

“Where You Lead, I Will Follow”:
Partisan Cueing on High Salience Issues

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The ability of parties to not only reflect, but actually shape, citizens’ preferences on policy issues has been long debated, as it corresponds to a fundamental prediction of classic party identification theory. While most research draws on data from the United States and/or studies of low salience issues, we exploit the unique opportunity presented by the 2013 Italian election, with the four major parties of a clear multiparty setting holding distinct positions on crucial issues of the campaign. Based on an experimental design, we test the impact of party cues on citizens’ preferences on high salience issues.

¹ Authors are listed in alphabetical order by last name. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2013 European University Institute (EUI) Dissemination Conference: *Elections in Europe in Times of Crisis*. The authors wish to thank the anonymous reviewers, along with all the panelists and discussants for their precious feedback. Also, a special thank you goes to Nicola Maggini for his contribution to the formulation of the experimental questionnaire items.

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The results are surprising: despite a party system in flux (with relevant new parties) and a weakening of traditional party identities, we find large, significant partisan cueing effects in all the three experimental issues, and for voters of all the major Italian parties – both old and new, governmental and opposition, ideologically clear or ambiguous.

Keywords:

partisanship, party identification, experiments, experimental methods, survey experiments, Italy

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Abstract:

The ability of parties to not only reflect, but actually shape, citizens' preferences on policy issues has been long debated, as it corresponds to a fundamental prediction of classic party identification theory. While most research draws on data from the United States or studies of low salience issues, we exploit the unique opportunity presented by the 2013 Italian election, with the four major parties of a clear multiparty setting holding distinct positions on crucial issues of the campaign. Based on an experimental design, we test the impact of party cues on citizens' preferences on high salience issues. The results are surprising: despite a party system in flux (with relevant new parties) and a weakening of traditional party identities, we find large, significant partisan cueing effects in all the three experimental issues, and for voters of all the major Italian parties – both old and new, governmental and opposition, ideologically clear or ambiguous.

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1. Introduction

By taking positions on matters of policy, political parties provide information that helps voters choose a party whose priorities and goals fit well with their own preferences. However, party position-taking can also shape the policy preferences voters themselves adopt. Scholars have long asserted that when parties take a position, their partisan followers bring their preferences into line with the party (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Przeworski & Sprague, 1986). But even in the absence of a clearly preferred party, learning party positions on issues may make it less complicated for citizens to identify a position with which they feel comfortable.

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Experimental studies over the past two decades have provided numerous empirical demonstrations that party endorsements do indeed strongly influence the policy opinions of citizens in the United States (Berinsky, 2009; Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2013; Coan, Merolla, Stephenson, & Zechmeister, 2008; Cohen, 2003; Druckman, 2001; Kam, 2005; Lenz, 2012).² Such strong effects are, perhaps, to be expected in the U.S., however, recently, results across several party systems have shown party cueing effects that are more-or-less comparable to those in the U.S., though the effects appear more variable and weaker on average (Samuels and Zucco 2014; Brader and Tucker 2012a; Petersen et al. 2012; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Merolla, Stephenson, and Zechmeister 2007; 2008; Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007).

Still, research performed so far still presents limitations to a potential generalization of findings. While there is good variation on the ages of both democracy and the party system, these two dimensions are highly correlated among the set of countries in which previous studies have been conducted. So far research has dealt with either old and stable party systems – e.g. U.S., U.K., Netherlands, Denmark, Canada (Brader & Tucker, 2012a; Merolla et al., 2008; Petersen et al., 2012; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007) – or young and unstable party systems – Brazil, Mexico, Hungary, Poland, Russia (Brader & Tucker, 2009, 2012a; Brader, Tucker, & Ryan, 2013; Merolla et al., 2007; Samuels & Zucco, 2014). As a result, one “hole” in the coverage of political systems to date is a lack of countries that have experienced many decades of democratic party competition but where there is considerable instability in the party system. This hole appears particularly relevant in current times, in which a relevant increase in party system instability is characterizing established Western democracies (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017). As we shall see, our investigation of the Italian case provides fruitful insights on party cueing dynamics in this kind of political systems.

Moreover, recent studies have measured party cueing effects on a wide range of policies; however, most tests outside the U.S. have focused on issues of low salience (Samuels and Zucco 2014; Brader and Tucker 2012a; Petersen et al. 2012; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Merolla, Stephenson, and Zechmeister 2007; 2008; Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007). While understandable for methodological reasons, this may limit our understanding in three ways. First, it makes a full comparison with many studies of partisan cueing in the U.S. more difficult. Second,

² We are concerned here with a simple, direct form of opinion leadership, where merely by espousing (or associating themselves with) a point of view political parties can influence the policy opinions of citizens, irrespective of providing citizens persuasive arguments or effective frames that might justify the point of view. For this reason, our discussion of the prior research literature focuses predominantly on experimental studies that have isolated party cues from these sorts of factors.

one might suspect that it is easier to move citizens' opinions on low salience issues than on high salience issues, thus suggesting that existing studies represent a ceiling on partisan cueing effects. Third, because we may find value in using partisan cueing effects to measure the strength of partisanship comparatively, an over-emphasis on less salient issues may leave us longing for insight into how partisanship shapes opinions on more politically relevant issues.

To address these gaps in the experimental literature on party cues, we exploit a rather unusual opportunity afforded by the 2013 Italian parliamentary election. The election featured a constellation of political parties, issues and party positions that were well-suited to testing the effect of party cues on high salience issues—specifically, electoral reform, tax reform, and gay marriage—all of which featured in the campaign and on which the four most popular parties/electoral coalitions held distinct positions (Di Virgilio & Giannetti, 2014).

Italy is also an interesting case because its democracy is now many decades old but has experienced radical transformations in its party system over the past two decades, especially in recent years (D'Alimonte, Grofman, & De Sio, 2012), a combination that, as we have noted above, constitutes a gap in the existing partisan cueing literature. Moreover, the 2013 election featured two completely new parties that ended up receiving more than 30% of the vote.³ As a consequence, the Italian case presents an interesting mix of parties with respect to their age. This fact crucially resonates with a fundamental element of party identification theory, i.e. the importance of time (and of the presence of a stable party context) for the development of enduring party attachments which would justify strong partisan cueing effects (Converse, 1969). The rise and fall of particular parties, along with shifting coalitions and labels, may have implications for our theoretical understanding of both parties as cue-givers and citizens as cue-followers. Even more, in light of recent scholarly contributions that have highlighted the role of repeated vote choice for the formation of firm partisan identities (Dinas, 2014), the presence of two relevant parties running in their first general election qualifies the Italian election of 2013 as an extremely unlikely case both for strong party cueing effects and for clear effects of partisanship, especially on issues that were highly salient during the election.⁴

Despite such expectations, a survey experiment conducted in Italy in 2013 reveals clear and substantial cueing effects across all three highly salient issues, and across all four parties examined,

³ One of them, the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), received the most votes of any single party, marking the largest electoral success of a new party in Western Europe (in a non-founding election) since WWII.

⁴ For more information on the 2013 Italian elections, see Appendix E, which provides a much more detailed description of the parties, issues, and electoral campaign.

which includes both new and old parties. Closer analysis indicates that party identification modulates responsiveness to party cues, but only for a single issue. In all, the results suggest that Italians are attracted to and follow the lead of parties on policy matters. These findings encourage a more nuanced interpretation of the aforementioned theoretical expectations regarding the widespread presumptions about the greater immutability of positions on high salience issues.

2. Prior Research on Partisanship and Partisan Cue Taking

Few concepts have had such an importance in the study of voting as party identification (Campbell et al., 1960). It revolves around the idea that individuals develop a psychological attachment towards a political party, either through the family environment or through key experiences during the socialization process. Despite the emergence of structural changes in the patterns of partisanship (Dalton, 1984), party identification retains a central role in the study of voting and political attitudes in the U.S. (Bartels, 2000, 2002; Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, & Weisberg, 2008), and is still considered one of the driving forces of voting behavior in multi-party systems (Bartle & Bellucci, 2009).

The U.S. is a well-studied single case, often held out to be rather “exceptional” due to some combination of its political institutions, culture, and stability. Do citizens look as readily to parties for guidance on policy opinions in multi-party systems where voters are presented with a less frequent, more direct, and longer menu of party choices? What about in party systems where there is greater electoral volatility or less stability in the party system itself? We might expect citizens in multi-party settings to rely on their own issue and ideological bearings rather than on long-term habits of partisanship. When parties are new or their coalitions are in flux, they may lack a clear reputation and the trust required to lead voters on matters of policy. Alternatively, in such environments, citizens may still lean on parties to simplify decision-making amid myriad choices and greater political uncertainty. However, the bases for such partisan leaning might be considered weaker and perhaps of a different nature, lacking the necessary time (Converse, 1969) and repeated vote choice (Dinas, 2014) which have previously been posited as required conditions for the development of firm partisan identities.

Indeed, the process of adapting the Michigan School conceptual apparatus to multi-party systems was far from uncontroversial. Many scholars have raised the question of whether strong partisanship is more of an American than European phenomenon, where ideology is posited to be a much stronger organizing principle for citizens, especially after the decline of mass parties (Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, & Tanenbaum, 2001; Fuchs & Klingemann, 1990; Gunther & This article is protected by copyright. All rights reserved

Montero, 2001; Knutsen, 1990, 1995). Some have even suggested that ideology might act—in Western Europe—as a possible functional equivalent to party identification (Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976; Lancaster & Lewis-Beck, 1986; Lewis-Beck, 1983; Percheron & Jennings, 1981). Furthermore, the presence of measurement problems lead to alternative question wordings (Johnston, 2006), which allowed large-scale survey efforts to much easier study partisanship in a broad comparative context (Huber, Kernell, & Leoni, 2005; Kedar, 2005), but this in turn raises questions about the extent to which self-reported measures of partisan closeness accurately convey the power party identification wields over the behavior of citizens (Thomassen, 1976).

In recent years, scholars have tried to overcome the problem of measuring the effects of party identification in different contexts by adopting experimental designs containing party cues. The experiments manipulate the presence of party cues while asking people about their positions on issues. Respondents in control groups typically receive standard policy questions, while respondents in the treatment group learn which positions are being endorsed by one or more political parties. In the U.S., such studies show that voters indeed are responsive to party cues on a wide range of issues—low or high salience, simple or complex (Berinsky, 2009; Bolsen et al., 2013; Coan et al., 2008; Cohen, 2003; Druckman, 2001; Kam, 2005; Lupia, 1994). The results are nonetheless far from uniform. Party endorsements tend to be more influential when they run contrary to the stereotypical image or ideology of the party (Bergan, 2012; Nicholson, 2011), while they are often less influential when citizens are provided with additional substantive information and arguments about the policy (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014; Bullock, 2011).

More recently, the potential of this methodology has been exploited in multi-party systems as well, although to date the number of all such studies combined is roughly equal to those carried out in the U.S. Nevertheless, several interesting patterns have emerged. First, contrary to claims that partisanship may be a peculiarly American phenomenon, there is clear evidence of opinion leadership by parties in the well-established multi-party systems of Denmark, Great Britain, and the Netherlands (Petersen et al., 2012; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007), as well as in Brazil which has both a highly fragmented party system and yet has been stably dominated by two parties at the key presidential level (Samuels & Zucco, 2014). Party cueing effects were also present, yet in a weaker and less directionally consistent form, in some relatively young competitive democracies, such as those in, Mexico, Hungary, and Poland (Brader, Tucker,

& Duell, 2013; Merolla et al., 2007).⁵ Fairly modest and inconsistent effects were also uncovered in Canada, despite its position among more venerable democracies, something the researchers attribute to a recent merger of conservative parties and a weaker sense of partisan loyalty in Canada relative to the U.S (Merolla et al., 2008).⁶ The proliferation of these experiments has also made possible the comparison of effects across countries (Merolla, Stephenson, & Zechmeister, 2005).⁷

Surprisingly few studies to date have examined directly whether responsiveness to party cues corresponds well to self-reported partisanship. The rare exceptions yield mixed results. In Brazil, party cues move partisans but not non-partisans (Samuels & Zucco, 2014). In Canada, however, partisans displayed greater responsiveness to cues than non-partisans for only one of three parties examined (Merolla et al., 2008). In the U.S., a study found only modestly amplified responses for strong—relative to weak—partisans (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014). In a three-country comparison (Brader & Tucker, 2012a), researchers found that partisanship matters more (i.e., predicts stronger cue-following) relative to simply preferring a party, as one moves from younger and less stable party systems to older, more stable systems.

One key limitation of prior research is the frequent adoption, especially in studies dealing with multi-party systems, of low-salience or artificial policy issues (Samuels and Zucco 2014; Brader and Tucker 2012a; Petersen et al. 2012; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Merolla, Stephenson, and Zechmeister 2007; 2008; Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007). There are sound reasons for utilizing low salience issues in partisan cueing experiments in multi-party systems. Absent the reflexively oppositional framework of a two-party system, it is difficult to find high salience issues on which all parties either hold the same position (thus feasible for a “single cue” experiment) or hold distinct positions (amenable to a “multiple cue” experiment).⁸ Real-world, salient issues are prone to yield smaller cueing effects compared to fictitious or low-salient issues for at least two different reasons. On the one hand, policy congruence rates in the treatment group might be lower (and thus close to the control group) on very well-known and debated policies, as voters may have developed

⁵ See as well Conroy-Krutz, Moehler, and Aguilar (2016) on party cueing effects on voting behaviour in Uganda. The studies in Hungary and Poland were carried out in the 2000s, well before the current democratic retrenchment in those two countries.

⁶ The authors also gesture to the widely held belief, among many experts on Canadian politics, that citizens of that country develop weaker party attachments and loyalty relative to Americans.

⁷ Outside of the experimental framework, previous research on Western Europe has highlighted how parties, despite a limited ability to shape voters’ opinions on issues related to the left-right dimension, are successful in doing so on the EU integration dimension (Adams, Ezrow, & Somer-Topcu, 2011; Milazzo, Adams, & Green, 2012; Ray, 2003; Steenbergen, Edwards, & De Vries, 2007).

⁸ Most experimental studies of partisan cueing outside of the U.S. adopt a single cue framework, whereby subjects in the treatment group are told the position of one party – see Brader and Tucker (2012b). In a two-party system, one can often comfortably assume that respondents will attribute the opposite position on the issue to the other party.

a stronger and more stable opinion, with less room for party cueing. On the other hand, congruence rates in the control group might be higher (and thus closer to the treatment group) if the party's position has been widely publicized, so that party supporters would be able to conform to their party's position even without an explicit party mention.

3. Research Questions and the Case of 2013 Italy

Although understandable, the focus on low salience issues in studies of partisan cueing (outside of the U.S.) raises concerns regarding external validity, also related to the restricted sets of issues employed.⁹ Previous studies, frequently based on low-salience issues, might then have produced too generous estimates of partisan cueing effects, which urgently calls for the analysis of high salience issues. Moreover, previous studies do not meaningfully pair issue salience with party system variation, as studies outside the U.S. mostly focus on low salience issues, while studies inside the U.S. examine both high and low salience issues (Berinsky, 2009; Bolsen et al., 2013; Coan et al., 2008; Cohen, 2003; Druckman, 2001; Kam, 2005; Lenz, 2012; Lupia, 1994). Therefore, the analysis of high salience issues in a multi-party system is in our opinion even more urgent.

For these reasons, our study focuses on three issues that were all salient during the campaign for the 2013 Italian general elections.¹⁰ Namely, the home ownership tax, gay marriages, and the electoral reform.¹¹ Moreover, the Italian case appears as a perfect example of a stable democracy with an unstable party system, a combination which has not been studied enough so far. We investigate what we deem a challenging context for finding partisan cueing effects: Italy is a multi-

⁹ See the discussion in Samuels and Zucco (2014). Other concerns are also raised by the relationship between a specific issue and a particular party in terms of the strategic importance of the issue (De Sio & Weber, 2014).

¹⁰ We need to acknowledge that the salience we document is at the party level. While highly campaigned issues should present voters with more information, there is no guarantee that voters pay attention. However, we note that the number of non-valid responses to the experimental issue items is generally low. Out of 1,250 respondents, they are respectively 4, 46, and 118 on the three issues. If we assume that providing a valid answer is an indicator of some kind of issue saliency, this testifies that the three issues were in general quite salient even among respondents. Moreover, the fact that rates of non-valid responses are already low in control group (1, 20, and 66 out of 634 respondents) provides in our view additional evidence on this point.

¹¹ Home ownership taxation was the single most salient issue in the campaign (Bellucci, 2013; Bobba & Seddone, 2014). Two other issues central to our study had played an important role in Italian politics since the early 1990s. Before the 2013 elections, virtually all parties agreed on the need to reform electoral rules once again, although their clear and different positions on the preferred form of change (Garzia, 2013, p. 1096). For gay couples rights, its enduring importance is reflected by: a) all major leaders taking some position on the issue during the campaign; and b) immediately after the election, eleven proposals on the issue were presented to the Senate, eventually leading to a law that was approved in 2015 (Ferrari, 2016). For a review of the stances about gay couples right in the 2013 electoral campaign, see (Ozzano, 2015, pp. 9–10). A further discussion on the role of the experimental issues in the electoral campaign can be found in the Online Appendix E.

party system with low public trust in political parties,¹² where the 2013 elections have shown both an increase in fragmentation, with the effective number of electoral parties (ENP) reaching 5.3 (Chiaromonte & Emanuele, 2013), and incredibly high electoral volatility (Baldini, 2013; De Sio, Emanuele, Maggini, & Paparo, 2013), with important successes by new parties (Maggini, 2013). With 13 relevant parties, and two of them running in their very first general election (thus with no time to develop a base of identifiers), we expected it to be very difficult to find evidence of partisan cueing effects.

Let us briefly present the context of the 2013 Italian elections. After Berlusconi's resignation in November 2011, President Napolitano appointed the economist Mario Monti as Prime Minister. His technocratic cabinet (which stayed in office until the February 2013 election) pursued austerity policies and several reforms (Culpepper, 2014), with the initial support of both the leftist PD (Democratic Party) and Berlusconi's PDL (People of Liberties) – although the PDL eventually withdrew its support.

The PD is the main party of the Italian center-left. It was founded in 2007 (Bordandini, Di Virgilio, & Raniolo, 2008), as a merger of two parties—the heirs respectively of the old Italian Communist Party, (Bellucci, Maraffi, & Segatti, 2000; Ignazi, 1992), and of the leftist wing of the Christian Democracy (Baccetti, 2007; Di Virgilio, 2008). It was led in 2013 by Pierluigi Bersani, and ran as part of a center-left coalition with two other minor parties.¹³

The PDL was also founded in 2007 (McDonnell, 2013), under Mr. Berlusconi, and was itself a merger of two parties (Diamanti, 2007): Forza Italia, the party founded by Berlusconi in 1994 (Poli, 2001), and National Alliance, the heir of the old neo-fascist party (Ignazi, 1994; Tarchi, 1997). The two formed the core of the center-right coalition since the beginning of the Second Republic (Bartolini, Chiaromonte, & D'Alimonte, 2004). On a platform centered on tax cuts, the PDL ran in 2013 in a coalition with several minor center-right parties.

The M5S (Five Star Movement) was founded in 2009 (Tronconi, 2015), combining the top-down, populist leadership of comedian Beppe Grillo and a genuine grassroots movement of local clubs (based on the meet-up model inaugurated by Howard Dean in the U.S.). It purports to replace the corrupt political elite with honest common citizens and a massive injection of forms of direct democracy while rejecting any ideological label (Diamanti, 2014).

¹² In comparative terms, Italians appear to be the least trusting political parties across Western European electorates, both according to Eurobarometer and European Social Study data.

¹³ Readers should note that in Italian elections parties can run as either a stand-alone party or as part of an electoral coalition, which has implications for how seats are distributed. However, all four parties considered ran either alone (the M5S) or as – by far – the dominant party of their coalition.

Finally, SC (Civic Choice) was launched less than three months before the 2013 election by Prime Minister Monti. After refusing—a few months before the election—Berlusconi’s offer of the PDL leadership, Monti decided to launch his own political party, forming a coalition with a couple of existing center-right parties. Though nominally rejecting ideological connotations, his coalition can easily be identified as moderate and centrist.

As a result of a campaign where the classical economic-voting, government-opposition, blame-attribution mechanism was not likely to be at play (Vegetti, Poletti, & Segatti, 2013), as virtually all of the main parties had supported the Monti cabinet,¹⁴ the 2013 election presented a new political landscape, with the breaking of the twenty-year-old, two-bloc format of the Italian Second Republic Republic (Baldini, 2013; Chiaramonte & De Sio, 2014; De Sio et al., 2013). The two main coalitions combined failed to receive 60% of the votes, compared to 99.5 % in 2006 and 85 % in 2008. While the centre-left coalition obtained a narrow victory, the key election result was the unexpected success of the M5S (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013).

We focus on two fundamental research questions. First and foremost, do we observe party cueing effects—parties influencing the policy views of their supporters—in Italy? Such effects have been observed in many other countries, including on salient and peripheral issues, and in some young as well as venerable party systems. Nevertheless, conditions seem especially unfavorable for finding effects in Italy. To address this question, we test the following hypothesis in the context of the 2013 Italian general election:

H1: Citizens presented with party cues on salient electoral issues will exhibit greater congruence *with their preferred party’s position on that issue than citizens not presented with party cues.*

Second, to the extent we observe any cueing effects on policy opinions among Italian citizens, does party identification matter? In other words, is responsiveness to party cues moderated by subjective feelings of partisan attachment? Theories posit more than one plausible explanation for an impact of party cues on policy opinions, though, as noted earlier, few studies have assessed directly the impact of party cues conditional on party identification and, when they have, the results have been quite variable. To address this research question, we test the following hypothesis:

¹⁴ The M5S was not yet represented in Parliament in the 2008-2013 term.
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H2: Party cues on salient electoral issues will generate stronger congruence with the preferred *party's position among self-reported partisans* than among non-partisans who like the party.

Finally, prior research suggests the impact of party cues may also vary by characteristics of the party and the policy issue. The small number of parties and issues included in this case study does not allow us to perform a systematic test of any theoretical expectation. However, we will still offer some general qualitative assessment of few broad propositions. In general, we should observe that cue-taking ought to be stronger among supporters of parties that are older, in the opposition (instead of the incumbent government), and perceived as more ideologically clear or coherent. Prior research found support for all three expectations (Brader, Tucker, & Duell, 2013; Coan et al., 2008; Merolla et al., 2007, 2008). With respect to differences among issues and issue domains, prior research argues that we are more likely to observe cue-taking on policy issues that are more complex or difficult for voters to assess based on their personal experiences or basic moral principles (Coan et al., 2008; Hellström, 2008; Pannico, 2017).

4. Data, design and measurement

To assess the impact of party cues on policy preferences, we use data from a CATI/CAMI panel survey conducted by the Italian Centre for Electoral Studies (CISE). The fourth wave of the CISE panel included a series of experimental questions that manipulated the presence of party cues when asking about key policy debates. Interviews for that wave took place in March 2013, a few weeks after the election. Other measures were drawn from the third, pre-electoral wave that took place in January 2013. A total of 1,490 respondents completed the experimental questions.¹⁵

For these questions, respondents were randomly assigned to a control group (N = 753) or a treatment group (N = 737). We selected the three issues described in the previous section in an effort to use high salience issues and maximize variance on issue complexity and policy domain. Namely, we selected the most salient issues on economic matters (the home property tax), the most

¹⁵ This survey included 3,052 respondents included in the first panel wave (April 2012). Roughly 50% of them were not part of the panel in the second wave (October 2012). In the third (February 2013, pre-electoral) and fourth (March 2013, post-electoral) waves, the dropout rates were smaller: 35%, and 27% respectively. This increases the likelihood that those who remain in the study are a biased subset of the original sample, likely disproportionately interested in politics. To compensate for this, the first three waves of the survey included a replenishment of respondents. The experimental questions appeared in the fourth wave, so that—by design—attrition cannot have any impact on randomization. As a result, our balance tests (see Table A4 in the Online Appendix A) reveal no statistically significant difference in political interest between the control and treatment groups. Full details regarding the design are in the Online Appendix D, which follows the reporting standards recommended by the Experimental Research Section of the American Political Science Association (Gerber et al., 2014)

salient social issue (rights for gay couples), and the most salient issue on institutional matters (the electoral reform).¹⁶ For each of these issues, respondents in the control group were asked to choose among four different policy options without party labels. Respondents in the treatment group received the identical options, but each labelled with the specific endorsing party.¹⁷ Each respondent was assigned to the same condition—treatment or control—for all three of the questions. Balance tests suggest that the randomization process worked as intended (see Table A4 in the Online Appendix A for details).¹⁸

Party identification is operationalized through the traditional questions used in studies of multi-party systems in Western Europe. Respondents are first asked if there is a party to which they feel closer. If the answer is positive, they are then asked to name the party.

Our dependent variable is “policy congruence” with one’s preferred party. More specifically, for each policy issue we offered four alternatives corresponding to the actual policy positions of the four largest parties: the Partito Democratico (PD), the Popolo della Libertà (PDL), the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) and Scelta Civica (SC).¹⁹ For each of the three issues tested, we then coded whether the respondent chose the policy option endorsed by her preferred party (assigned based on items from previous, pre-electoral waves).²⁰ We also calculated an overall party-respondent congruence index across all issues, by averaging over valid values of the congruence indicators for all issues.²¹

¹⁶ The experimental design forced us to select issues on which each major party holds clear and distinct positions, a criterion that was particularly demanding, ending up in significant restrictions of the possible choices.

¹⁷ The full questions are in the Online Appendix B. These were the only party cueing experiments included in the survey.

¹⁸ Table A4 in the Online Appendix A reports the results of a multivariate logistic regression of treatment assignment based on a large set of typical predictors of voting behaviour, none of which discriminates between the two groups in a statistically significant way. Thus, we do not include additional control variables in the results presented below. Note that the balance table only includes the respondents included in the analysis, those that preferred one of the four parties included in our experiment.

¹⁹ These four parties obtained 25.4%, 21.6%, 25.6% and 8.3% of the vote in the February 2013 election, respectively. See Table A1 in the Online Appendix A for the full electoral results.

²⁰ This required us to exclude supporters of parties other than the 4 top parties for which we had cues; although these were all minor parties, they did overall receive 19.3 percent of the vote. The party identification item is used first (if present, the party towards which R feels close is coded as the preferred party); if no party closeness is reported, vote intention is then used; for respondents still without a preferred party, we finally code the party that receives the maximum PTV (propensity-to-vote) score as the preferred party. For a presentation of PTV scores as measures of party preference see (Van der Eijk, Van der Brug, Kroh, & Franklin, 2006). Through this algorithm we were able to link 1,250 respondents (out of the total 1,490) with one of the four major parties. All analyses are performed on this subsample. The remaining 240 respondents who did not prefer any of the major parties were removed from all analyses. All question wordings are available on request.

²¹ There were of course people who declined to provide answers to some of our opinion questions: a trivially small 0.3% for the tax question, but a more noticeable 4% for the gay marriage question and 10% for the electoral reform question. We elected to code these people as “non-congruent” because, at the end of the day, they failed to endorse the same position as their party; this allows us to maintain the same sample for all of our analyses. As a robustness test, we reran our primary analysis (Figure 1 below) with only respondents who chose one of the offered positions on each issue. The results are presented in Table A2, Panel 2 in the Online Appendix A, and are practically identical—all are

5. Results

5.1 Partisan cueing effects

The first results we provide are assessments of the direct effects of our experimental treatments. Is there more congruence between respondents and their party's position among subjects who receive a partisan cue than those who do not (H1)? Figure 1 displays the difference in means for the control and treatment groups across all three experiments combined (far left) and then individually for each of the three issues.²²

To reiterate, each respondent was assigned to either treatment or control for all three questions. Thus, the difference of means in the first two bars represents the overall Average Treatment Effect (ATE) for the three experiments combined. This first test already demonstrates stark effects.²³ On average (among supporters of the four major parties), 52% of respondents in the treatment group pick the option held by their party, compared to only 34% in the control group where parties were not mentioned.²⁴ Relative to effect sizes in prior research, an ATE of 18 percentage points ($p < .001$) is quite large. Since the control group matched their party's position only about 34% of the time, party cues increased the rate with which Italians expressed policy congruence with their party by over 50%. Thus, party cues have a strong substantive effect in driving respondents towards the policy positions endorsed by their party. This dramatically underscores the ability of parties to shape voters' preferences, despite—as discussed previously—the conservative biases introduced by the design and context, which features highly contested issues, in the immediate aftermath of a national election, and in a country with two parties running in their first general election.

[FIGURE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

large, statistically significant, and within two-percentage points of the effects presented in the text, and, accordingly, the rank order of effect size across issues is also preserved. Moreover, it was always the case that the size of the treatment effect was larger (albeit not by that much) when we omitted non-respondents.

²² Table A2, Panel 1 (in the Online Appendix A) provides the difference in means and standard errors for readers who prefer this information in tabular format.

²³ We acknowledge that, especially given that the experiment was administered in a post-electoral panel wave, it is possible that respondents' desire to express opinions consistent with the party they stated support might be contributing to these results. We stress that respondent-party pairings were constructed based on data collected in pre-electoral waves of the panel, and including several indicators, most of which were not directly related to vote intention. Experimental issue questions were instead administered in the post-electoral wave. However, this does not rule out the possibility that some post-hoc rationalization might have occurred for those respondents who voted for the party to which they had been previously paired.

²⁴ As per the nature of the experimental design, on each issue, treated respondents were exposed to multiple partisan cueing at once. Thus, it not possible for us to empirically disentangle the specific roles of in-party cues and out-party cues, which also have been proved to have significant effects on issue preferences (Nicholson, 2012). The effects we observe are a combination of both.

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It is worth briefly commenting on the policy congruence rate in the control group. At 34%, it is statistically distinct ($p < .001$) from the value we would have expected had respondents simply been randomly choosing one of the responses—25%. Therefore, even absent cues, voters endorsed the policy option associated with their party more often than if they were just picking policy preferences by chance, though we cannot say whether this is due to prior party signaling or to the party aligning itself with the views of its supporters. However, the difference from random selection is not that large, especially for high salience issues: in the absence of a party cue, on three of the most prominently discussed issues during the campaign, voters only matched their party's position roughly one-third of the time. There of course are many non-policy reasons why voters would support a party independent of sharing similar views on issues (Campbell et al., 1960). Even so, the low baseline incidence of congruence on major campaign issues is worthy of note.

Figure 1 makes it clear that our overall finding for the ATE is not being driven only by one or two of the treatments. Although there is variation in the size of the effect across the three experiments, all three of the experiments produce a statistically significant and substantively meaningful effect on policy opinions. The strongest effect is on electoral reform, where the treatment effect is 25 percentage points. Given that the congruence rate in the control group is so low for this issue (27%), that treatment effect of 25 points represents almost a doubling of the likelihood that a respondent would match his or her party on the issue.

For the other two issues we find effects that are slightly smaller, but still substantial. For the property tax, the presence of party labels increases the congruence rate by 17 percentage points, from 39% to 56%. Finally, for gay couples' rights the ATE is 13 percentage points, increasing the congruence rate from 36% to 49%. Although this is the smallest effect of the three, it is still impressive to observe such a strong effect on a "moral" or "easy" policy issue, where we would expect respondents to have formulated the most fixed opinions on their own. Interestingly, the highest baseline level in the control group was in the house tax issue, the most salient campaign issue.

We next consider the possibility that cues from a single party might be driving our findings or, conversely, that there might be a party unable to produce a meaningful change in congruence on policy preference. Results show that this is not the case. Table 1 (full regression results can be found in Table A3 in the Online Appendix A) reveals that party cues have a statistically significant and substantively meaningful effect on congruence for 15 out of the 16 party-issue pairs. Moreover, although some variance in the effects is found (with the PDL showing larger effects – particularly compared to the PD), no systematic variation emerges in terms of party age, with new parties (M5S,

SC) exerting the same cueing effects on their supporters than old parties (PD, PDL), or between parties with a clear ideological stance (PD, PDL) or rejecting the left-right dimension (M5S), or looking at whether parties are in government (SC) or in the opposition (M5S) – or even have supported the government without ministers (PD, PDL).

Finally, for all four parties, the most complex issue—the question of electoral reform—is the one with the largest cueing effect. For three of the four parties the smallest cueing effect is for the “moral” issue of gay couples. In addition, it is interesting to note that the more technocratic party of Monti (SC) had the lowest cueing effect on the issue of tax policy.²⁵

[TABLE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

5.2. Party identification

To this point, we have identified substantial effects for party cues on three major policy issues across a wide swath of the Italian electorate (thus confirming H1). We now test for the presence of heterogeneous effects across different categories of respondents, beginning with the key distinction between partisans and non-partisans (H2). More specifically, we test whether (self-reported) partisans are more likely to be affected by party cues than non-partisans.²⁶

Similar to Figure 1, the first column of Table 2 shows the ATE pooled across all three issues. The party cue effect for a non-partisan supporter is a sizable 13 percentage point increase in the likelihood of matching their party’s position, but among partisans it is an even greater 29 percentage point increase. This 16-point difference, which is the total effect of being a partisan and getting a cue, is statistically significant ($p < .001$).²⁷ Most of this increase (10 points) is due to the interactive effect of being a partisan who receives a party cue, as opposed to the more modest (5

²⁵ This is indeed an interesting piece of evidence, worth some discussion. We suspect supporters of Monti’s party may have been more likely than others to have been attracted to the party due to a similar economic outlook generally. On this particular tax issue, the supporters of Monti’s party did have a higher level of baseline agreement in the control group than the M5S supporters and especially the PDL supporters, although it was a little lower than the PD supporters (see Table A3 in the Online Appendix A). Moreover, Monti’s party was the only one to actually implement (in office) its policy on the house tax. Thus, one could think that it was clearest in its stance, and therefore it was easiest for its supporters to form an opinion. Furthermore, it could be argued that the austerity on economic matters was at the core of “Monti’s agenda”, which could account for the fact that respondents having voted for his party had an opinion on this issue coherent with their party more often than others.

²⁶ Recall our analysis is limited to respondents for whom we can identify a “preferred” party among the 4 main parties. For this analysis, we employed a two-wave measure (see e.g. (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2004)). Respondents were classified as partisans or non-partisans according to their responses to party closeness items in waves 3 and 4, scoring 0, 0.5 or 1 depending whether they reported partisanship in 0, 1 or 2 waves. This coding strategy allows us to make the best use of the richness of the multi-wave panel data. Moreover, it appears particularly adequate in order to avoid too strong correlation with the respondent-party attachment variable, which uses one-wave party-closeness as its primary component.

²⁷ The total effect is calculated by adding the coefficients for PID and for the interactive effect. The statistical significance of this total effect is estimated using the `lincom` command in Stata 13.1.

point) effect of partisans simply being better able to match their party's preference even absent a cue. The treatment effects, however, vary considerably across issues. For gay rights, the interaction effect is small in substantive terms and relative to the standard errors. For the tax issue, the interaction is larger but still not significant; in fact, the more notable effect in this case is from party identification itself increasing the likelihood of congruence even absent cues. Finally, results for electoral reform are in line with the partisanship hypothesis. While a non-partisan supporter was 13 percentage points more likely to match her party's position when receiving a cue, a similarly situated partisan was almost 23 percentage points more likely to match the position, meaning the effect of the cue among partisans was roughly 1.5 times as large as among non-partisans. And this 23-point increase is almost entirely due to the interaction effect.

Overall, then, we find a partial confirmation for H2 – a finding which appears consistent with most previous studies looking at the differentiated effects of cues by party identification (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014; Brader & Tucker, 2012a; Merolla et al., 2008). Of the three policies tested, only on electoral reform were Italian partisans clearly more responsive to cues—and strongly so—than were non-partisan supporters of the same party. It may not be a coincidence that this is the one policy in the set that is closely tied to the fate of the party itself, in other words where the stakes most directly impact the outcome for the partisan team (as opposed to individual members or society in general).

[TABLE 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

In sum, we have found strong evidence that partisan cues on real issues using the true positions of political parties led to a substantial increase in congruence between survey respondents and their preferred parties (H1), despite these being three of the most discussed issues during the election campaign and therefore issues on which one might reasonably have expected voters to have already had pretty firm opinions in a post-election survey. The effects are present across all four primary parties, as well as across all three of the issues included in the survey experiment. Moreover, the effects of these cues are somewhat greater among partisans than non-partisans as well, although with more noise, as theory would predict (H2).²⁸

²⁸ We also examined other potential moderating variables that draw and expand upon earlier efforts to explain variation in the impact of party cues. Namely, political knowledge, political interest, and trust in parties. No significant effect for any of these variables emerged. See Online Appendix F for a detailed discussion on the role of these variables and on the findings of our analysis (reported in Table F1).

6. Discussion

To what extent do Italians follow the lead of political parties when it comes to forming opinions on matters of policy? Our expectations were extremely low. New parties and shifting party coalitions would forecast an environment in which parties channel, but do not steer, the issue preferences of voters. However, our evidence points to a starkly different conclusion. In a series of experiments embedded in a representative national survey, we found that party cues strongly affect the policy opinions expressed by voters. When such cues were present, the share of supporters lining up to match their party's position jumped by roughly 15 to 20 percentage points.²⁹ Moreover, we observed this effect across all three policies in the study, even though they were salient issues from the just concluded election campaign. Further, although these effects may be marginally stronger among self-reported partisans, they appear to be remarkably consistent across respondents even when we take account of factors we suggest could mitigate the effect of partisan cues. Most importantly, a striking piece of evidence is the presence of large and significant cueing effects for the two parties that ran in their first general election.

On the one hand, these findings replicate what others have shown elsewhere: political parties have considerable capacity to shape the policy preferences of citizens merely by taking a position. Our analysis confirms that this holds true in contemporary Italian politics, adding Italy to the modest but growing list of political systems where this relationship has been directly tested. On the other hand, the strength—if not also the fact—of this confirmation comes as a surprise in light of previous research and expectations. In a multi-party system with shifting coalitions and entirely new parties, these should be weak cue-givers. Yet the effects observed in Italy are at least as strong as those that have been observed by studies in the United States and Great Britain, which are two of the oldest and most stable democratic party systems in the world. And they appear equally strong regardless of the age of the parties involved.

What are we to make of this departure from expectations? Some clues may come from another recent study that uncovered comparable effects in a “least likely” setting—Brazil (Samuels & Zucco, 2014), which suggested the broad relevance of party identification for guiding citizens. Even with relatively new parties, psychological theories suggest that the mere process of people sorting into salient and competitive groups is sufficient to unleash motivational forces that shape

²⁹ We reiterate that our experiments featured multiple party cues. There have been alternative ways of presenting party cues in experiments (namely, single party cues). However, typically studies rely on only one type, making it hard to determine if the experimental format affects effect sizes. One exception is a few studies carried out by Brader and Tucker (2012a), which suggest no systematic differences in effect sizes between the single cue and multiple cue formats.

attitudes and behavior. We are sympathetic to this point of view. But this conclusion only sharpens the larger puzzle. If the mere fact of identification and partisan-structured competition are all that is required, why have scholars found no effects, or much weaker effects, in places such as Canada, Mexico, and Poland?

Solving that puzzle is, we believe, an important focal point for scholars of parties and party identification in the years ahead. At present, we can only speculate about potential explanations. For example, it is possible that cueing effects vary with levels of public trust in political parties. Lupia and McCubbins (1998) argue that voters take cues from those who share their values and whom they regard as capable of providing helpful guidance. Perhaps what differentiates systems with robust versus anemic partisan cue-taking is the extent to which citizens see the parties as capable of addressing policy concerns. We can say a little about this because, by chance, the surveys in which our experiments were embedded did have a measure that allows us to identify voters who lacked faith in the ability of any party to handle the most important issues facing Italy. But alas we found no evidence that such distrust moderates responsiveness to party cues (see Table F1 in the Online Appendix F). That said, one can imagine that a richer set of instrumentation on public trust in the ability of parties to address matters of policy might offer a fairer, more complete test of the hypothesis (especially if carried out cross-nationally). For now, however, we have little reason to privilege this speculation.

Another possibility, one that is sort of the flipside of the preceding proposition, is that variation in responsiveness to party issue cues is driven by voter uncertainties in the policy realm. Perhaps where voters lack confidence in their own ability to make sense of policy matters, we will find greater deference to and thus cue-taking from the parties. A possible hint that this might be at least partially the case comes from the observation that for all parties the strongest cueing effect is found on the most complex and technical issue, which appears in line with previous research both in Western Europe and North America (Coan et al., 2008; Hellström, 2008; Pannico, 2017). Thus, the critical distinguishing factors may originate not with parties, but rather with the voters or the policy issues.³⁰ A similar possibility, fixed more squarely on the interactions of these forces at the system level, is that partisan cue-taking is more prevalent in those systems—like Italy—where policy content and discussion play a less important or central role in the political process relative to other

³⁰ A further interesting hypothesis concerning a possible intervening role of an issue characteristics comes from (Nicholson & Hansford, 2014), showing how cueing effects vary relatively to how polarized partisans are on an issue. Due to limitations of our experimental design, this cannot be empirically tested here.

factors (e.g., social group divisions, economic conditions, political personalities).³¹ In a way, this suggestion might resonate with an additional finding of our research – that the importance of the cueing effects we find is paired with relatively low baseline levels of policy congruence with the party: a suggestion that citizens indeed follow the policy cues provided by parties, but that policy is not the most important criterion in constructing party attachments in the first place. The challenge for researchers is how to test these and other propositions in a way that can account for the cross-national variation in partisan cue-taking observed to date.

For now, what the unexpected findings from Italy make clear is the need to broaden research into the capacity of parties to shape the policy preferences of their supporters. Such research, while proliferating of late, is still limited to scarcely a dozen countries and studies. The surprising results from two recent studies – our one and Samuels and Zucco’s in Brazil – also underscore the value of moving research into systems where democratic politics is not entirely new but where the leading parties are not generations old. This line of work, however, does more than raise intriguing questions about opinion leadership by political parties, it enriches our understanding of party identification itself. Robust forms of partisanship are clearly alive and well far beyond the American borders. Nevertheless, we observe strong party attachments—not merely self-expressed but behaviorally verified in experiments—in places where prevailing theories of party identification say they should not have taken hold. As the field presses forward, the evidence increasingly forces us to rethink classic accounts of why and how strong partisanship develops.

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³¹ Indeed, the relatively low congruence rates both in the control and the treatment group and the large cueing effects observed even for new parties, testify that issues do not appear in Italy as a key characteristic structuring political support. A regression of vote choice on policy preferences confirms their weak importance, with one issue being non-significant, and the overall predictive power of the model being very low. See Table A5 in the Online Appendix A.

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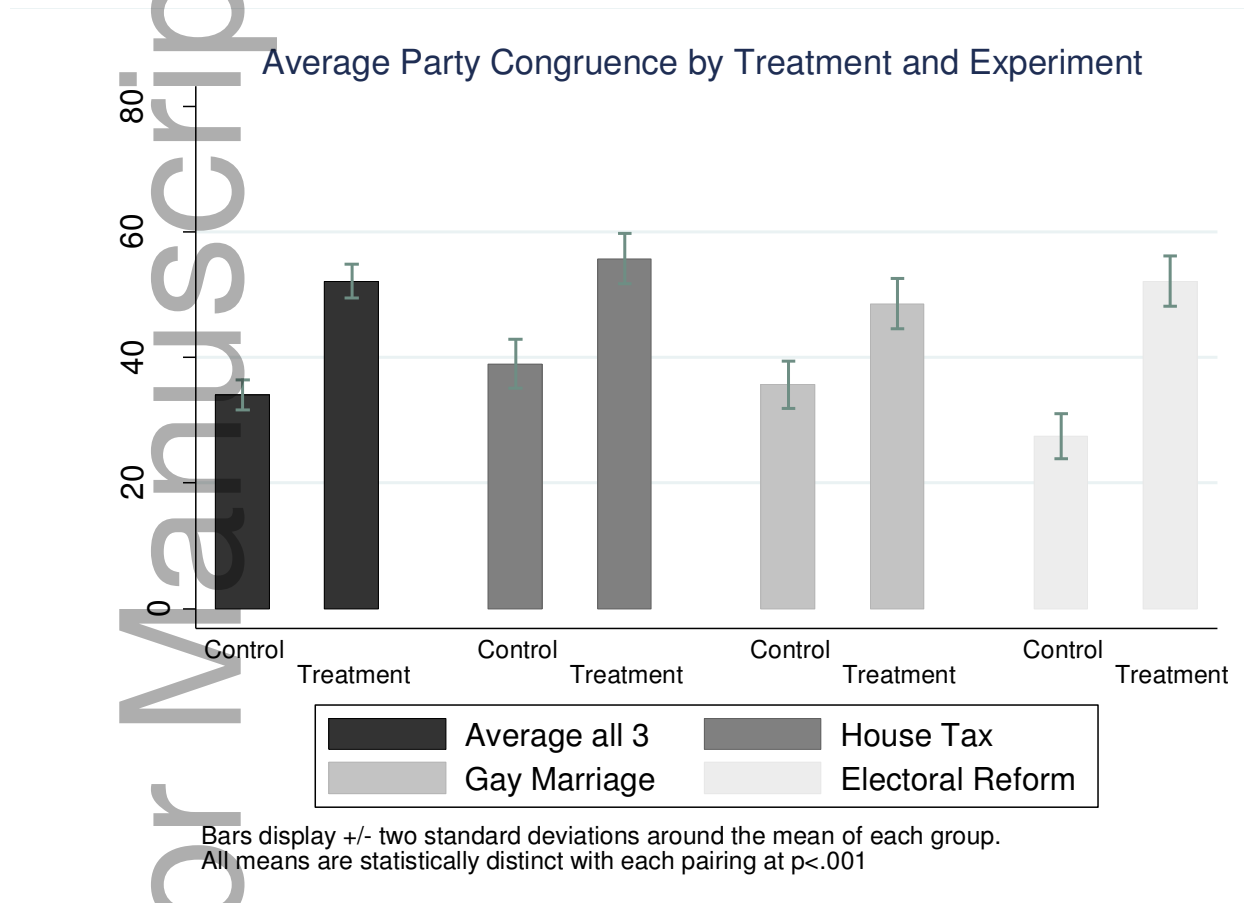


Figure 1. Differences of Means Across Experiments.

Table 1. Marginal Effects of Partisan Cues by Party and Issue.

PARTY	All 3	Tax	Gay Couples	Election Reform
PD	14.5** (2.5)	11.1** (4.0)	8.9* (4.0)	23.3** (3.8)
PDL	25.7** (4.1)	28.6** (6.6)	18.2** (6.6)	30.2** (6.3)
M5S	20.6** (3.8)	23.2** (6.0)	14.8* (6.0)	23.9** (5.8)

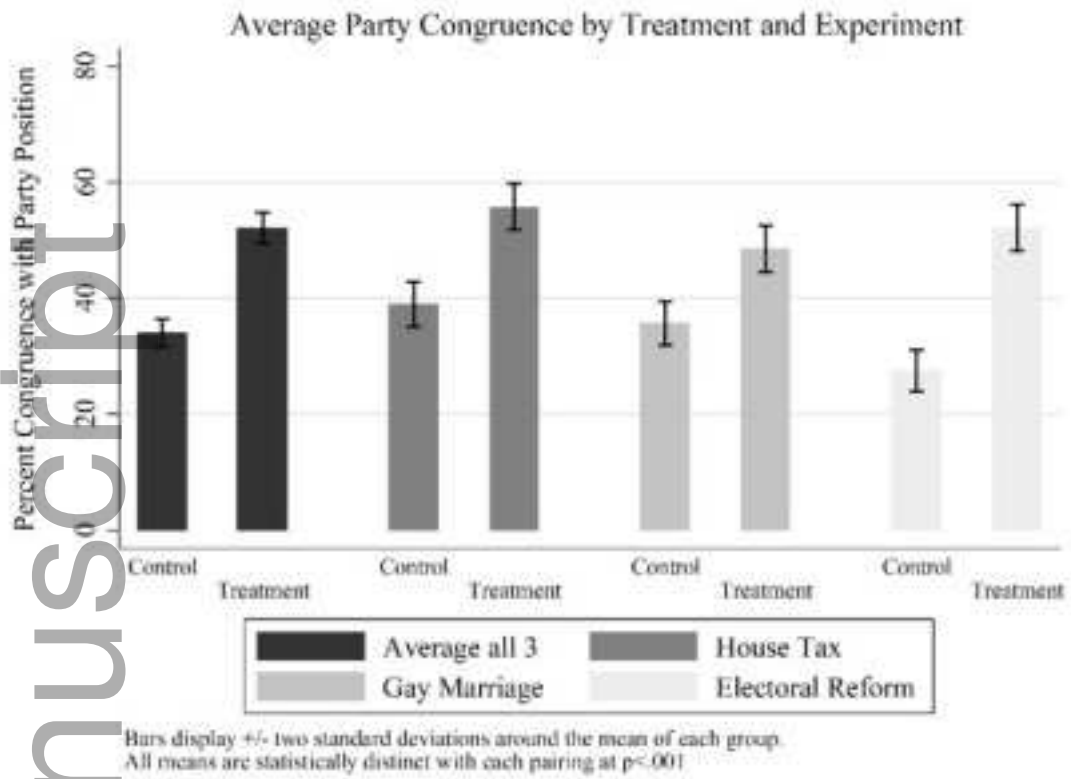
SC	15.4** (4.6)	8.8 (7.3)	17.2* (7.3)	20.2** (7.0)
Observations	1,250	1,250	1,250	1,250

Note. Table displays the ATE for all three experiments individually (columns 2-4) and combined (column 1) by party. The number in parentheses is the standard error of the ATE, calculated using the regress and lincom commands in Stata 13.1. The full regression results used to calculate these effects are reported in Table A3 in the Online Appendix A. **p<.01, *p<.05.

Table 2. Effect of Party Cues on Partisans and Non-Partisans.

VARIABLES	All 3	Tax	Gay Couples	Election Reform
Treatment	12.801** (2.912)	14.177** (4.590)	10.965* (4.591)	13.260** (4.401)
Party ID	5.337# (2.965)	11.015* (4.674)	3.741 (4.674)	1.254 (4.481)
PID × Treatment	10.438* (4.215)	5.713 (6.643)	3.947 (6.644)	21.654** (6.369)
Constant	30.961** (2.098)	32.653** (3.307)	33.505** (3.308)	26.727** (3.171)
Observations	1,250	1,250	1,250	1,250
R-squared	0.099	0.042	0.020	0.082

Note. Table displays coefficients and (standard errors) for all three experiments individually (columns 2-4) and combined (column 1) by party from on OLS regression with the dependent variable is congruence with one's preferred party's position. Congruence is coded as 100 for congruence and 0 for non-congruence for ease of interpretability so that the coefficient can be interpreted as the percentage increase in congruence as opposed to the proportion increase in congruence. Tables were calculated using the regress command in Stata 13.1. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, # p<0.1.



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