinions on the topic.

RA2: I would say the SPÖ and the ÖVP.
Interviewer: Ok, and if you were only able to give one party?
RA2: Then I would probably say the SPÖ.

RA6: I don’t think it can be just one party, but I would say the ÖVP – on the economy. So definitely the ÖVP, maybe together with the FPÖ, but yes.

Interviewer: And when you think back to the time since the last national parliamentary election in 2008, which party has done the best job on education?
RB3: The SPÖ and the ÖVP, or should I just name one.
Interviewer: Yes, just one.
RB3: The ÖVP.
Interviewer: Why?
RB3: I’m not sure exactly, but I can only remember, that I praised them sometime because of education. This is a bit embarrassing for me now. I really can’t remember right now, but I think that’s still the best answer.

RB3: The Greens or the BZÖ? I don’t know now.
Interviewer: From your point of view. There is no right or wrong answer.
RB3: Yes, yes. So let’s say the BZÖ.
RB7: [On immigration competence:] I think that the two coalition partners, so the SPÖ and the ÖVP, I think that they can hopefully find a very good solution and – the most competent, I think I can’t choose just one…
Interviewer: And if you had to choose just one.
RB7: Just one…I don’t know.

A lack of stable attitudes was most clear on all questions on competence on education and on the question of who is most competent on immigration. In contrast, a lot of respondents were quick to find an answer for the question of who is least competent on immigration: five of our ten respondents picked the radical-right FPÖ, and did so without much hesitation. Another three chose the Greens, again with little time needed to reflect on the answer. To us, this indicates that answering competence questions is easier on highly salient topics where there is strong polarization between parties. This matches Chong’s (1993: 897) finding that ‘top-of-the-head answers can be highly reliable if they pertain to commonly discussed subjects with established frames of reference’. 7 Interestingly, the strong polarization did not generally make it easier for respondents to say which party was most competent on immigration.

Furthermore, respondents had a hard time assessing the competence of opposition parties. They almost exclusively concentrated on the two government parties (SPÖ and ÖVP) when asked which parties had done the best job since the last election. In other words, the range of parties that respondents instinctively consider may be quite narrow. To the extent that voters have opinions about competence, these may limit themselves to the larger and/or governing parties.

RB3: I can take the SPÖ or the ÖVP…since the last election?
Interviewer: Yes.
RB3: Yes, SPÖ I think. SPÖ.

7 However, it is worth noting that even in the case of immigration respondents strongly mixed pure competence evaluation with their positional and salience assessments of the parties (see below).
RB7: …the SPÖ is more for staying down if you get a 5 [i.e. low grades], from what I have heard and I don’t think that’s so good, so that means I would take the ÖVP then.

RB8: I can’t think of anything related to the Greens or the FPÖ and education. I only know that I am not satisfied with the ÖVP’s education policy.

RB10: I don’t know.
Interviewer: May I ask why you would say that you don’t know?
RB10: So, I know that the SPÖ is doing something or what the [SPÖ] education minister says, which I don’t like. But I don’t know what the other parties say about it – I just don’t know. It doesn’t get communicated either – it doesn’t have to, either. I just don’t know.

Respondents had an easier time assessing opposition parties when it came to the more salient of our two topics, immigration: the FPÖ and the Greens were often seen as the least competent on this issue (see above), so clearly opposition parties quite readily came to mind on this topic.

Satisficing strategies

We suggested that respondents, especially when they have weakly preformed attitudes, might pursue three potential satisficing strategies: issue transfer, concept transfer and party affect.

In our interviews, we found no evidence of issue transfer. Respondents did not explicitly refer to other issue areas in explaining and justifying their answer. They also did not tend to drift off into the discussion of other topics when doing so. Of course, we cannot exclude that respondents unknowingly transfer competence assessments between issues, but at least this is not a strategy that our interviewees appeared to engage in consciously.

In contrast, the evidence for concept transfer is very strong. Many interviews clearly show that respondents assess competence in ways that mix relevant characteristics with less clearly related concepts such as salience and position. Some examples on salience are as follows:

RB4: Because [the Greens] just campaign the most on it. So on asylum matters…it was a lot mainly from the Greens. They advertised a lot and invested a lot of time.
RB7\textsuperscript{8}: The FPÖ [is the least competent on education] I think, because somehow I think they’re not interested in it at all.

RA10: I think, [the SPÖ] have a stronger commitment than the ÖVP. I do not know about the other parties, because you do not hear a lot from them.

Importantly, all three respondents cited above had a valid comprehension of competence, that is, they defined it as having the status of an expert in terms of ability or knowledge. Here, we thus arguably have particularly strong evidence that the use of salience is not a matter of comprehension but of satisficing.

Some respondents also referred to positions, though this occurred less frequently. Again, we limit ourselves to those who gave a valid definition of competence:

RB4: … I got this flyer and I read it carefully and I liked a lot what [the Greens] were offering there and what they were campaigning for. … So I thought of the Greens, because that’s the last think that stuck in my mind.

RB8: Well, the Greens always combine the issue [of immigration] with the economy, and that approach really appeals to me.

Respondents thus often argue that a party is particularly competent or did a good job if that party was very visible on the topic or campaigned on it. They also on occasion linked competence with making good, realistic suggestions that seem like the right solutions. Such statements have clear policy content as well. Overall, then, respondent assessments of competence are often based on more than just expertise and the ability to get things done. ‘Concept transfer’ occurs regularly in assessments of competence.

Finally, there are some occasions where party affect influenced responses. For example, one respondent showed evidence of negative affect when judging the FPÖ’s competence:

\textsuperscript{8} RB7 also gives some answers that indicate non-attitudes, see above.
RB10: The FPÖ [is least competent on education] – but you can put that as my answer for everything, that party isn’t competent on anything.

Another way in which party affect influenced responses was when interviewees framed their answers in reaction to their general party identification.

RA9: I can’t say [which party is best at dealing with the Euro crisis]. I am very disappointed by the ÖVP. I am actually an ÖVP voter since I can remember. I was a convinced ÖVP voter. But for ten years I am no longer that, but just out of habit.

Interviewer: And why would you say that [the SPÖ is the most competent party on immigration]?
RB9: The SPÖ? Now, not just because I just declared: I am a Social Democrat.

Like issue transfer, the influence of party affect may be difficult to detect since respondents are unlikely to acknowledge openly that their partisan leanings influence their answers. Moreover, respondents need not necessarily be aware of this influence in the first place. Nevertheless, these comments by our interviewees do show that party affect can shape how people assess issue-specific competence.

Conclusions and recommendations

Our cognitive interviews show that there is strong evidence that responses to issue-specific party competence questions suffer from two problems: a lack of stable attitudes and concept transfer. We see our findings concerning comprehension as largely encouraging, as respondents made use of clearly related terms and concepts in defining competence, although there are also examples where respondents confused competence and salience or when they appeared not to understand the term ‘competence’ at all.

Concerning the lack of stable attitudes, our core finding is that voters often only have weak prior opinions on the competence of particular parties on specific policy fields. This may happen in
particular when information is harder for voters to acquire, for example on opposition parties or on less salient issues (such as education in our interviews). As a result, respondents may give a response to a question, but not one that reflects previously held opinions. The problem of the lack of stable attitudes is therefore likely to be significant on competence questions.

Turning to concept transfer, we saw that respondents frequently use concepts distinct from competence, above all salience, but also position, to answer questions. Many respondents appeared to deduce competence from the amount of time a party talks about a topic and how much it advertises these elements of its program. This may be a rational strategy: if voters expect parties to concentrate on topics that they are competent on, then salience can be used as a useful proxy for competence. Yet it is perhaps worrisome if measures of competence largely reflect perceptions of another issue characteristic, namely salience or position.

Based on our findings, we have four specific recommendations for researchers who want to measure and analyses voter assessments of party competence and performance. First, the concept should be expressed in terms that respondents are likely to understand. In our cognitive interviews, respondents appeared to understand ‘doing a good/bad job’ best. Which formulation is easiest may of course differ on the language of the survey.

Second, it is important to be aware that respondents have a tendency to mix salience, position and competence in their assessments of political parties relative to issue areas. Ideally, then, surveys aimed at measuring the influence of competence assessments should include issue-specific questions not just on competence, but also on salience and position. If we know which party voters believe addresses the issue most and which party is closest to their own opinions, we can employ these measures as statistical controls in order to provide stringent tests for the effect of competence assessments.
Third, survey designers should think about asking follow-up questions about voters’ competence assessments. As we saw in the cognitive interviews, respondents are particularly likely to have only weak prior opinions and knowledge on issues they know little about. It would be useful to record this in the survey itself. For instance, it may be possible to ask respondents how certain they are about their assessment or how important that policy area is to them (Fabrigar et al. 2005: 26). We can use these additional measures as a guide to the likely accuracy of voter responses. Another possible option is to give respondents the explicit option to say that they do not know or have no opinion regarding party competence on an issue. In general, it is probably best if researchers confine questions to those areas that are generally of relatively high importance, for example in terms of media coverage.

Finally, we found that voters sometimes believe that more than one party is most competent on an issue. It would therefore make sense to allow for multiple responses on competence questions. Indeed, if there is space in the survey, a valid approach would also be to ask respondents separately how competent they believe each party to be.

While we found convincing evidence of concept transfer and a lack of stable attitudes in our interviews, the problems of issue transfer and party affect appeared less frequently. However, we would not want to conclude that these problems are not important as well. It may be that the use of other issues and overall party assessments as heuristics is not revealed by respondents, even in detailed interviews. Indeed, respondents need not actively be aware that they are using such cognitive shortcuts. Other research methods, for example panel studies of opinion change, might provide better insight into the relevance of issue transfer and partisan rationalization in issue-specific competence assessments.

Our paper has focused on issue-specific competence assessments of political parties. Some researchers instead use general assessments of party competence. Such summary judgments may be
more plausible ways of thinking of how voters make use of competence assessments in their voting decisions (Johns 2010, Green and Jennings 2011a). While such questions may suffer from fewer measurement problems than issue-specific assessments, it would nevertheless be worth investigating whether voters have stronger prior judgments concerning overall party competence and whether and how satisficing strategies are used to provide such judgments in a survey context.

Finally, our findings do not mean that competence is not an important factor in explaining electoral choices. However, our interviews do show that researchers need to be careful when interpreting these questions, and that care needs to be taken when designing and analyzing surveys that aim to measure party competence.
References


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of issue-specific competence questions (with examples)</th>
<th>Surveys: ANES, BES, EES, INES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past performance</strong></td>
<td>Example (BES): How well do you think the <em>present government</em> has handled Britain’s education system?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Example (EES): And, do you think British government policies have had a positive influence, a positive/ negative/no influence on the standard of health care in Britain?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Future or hypothetical performance</strong></td>
<td>Example (CES): Which party would be best at protecting the environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Example (BES): How well do you think a <em>Conservative government</em> would handle immigration?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Example (ANES): Which party do you think would do a better job of handling the nation’s economy…the Democrats, the Republicans, or wouldn’t there be much difference between them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall competence</strong></td>
<td>Example (ANES): Thinking of the most important political problem facing the United States: which party do you think is best in dealing with it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question asked</td>
<td>Verbal probing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Which party is best at handling the issue [most important issue given by respondent in previous question]?</td>
<td>What do you understand by “handling an issue best”?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2 Introduction: Independently of whether you agree with a party’s position or not, how competent are the parties in handling an issue? | A. What do you understand by a party being “competent”?  
B. Why did you choose party [X] as the most competent party?  
C. Why did you choose party [Y] as the least competent party? | B             |
| 3 Introduction: Thinking of the time since the last federal election,         | A. What do you understand by a party “doing a good or bad job”?  
B. Why did you choose party [X] as having done the best job?  
C. Why did you choose party [Y] as having done the worst job? | B             |
| 4 Introduction: And thinking of the coming years,                            |                                                                                  | B             |
Table 3: Participants in the cognitive interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Region</th>
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<tr>
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<td>male</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>sports coach</td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<td>38</td>
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<td>A3</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>A4</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Tyrol</td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>A5</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Tyrol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>A6</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
<td>Tyrol</td>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>female</td>
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<td>waitress</td>
<td>Salzburg (region)</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<tr>
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<td>76</td>
<td>retired</td>
<td>Vienna</td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<td>female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Vienna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>ca. 45</td>
<td>concierge/cleaner</td>
<td>Vienna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>high school student</td>
<td>Vienna</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
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<td>female</td>
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<td>retired</td>
<td>Lower Austria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>B4</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>student</td>
<td>Vienna</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
<td>Tyrol</td>
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<td>Tyrol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
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<td>female</td>
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<tr>
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<td>B9</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>medical doctor</td>
<td>Vienna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>B10</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>retired</td>
<td>Vienna</td>
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