Party Polarization and the Balance Between Ideology and Evaluation in Europe

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Two sides of political representation:

1. Ideological congruence
   - Ideological similarity between citizens and governing elites.
   - It refers to the direction of the public policy-making.

2. Competence
   - Ability of the elected representatives to reach their policy goals.
   - It expects voters to judge parties based on their performance to deliver.
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A trade-off between the two?

- Ideology becomes salient when candidates’ positions diverge.
- Depending on who is elected, the policy outcome will vary.
- Citizens try to influence public policy by voting for the party that is closer to their preferences.
- Positional approach.

- Competence becomes salient when there is consensus about the direction to be taken.
- Given some widely-shared policy goals (e.g. low unemployment, low corruption), citizens vote for who is better able to handle the issue.
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The role of party polarization

- Polarization refers to the divergence between parties’ ideological positions.
- It tells something about the level of ideological conflict in a certain country.
- When parties are polarized, people are better able to link their policy preferences to parties’ positions.
- In fact, higher party polarization is associated with more ideological or policy voting.
- (see Alvarez Nagler 2004; van der Eijk et al. 2005; Lachat 2008).
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Ideological convergence as a necessary condition for competence voting?

Two pieces of evidence (plus one):

- UK evidence shows that parties depolarization corresponds to less ideological voting and more competence voting (Green & Hobolt 2008).
- Cross-country evidence shows that this is not necessarily the case (Pardos-Prado 2012).
- Other UK evidence shows that policy proximity has a positive influence on valence judgments (Sanders et al. 2011).
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A visual summary

Policy / Ideology → Polarization → Party Preference

Policy / Ideology → + Competence → +/− Competence

Polarization → + Party Preference

Competence → + Party Preference
The puzzle

- Does party polarization depress or increase competence voting?
We may have forgotten something here

Party polarization is not only about ideological voting

- US and European literature suggests that higher polarization is associated with increased mass *partisanship* (Hetherington 2001; Schmitt & Holmberg 1995).
- Higher polarization implies bigger emphasis on the *differences* between parties.
- This should clarify party identities, and make the cues that they provide more relevant.
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How does this relate to competence and ideology?

- Citizens are represented *through* and *by* parties (Sartori 1968).
- Party cues can influence citizens’ perceptions of the ideological alternatives, as well as of competence.

**The substantive political content of partisanship**

“It should be related, preferably strongly related, to such political factors as the ideological closeness of voters to the parties and their evaluation of the policies of parties on specific issues.” (Schmitt & Holmberg 1995)
Some hypotheses

1. Party polarization should increase the probability that citizens feel attached to a certain party-level.

2. Party polarization should increase the substantive content of partisanship, by strengthening its links with ideological congruence and competence.
Empirical test

- Pooled dataset of EES studies from 1994 to 2009.
- 78 elections
- Parties’ and voters’ ideological positions are observed using the left-right scale.
- Partisanship as a dummy: either R feels close to a party or not.
Ideological Polarization

\[ Pol = \sum_{i=1}^{n} |\bar{x} - x_i| \ast w_i \]  

(1)

Where:
\( \bar{x} \) = Ideological center of the party system;
\( x_i \) = Ideological position of party \( i \);
\( w_i \) = Size weight of party \( i \)
Multilevel model of individual partisanship

Polarization and Partisanship

Predicted Probability to be partisan

Low  Mean  High

Polarization
Ideological perceptions of partisans

Is the ID party the (objectively) ideologically closest?

Predicted Probability

Low Mean High

Polarization
Competence perceptions of partisans

Is the ID party the most competent?

Predicted Probability

Low Mean High

Polarization
Ideology, Competence and Party Polarization

Is the most competent party the (objectively) ideologically closest?

![Graph showing predicted probability with different levels of polarization for partisans and non-partisans](image-url)
Conclusions

1. Research on the effects of party arrangement on competence voting overlooked the role of partisanship and its connection to the level of polarization.

2. Ideological proximity and competence attribution may be two sides of the same coin.

3. As higher polarization makes parties more relevant, citizens will be:
   - More likely to feel a partisan attachment.
   - More likely to see their preferred party as better able to deal with salient issues.
   - More likely to be ideologically similar to their preferred party.

4. Concerning these research topics, we need to bring partisanship back in.
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Thank you for your attention