

# Experiments on Party Cue Effects: Does Party Identification Account for Treatment Effect Heterogeneity?

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## Abstract

Since the publication of *The American Voter*, scholars of political behaviour have been aware of the influence parties have on citizens' preference. In recent years, numerous experimental studies have convincingly shown that parties influence citizens' opinions. However, while nearly all of these studies assume that such party cue effects reflect party identifiers adopting the positions of the party with which they identify, none of them have shown that this is the case. I argue that party identification is unlikely to account for party cue effects, particularly in multi-party systems. I reanalyze a prominent party cue study and show that party identification is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for parties to influence citizens' preferences. I conclude that the theory of partisan motivated reasoning should be revised to be about partisan attitudes rather than party identification.

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Ever since Campbell et al. (1960) published *The American Voter*, scholars of political behaviour have been aware of the influence parties have on citizens' political attitudes. They described the political party as "an opinion forming agency of great importance" (Campbell et al., 1960, 128). More recently, numerous studies have adopted experimental approaches to show that parties influence a wide variety of policy preferences (e.g. Cohen, 2003; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013; Merolla, Stephenson and Zechmeister, 2008). Nearly all of these studies rely on the concept of party identification. That is, they assume that citizens who identify with a party adopt the policy positions of that party in order to show support for it. More recently, this phenomenon has been called "partisan motivated reasoning" (Bolsen, Druckman and Cook, 2014; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014).

However, while all these studies have convincingly shown that parties influence citizens' opinions, none of them have shown that such influence has anything to do with party identification. They all show that parties influence partisan groups by interacting party cue treatments with party identification variables. However, interactions between randomly-assigned treatments and non-experimental covariates cannot show that covariates (in this case, party identification) influence the effect in question (here, the influence of parties on policy preferences) (Gerber and Green, 2012; Kam and Trussler, 2017). All they do is show that on average, a given partisan category reacts differently from the reference category.

In this paper, I cast doubt on the interpretation of these results as being about party identification in multi-party systems. I point to the long history of skepticism about whether citizens in such systems identify with a single party. I then argue that, even though many citizens do have a stable identification with a single party, there is no reason to expect party influence to be limited exclusively to people who identify with a particular party. I argue that what really should matter is how citizens feel about a party. Those who like a party more should adopt policy positions that are closer to that party's positions, while those who like it less should adopt positions that are more distant from it.

I reanalyze a prominent study on party cue effects in a multi-party system and show that there are a number of anomalies for the theory of partisan motivated reasoning. In one of the cases I consider, while partisans of a party do not react to cues from it, those who strongly like the party do react to it. More damaging for the conventional theory is that participants who do not identify with a party sometimes adopt a party's position when they like that party. I conclude that the theory of partisan motivated reasoning should be freed of the concept of party identification and should be recast as being about party attitudes.

## Theory and the Study of Party Cue Effects

Following the publication of *The American Voter*, research on the influence parties have on citizens' policy preferences used observational data (e.g. Jacoby, 1988). The study of the influence parties have on citizens' policy preferences became much more convincing with the experimental study by Cohen (2003) on reactions to party cues, information that a given party has a certain policy position. He focused on ideological (liberals and conservatives) rather than partisan groups in the American context. He compared the reactions of liberals and conservatives to cues from each party and found that liberals move in the direction of the Democratic cue, while conservatives adjust their policy preferences in the direction of the Republican cue. Since his study, numerous studies have adopted his approach (e.g. Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013; Kam, 2005; Merolla, Stephenson and Zechmeister, 2008). They show participants in one or more treatment one or more parties' positions and assess the reactions of different party groups.

There are two theories that account for party influence on opinions. According to the first theory, citizens use parties as heuristics to help them figure out their positions on policy issues (Downs, 1957; Kam, 2005). More recently scholars have argued that parties influence citizens' preferences because citizens identify with a party and they seek to support that party by adopting its policy positions. This theory has been called partisan motivated reasoning (Bolsen, Druckman and Cook, 2014; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014).

Recent studies have found more support for the view that party cue effects are about showing support for the party with which one identifies rather than about making decision-making easier. Citizens take longer to answer policy questions when exposed to party cues, suggesting that they do not make it easier for people to express their opinions (Petersen et al., 2013). Moreover, only people who experience strong physiological reactions to party cues are influenced by party positions, suggesting that party cues depend on affective reactions (Petersen, Giessing and Nielsen, 2015). Finally, people with more political knowledge react more strongly to cues than people with less knowledge (Slothuus, 2015). While partisan motivated reasoning has received more support than the heuristic perspective in recent years, the main prediction of both theories is the same: partisans of a party become more supportive of that party's positions when they see them.

Experimental studies on party cue effects were initially conducted in the United States. However, subsequently, studies have been conducted in other contexts. Scholars have notably conducted party cue experiments in Canada (Merolla, Stephenson and Zechmeister, 2008), Denmark (Aaroe, 2012; Slothuus, 2015), Mexico (Merolla, Stephenson and Zechmeister, 2007), Spain (Guntermann, 2017). Overall these studies have found weaker effects than in the US (see Bullock, 2011, for an early review). Nearly all of these studies have adopted the same approach as earlier American studies, which is to use party identification as a moderator of reactions to party cue effects.<sup>1</sup>

However, such studies rely on the strong assumption that party identification is what moderates party cue effects. They assume that parties are homogeneous with respect to other variables that may influence the magnitude or direction of party cue effects. However, none of these studies have tested whether party identification conditions the influence of parties on opinions. Experiments do not allow researchers to randomize respondents' pre-treatment covariates. Therefore, assessing moderating effects requires the same kind of systematic assessment of alternative explanations scholars routinely engage in in observational studies (Gerber and Green, 2012; Kam and Trussler, 2017). It is thus important to consider whether party identification does adequately moderate party cue effects. Doing so is key to testing a key aspect of conventional theories of party cue effects: that people who identify with each party react to cues from them.

I argue that there is no reason to expect party identification to be the key moderator of party cue effects, at least outside the United States. Scholars have always been skeptical about the applicability of party identification outside the United States (Thomassen, 1976). While early critiques focused on the stability of party identification relative to vote choice, the key problem is that, whereas, in the bipartisan US, identifying with a party implies dislike for the other party, that is not the case in systems with multiple parties. In such systems, as Blais, Guntermann and Bodet (2017) showed, citizens have a variety of positive and negative attitudes towards parties.

Moreover, the concept of motivated reasoning, that is reasoning aimed at striving towards a particular goal (Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006) was not originally about promoting a particular party. Scholars of partisanship have argued (Rosema, 2006) and shown (Guntermann, 2020) that partisan attitudes, that is citizens' positivity and/or negativity towards parties, influence citizens'

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<sup>1</sup>The only exception I am aware of is Guntermann 2017. Note that studies of party cues in Denmark use vote choice rather than party identification as the key moderator (Aaroe 2012; Slothuus 2015). However, these studies make the same assumption discussed in the next paragraph just about vote choice instead of party identification.

political attitudes and behaviours. Why should partisan attitudes not be enough to get citizens to follow cues from parties? Moreover, in his study of party cues in Spain, Guntermann (2017) found that people follow cues even if they have no party identification as long as they prefer that party to a party defending the opposite side of an issue. Consequently, there is a clear rival account of party influence that must be refuted before concluding that parties influence attitudes because of people's identification with a party.

## Results

### Do Partisans Have Heterogeneous Partisan Attitudes?

If party identification adequately accounts for citizens' party attitudes, it should be the case that partisans of a given party like that party and also that they like other parties less than the party with which they identify. That this is the case is particularly doubtful in a multi-party system because there are many reasons why citizens might like and/or dislike each of the parties. I assess the adequacy of party identification to account for citizens' attitudes towards parties by plotting ratings of the major out-parties against ratings of the in-party for identifiers with each of the major parties in Canada. I use feeling thermometer data from campaign-period component (i.e. pre-electoral) of the most recent Canadian Election Study (2015).

Figures 1, 2, and 3 show attitudes towards the parties for respondents who identify with the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC), and the New Democratic Party (NDP), respectively. Each plot has a 45-degree line showing where feeling towards the out-party and the in-party are identical. Points below the line reflect the kinds of attitudes we would expect from partisans. Those who are on the line do not (they like another party as much as the party with which they identify). Those who are above the line strongly go against the conventional view of partisanship (they like another party more than the party with which they identify).

What is clear from the graphs is that partisans of each party do tend to like their party. The vast majority rate their party above 50 (the midpoint) on the 0 to 100 feeling thermometer scale. However, their attitudes towards their own party vary considerably within the 50 to 100 range. What is most striking is that identifying with a party does not mean that a respondent dislikes the other parties. Forty-four percent of Conservative partisans rate the Liberal Party at 50 or above and 37 percent of them rate the NDP at 50 or above. Moreover, 40 percent of Liberals rated the Conservative Party at 50 or above and a full 72 per cent of them gave such a neutral or positive rating to the NDP. NDP partisans were more decisive about their dislike for the Conservatives. Only 23 percent of them rated that party at 50 or above. However, they reciprocated Liberal partisans' warmth towards their party. Seventy-one percent of them rated the Liberal Party at 50 or above.

Figure 1: CPC Identifiers' Partisan Attitudes

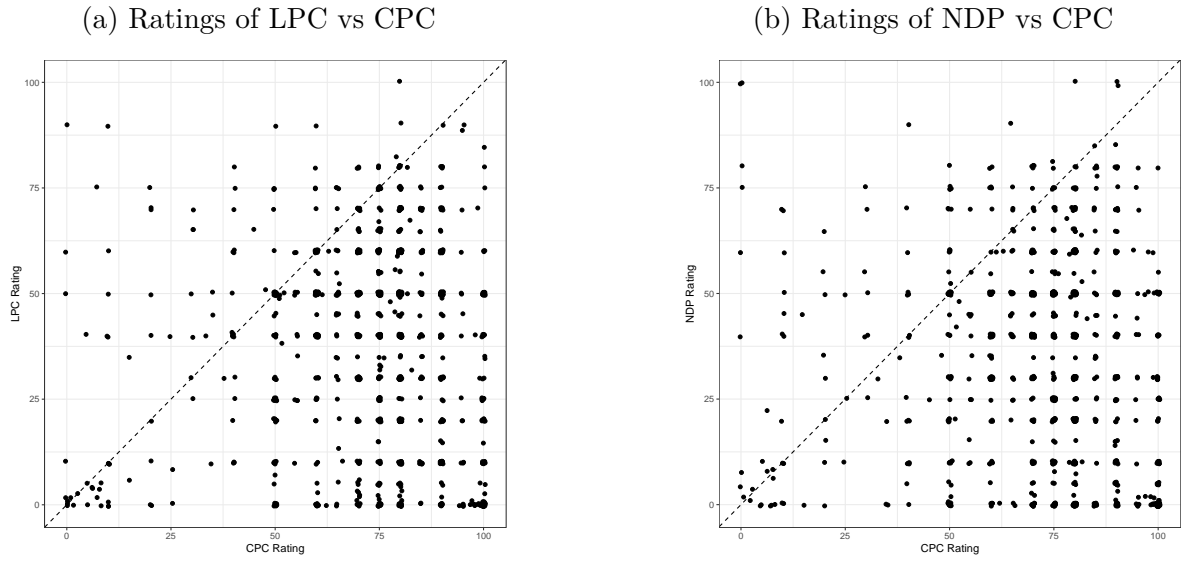


Figure 2: LPC Identifiers' Partisan Attitudes

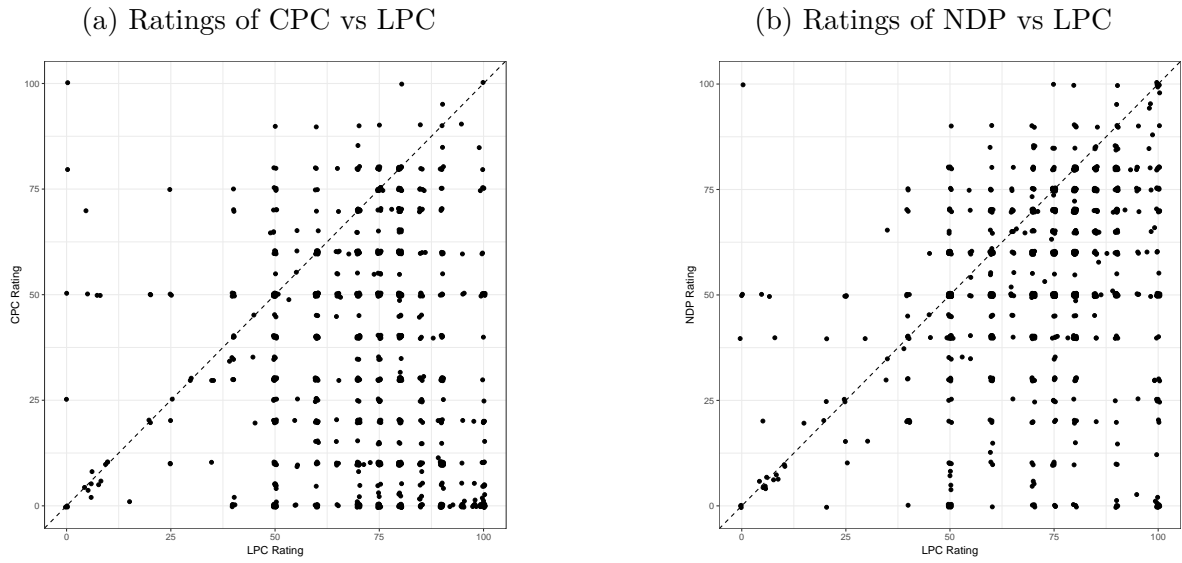
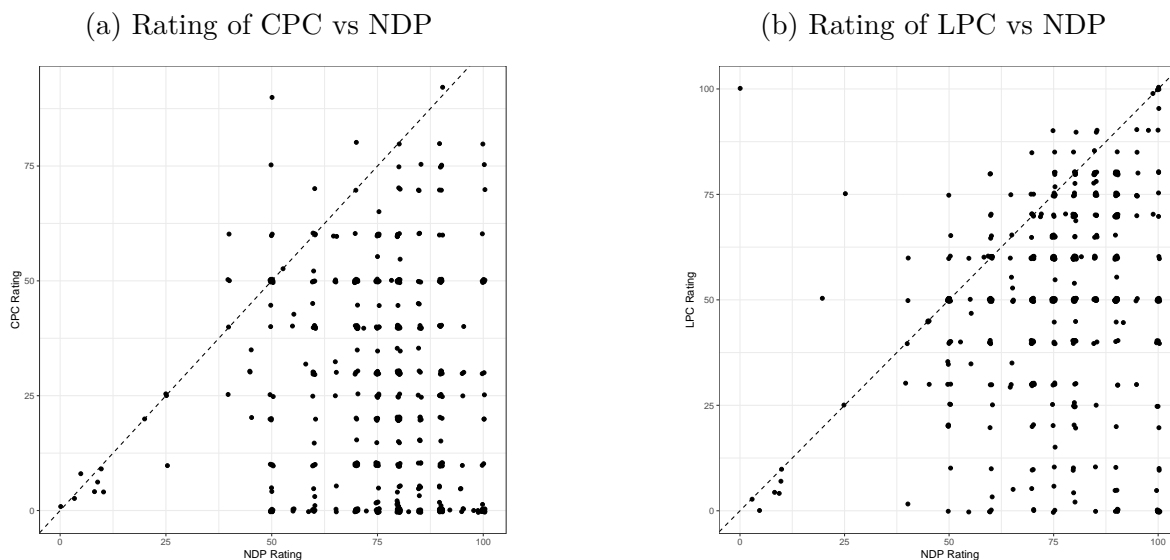


Figure 3: NDP Identifiers' Partisan Attitudes



In sum, while CES respondents who identify with a party tend to like that party, there is considerable variation in how much they like it. Moreover, many partisans like another party. That is particularly the case among NDP and Liberal partisans, who tend to like each others' parties. There is little evidence that self-identified partisans see their party as an in-group and the other party as an out-group. Only 35 percent of Conservative identifiers rate their party above 50 and rate the Liberals and NDP below 50. Only 9 percent of Liberals give a positive evaluation to their party and a negative evaluation to both other parties. That is the case of 18 percent of NDP partisans.

The implication of these findings is that if party cue effects reflect partisans acting as group members and following cues from their own party while opposing cues from out-parties, party cue effects should be weak in a multi-party system like Canada. Alternatively, if party cue effects depend more on attitudes towards parties than on identification with parties, party cue effects may still be strong in such systems but party identification may simply not be the an adequate moderating variable. In particular, it may be that only partisans with very positive attitudes towards the party with which they identify react positively to party cues. Moreover, people who are not partisans of a party may react positively to cues from it if they really like that party.

## Does Party Identification Adequately Account for Heterogeneity in Treatment Effects?

To determine whether partisanship adequately accounts for heterogeneity in reactions to party cues, I replicate the party cue experiment Merolla, Stephenson and Zechmeister (2008) ran in Canada in 2004. This study was one of the first studies of party cue effects in a multi-party system. It follows the conventional approach of assessing heterogeneity by interacting party identification with treatments. They recruited 196 university student participants. They found weak evidence for party cue effects. NDP cues were the most influential. The authors presented respondents one of four different treatments: a control treatment with no cues, a Conservative Treatment, a Liberal Treatment, and an NDP treatment. Treatments deal with four different issue proposals: legalizing same-sex marriage, reducing spending on social services, changing employment insurance to create a status for seasonal workers, and creating an ombudsman for older adjust justice. Note that I only

consider unambiguous treatments.<sup>2</sup>

I assess the two types of deviations from the conventional view of party cue effects described above. Self-identified partisans may not follow cues from the party with which they identify if they do not like it enough. If that is the case, party identification is not a sufficient condition for parties to influence opinions. Furthermore, and more damaging for the conventional view of party cue effects, experimental participants who do not identify with a party may follow cues from that party. If that is the case, party identification is not even a necessary condition for parties to influence opinions.

To determine whether party identification adequately accounts for heterogeneity in participants' reactions to party cues, I run Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions of policy preferences on dummy variables indicating each of the party treatments, dummies indicating partisanship with each of the main parties, feeling thermometers for each of the parties as well as interactions between all these variables. Full results are in Table A1 in the Appendix.<sup>3</sup> Here I focus on presenting marginal effects of each treatment among at different levels of evaluation of each party among participants who identified with them and among those who did not.

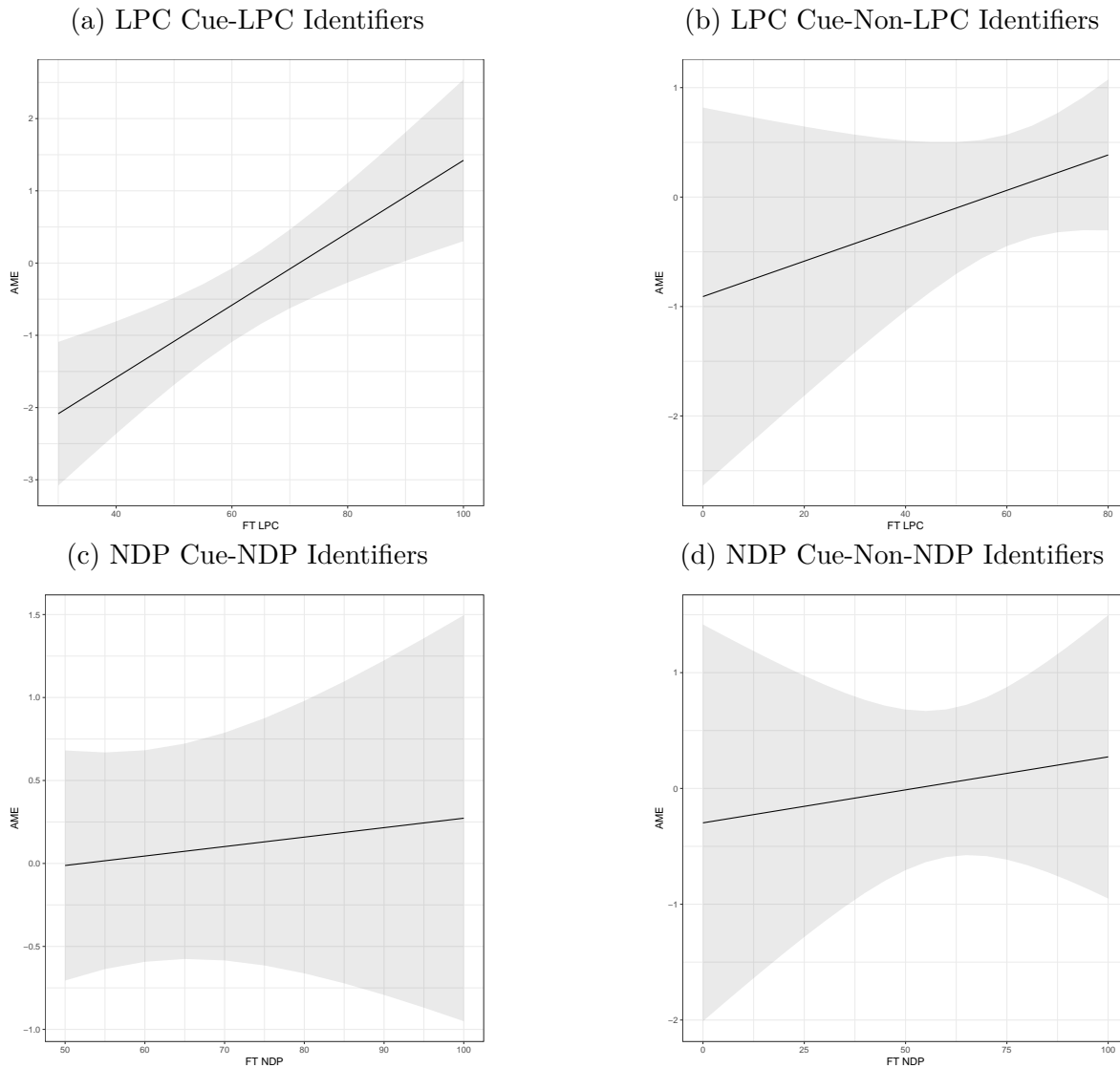
Figure 4 shows marginal effects for the same-sex marriage issue. We can see that the only cue that influenced participants was the Liberal cue. It made Liberal identifiers who really like the party (i.e. rated it 90 or higher, which is the case four percent of Liberal partisans in their study) more supportive of same-sex marriage. Liberal Identifiers who do not like the party as much (i.e. who rated it 60 or lower, which is the case of 24 percent of Liberal partisans in the study) reacted against the cue by becoming less supportive of same-sex marriage. Thus, while the Liberal cue had the expected positive effect on a small number of Liberal identifiers who really liked their party, many Liberals did not follow the cue and actually became less supportive of their party's position. This is the first result showing that party identification is not a sufficient condition for a party to positively influence people's opinions. Partisans also have to have positive attitudes towards "their" party to be influenced by it. The Liberal cue had no effect on participants who did not identify with the Liberals. The NDP cue had no effect on either partisans or non-partisans.

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<sup>2</sup>In some of the treatments, parties were said to oppose a proposal. Respondents were then asked how strongly they support or oppose the proposal. In cases where parties opposed a proposal, the question wording made it unclear whether participants were being asked to assess the original proposal or the particular party's opposition to that proposal. I thus only consider responses to treatments in which parties support a policy.

<sup>3</sup>As in the original analyses, all policy preference variables are scaled so that higher values indicate the more left-wing position.

Figure 4: Average Marginal Effects of Party Cues on Same-Sex Marriage



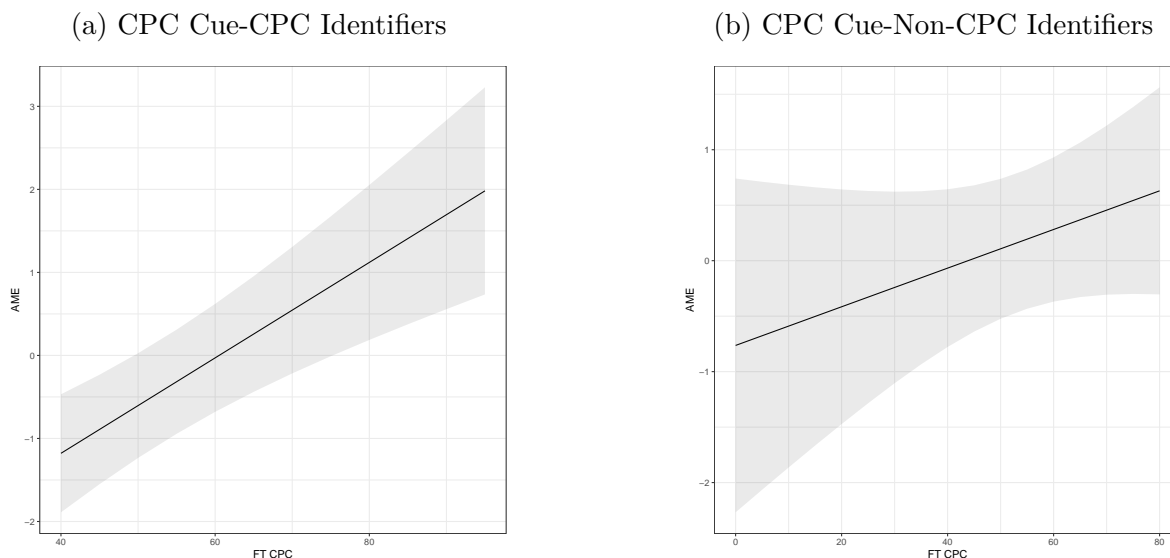
Note: marginal effects were calculated using the margins R package from OLS regressions. The Liberals and NDP support changing the legal definition of marriage to include same-sex marriage. The Conservatives are opposed to this change.

Figure 5 shows responses to the Conservative cue on reductions in social spending. We can see that, as with Liberal partisans in the case of same-sex marriage, Conservative partisans reacted in different ways depending on their attitudes towards the party. Those who rated it below 50, as did three percent of Conservative partisans, became more supportive of the Conservative position on the issue (i.e. reducing spending on social services). Those who rated it over 75, as did 27 percent of Conservative identifiers, became less supportive of the Conservative position. Once again, party identification is not a sufficient condition for a party to be influenced by its partisans. However, in this case the direction of the effect is wrong. I thus do not consider it a case of a successful party cue.<sup>4</sup> There was no effect on participants who did not identify with the Conservatives.

<sup>4</sup>Mullinix (2016) found that partisans resist cues from parties on issues that are important to them. A possible explanation for this anomaly is, therefore, that Conservative partisans who had very positive attitudes towards the party also had prior attitudes on this issue that were important to them.



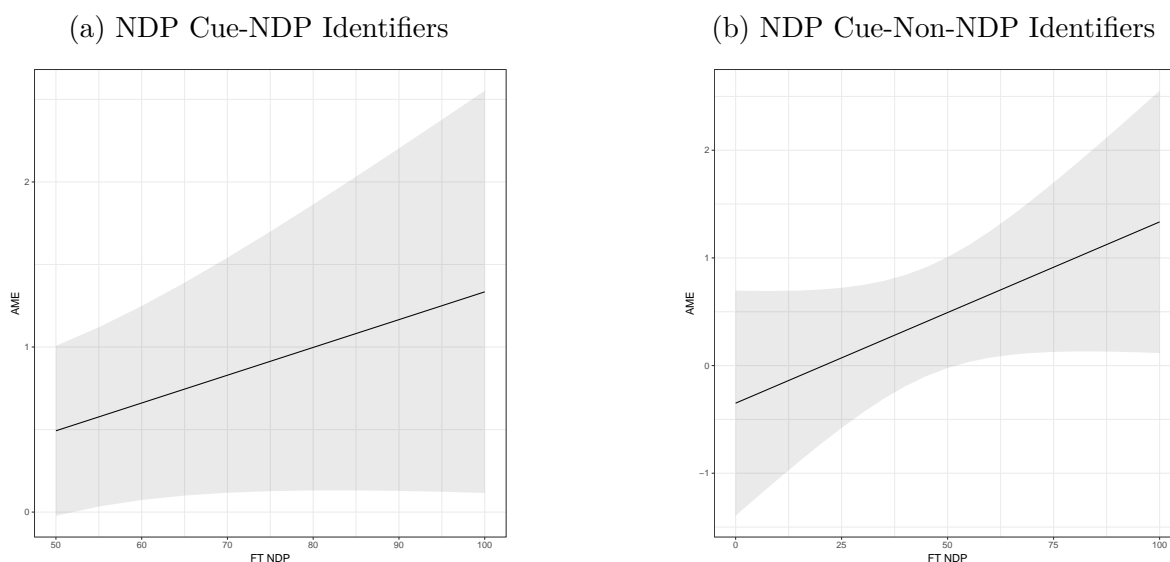
Figure 5: Average Marginal Effects of Party Cues on Reducing Spending on Social Services



Note: marginal effects were calculated using the margins R package from OLS regressions. The Conservatives support reducing spending on social services. The Liberals and NDP oppose such a reduction.

Figure 6 shows reactions by NDP partisans and non-partisans to NDP cues on the proposal of reforming Employment Insurance to add a special status for seasonal workers. We can see that NDP partisans at all but the lowest ratings of the NDP became more supportive of this reform when exposed to the cue. However, study participants who did not identify with the NDP but rated the party above the midpoint also became more supportive of the reform. These findings suggest that party identification is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for party influence. Both NDP identifiers and those who do not identify with that the NDP become more supportive of the reform when exposed to the NDP cue as long as they rate the party above the midpoint.

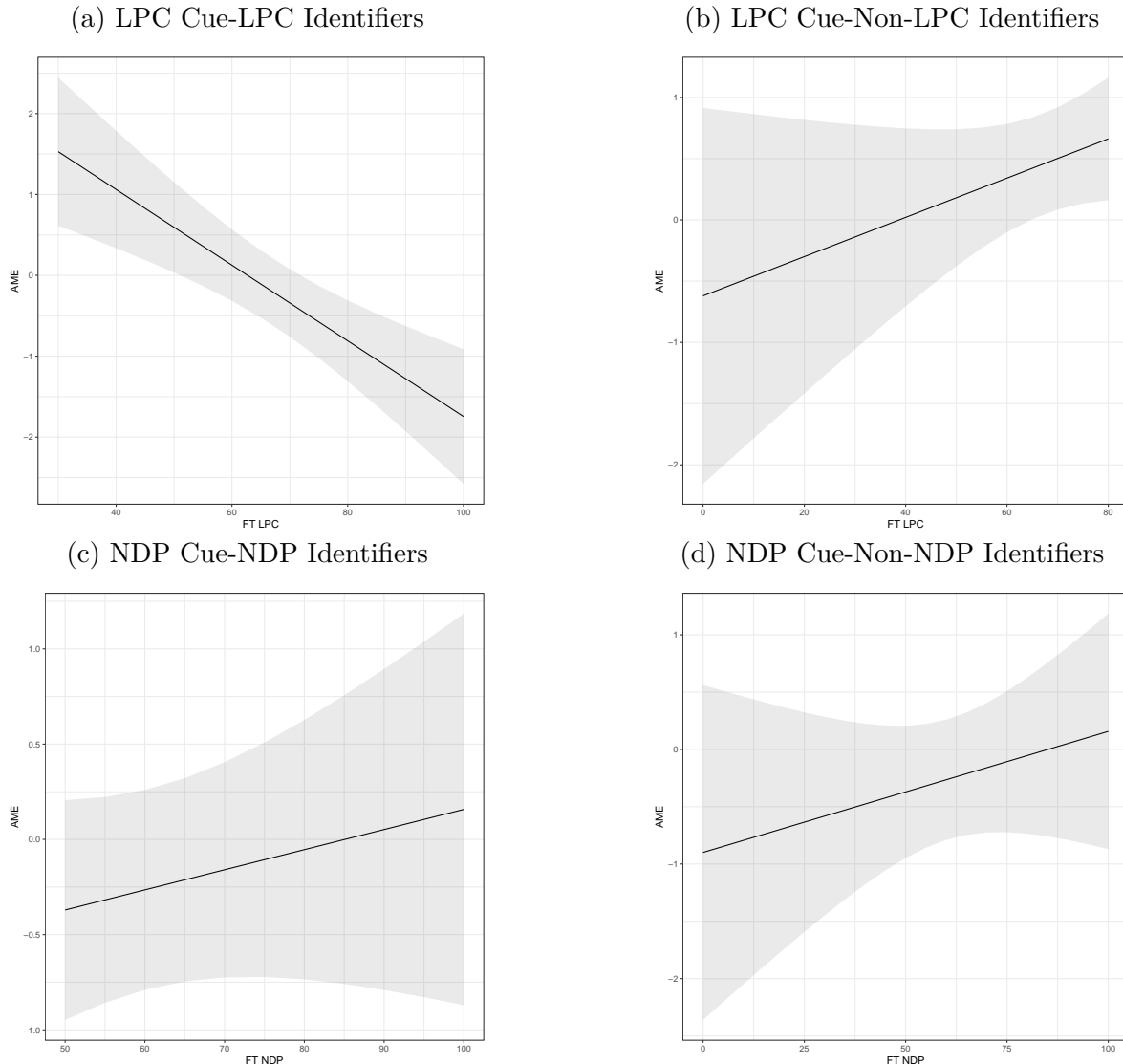
Figure 6: Average Marginal Effects of Party Cues on Employment Insurance Reform



Note: marginal effects were calculated using the margins R package from OLS regressions. The NDP supports changing the Employment Insurance Act to establish specific status for seasonal workers. The Liberals and Conservatives oppose this change.

Figure 7 shows reactions to Liberal and NDP cues on the issue of creating an ombudsman for older justice. We can see that, among Liberal partisans, those who rate the party above 70 move against the party's support for the reform, while those who rate the Liberals below 50 become more supportive of the reform in reaction to the cue. Among those who are not Liberal partisans, the Liberal cue had a significant positive effect on support for the reform among those who rated the Liberal Party above 50. These findings again show that party identification is not a necessary condition for party cues to influence preferences. Non-identifiers who like a party can also be influenced by them. The NDP cue had no effect.

Figure 7: Average Marginal Effects of Party Cues on Creating an Ombudsman for Older Justice



Note: marginal effects were calculated using the margins R package from OLS regressions. The Liberals and the NDP support creating an ombudsman office for older justice. The Conservatives are opposed to such an office.

In sum, of the six cues I have considered here, two had no effect, one of them moved respondents in the opposite direction of predictions (and another moved many party identifiers in the wrong direction), one of them, however, did have an effect but only among partisans who like their party a lot. Another two influenced non-partisans who liked the party giving the cue. Thus, party

identification is incapable of accounting for reactions to the three cues that had effects on opinions in the expected direction. While it could be argued that the Liberal same-sex marriage cue only influenced partisans who strongly liked the party because they are strong partisans, the findings that participants reacted positively to cues from parties with which they do not identify is not consistent with the conventional view of party cue effects.

## Conclusion

I have reviewed existing studies on party cue effects, particularly those conducted in multi-party systems. I have shown that they nearly all adopt the same approach to assessing party influence. I have argued that this approach relies on the assumption that people who say they identify with a party see that party as an in-group and others as out-groups. Using Canadian Election Study data, I have shown that most self-identified partisans do not have such attitudes towards parties. Moreover, I have replicated an influential study on party cue effects and shown that the cues that influenced preferences in the expected direction had effects that cannot be explained by conventional theories of party cues.

My findings show that cues sometimes only influence a subset of partisans, namely those who are very positive about the party they self-identify with. They also show that many people who should not respond to cues according to conventional theories of partisanship do react to cues from parties they like but do not identify. In, sum, partisanship is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for parties to influence citizens' attitudes.

Consequently, scholars need to rethink the conventional view of partisanship. Focusing exclusively on people who identify with a party misses much of the influence parties can have. More fundamentally, my findings point to a difficulty involved in experimental research. While experiments allow scholars to show that a treatment causes an outcome, they do not facilitate testing theories that imply that some people respond to a cue and others do not (or that they respond in a different way). Assessing such theories requires a systematic assessment of alternative explanations. My findings have shown that an alternative account of party influence focused on party attitudes rather than identification provides a more compelling account for the effect of partisanship. Future research on party cue effects should thus take it into account.

# Appendix

Table A1: Models of Policy Preferences

|  | Same-Sex Marriage | Social Services | EI Changes       | Older Justice    |
|--|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| Intercept  | 1.47<br>(0.79)    | -0.78<br>(0.78) | -0.88<br>(0.79)  | 1.72*<br>(0.84)  |
| CPC Treatment                                    | -2.59*<br>(0.63)  | -0.76<br>(0.64) | -0.99<br>(0.63)  | -1.11<br>(0.65)  |
| Liberal Treatment                                | -0.91<br>(0.87)   | -1.00<br>(0.89) | 1.19<br>(1.03)   | -0.62<br>(0.92)  |
| NDP Treatment                                    | -0.30<br>(0.55)   | 0.35<br>(0.56)  | -0.35<br>(0.56)  | -0.90<br>(0.61)  |
| CPC Identification                               | 0.44<br>(1.77)    | -0.02<br>(1.50) | 1.04<br>(1.57)   | 0.47<br>(1.55)   |
| LPC Identification                               | 0.63<br>(0.99)    | -0.36<br>(1.01) | 1.50<br>(0.98)   | -0.35<br>(1.02)  |
| NDP Identification                               | 0.26<br>(1.59)    | 1.10<br>(1.66)  | -1.16<br>(1.90)  | 2.10<br>(1.66)   |
| CPC Rating                                       | -0.01<br>(0.01)   | 0.00<br>(0.01)  | -0.00<br>(0.01)  | -0.01<br>(0.01)  |
| LPC Rating                                       | -0.01<br>(0.01)   | 0.00<br>(0.01)  | 0.01<br>(0.01)   | -0.02<br>(0.01)  |
| NDP Rating                                       | 0.01*<br>(0.01)   | 0.00<br>(0.01)  | 0.00<br>(0.01)   | 0.01<br>(0.01)   |
| CPC Treatment*CPC Identification                 | -1.87<br>(3.16)   | -2.71<br>(3.04) | 0.20<br>(3.03)   | -4.16<br>(3.09)  |
| LPC Treatment*LPC Identification                 | -2.68<br>(1.98)   | 2.52<br>(2.03)  | -2.40<br>(2.09)  | 3.55<br>(2.13)   |
| NDP Treatment*NDP Identification                 | 2.72<br>(6.71)    | 0.50<br>(3.36)  | 5.05<br>(3.42)   | -1.10<br>(3.35)  |
| CPC Treatment*CPC Rating                         | 0.04*<br>(0.01)   | 0.02<br>(0.01)  | 0.02<br>(0.01)   | 0.01<br>(0.01)   |
| LPC Treatment*LPC Rating                         | 0.02<br>(0.02)    | 0.04*<br>(0.02) | -0.02<br>(0.02)  | 0.02<br>(0.02)   |
| NDP Treatment*NDP Rating                         | 0.01<br>(0.01)    | 0.01<br>(0.01)  | 0.02<br>(0.01)   | 0.01<br>(0.01)   |
| CPC Identification*CPC Rating                    | -0.01<br>(0.02)   | -0.00<br>(0.02) | -0.00<br>(0.02)  | -0.01<br>(0.02)  |
| LPC Identification*LPC Rating                    | -0.01<br>(0.01)   | 0.00<br>(0.01)  | -0.03*<br>(0.01) | 0.01<br>(0.01)   |
| NDP Identification*NDP Rating                    | -0.01<br>(0.02)   | -0.02<br>(0.02) | 0.01<br>(0.02)   | -0.03<br>(0.02)  |
| CPC Treatment*CPC Identification*CPC Rating      | 0.03<br>(0.04)    | 0.04<br>(0.04)  | -0.00<br>(0.04)  | 0.06<br>(0.04)   |
| LPC Identification*LPC Identification*LPC Rating | 0.03<br>(0.03)    | -0.05<br>(0.03) | 0.05<br>(0.03)   | -0.06*<br>(0.03) |
| NDP Treatment*NDP Identification*NDP Rating      | -0.02<br>(0.08)   | 0.01<br>(0.04)  | -0.05<br>(0.04)  | 0.03<br>(0.04)   |
| <i>N</i>   | 177               | 178             | 180              | 171              |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>                            | 0.26              | 0.23            | 0.27             | 0.22             |
| Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>                   | 0.16              | 0.13            | 0.18             | 0.12             |

Standard errors in parentheses

\* indicates significance at  $p < 0.05$

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