

**Where Have All the Socialists Gone?  
Unintentional Biases in Opinion Surveys**

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## Introduction

Democracy is generally claimed to be a form of government that has the greatest potential of satisfying the needs of most if not all the population of a given polity. Representative democracy, as implied by the name itself, bases its normative claim to legitimacy on the accurate and unbiased political representation of the interests of all the citizens. Finding the apparent and hidden sources of distortions to political representation brings us one step closer to solving the problem of political inequality (the concept here refers to any individual-level inequality that determines disproportionate influence on political decisions). The aim of my research is to find, quantify and describe the informational component of these distortions. This paper will investigate the relationship between specific institutional contexts and the existence, size and direction of information effects in the member countries of the European Union.

Dwelling mostly on the literature linking political information to political behavior and to economic attitudes (see especially Berinsky, 2002; Althaus, 2003; and Bartels, 2005); this paper argues that information gains tend to favor pro-market attitudes to various degrees on a cross-national basis. These cross-country variations are not entirely stochastic; they often follow theoretically predictable patterns outlined in the extant literature that is summarized in the following sections (we will refer to them as the *sociological explanation*). Alternatively, the sizes and directions of such information effects can be mediated by the existence, the direction and strength of pro-market or anti-market biases in the information environment of people (we call this perspective the *propaganda explanation*).

After a brief survey of some of the more important theories and findings in the field of information effects, we make a more detailed description of the proposed causal link between information environments and information effects on attitudes towards economic redistribution. The theory is then tested using Markov-Chain Monte Carlo simulations of the effects of information gains for each country in the EES 2009 survey; the results thus found serve as input data (as dependent variable) for a country-level regression model that aims to estimate the effect of the informational-environmental bias on such information effects. Finally, the results of the empirical tests are discussed in more detail before concluding with the final remarks and guidelines for future research.

## **Size and direction of information effects: the *sociological* and the *propaganda* explanations**

Empirical studies on the matters of political information, vote choice and political attitudes have been carried out before (Bartels, 1996; Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Althaus, 1998; Gilens, 2001; Sturgis, 2003; Toka, 2002; Andersen et al, 2005; Sturgis and Smith, 2010), but the cross-national study of the links between these issues is still in an emerging state. While most of these studies focused on one single polity and had empirical findings that may reflect the idiosyncrasies of specific countries; the primary objective of this article is to provide empirical support for a much more general and generalizable theory of political sophistication and political attitudes.

Previous studies have found that political information tends to correlate with right-wing attitudes towards economic issues and with liberal attitudes towards social ones (Johnston et al., 1996; Berinsky and Cutler, 1998; Berinsky, 2002, Fournier, 2002; Althaus, 2003; Weith, 2010). Furthermore, more informed people, as mentioned before, had a higher propensity of voting for right-wing parties in most countries where this relationship was studied (Oscarsson, 2007; Hansen, 2009; Crampton, 2009), suggesting that the trend may not reflect country-specific peculiarities but rather a more universal pattern. However, such studies were only performed in a few countries and require further replication.

We can thus hypothesize that political information will correlate positively with pro-market attitudes and with liberalism on social issues (support for alternative lifestyles, abortion, euthanasia, etc.). While the latter may be very context specific and the cross-national data on such matters is rather scarce, the former are issues that are relevant in most if not all political contexts one can conceive of. Even though the economic axis (market-redistribution) may not be central to the political debate and to electoral competition in some countries (Benoit and Laver, 2005), citizens are affected by economic policies regardless of the saliency of the issue on the political scene. As a result, analyzing the impact of political information on the economic attitudes of citizens is likely to be relevant across national political contexts.

Why would political information correlate with right-wing attitudes towards the economy? There is no consensus in the scholarly literature on this matter, regardless of the numerous studies that consistently revealed the same directionality of the relationship

between information and economic attitudes (Luskin, 2003). One of the plausible causes of this situation is related to the predominant socio-economic profile of the natural supporters of economic redistribution. The natural supporters of economic redistribution are the economically worse off, who often happen to be less educated and, thus, to have less means or fewer channels of access to the mainstream political discourse. This being the situation, the supply of political information will be skewed in favor of the supporters of right-wing policies, who are generally economically better off and, more often than not, more educated than the likely supporters of economic redistribution. Consequently, exposure to political information tends to be more strongly associated with the socialization of pro-market ideas than with pro-redistribution ones. Thus, the underlying preferences of the uninformed citizens that would benefit most from economic redistribution are more likely to remain dormant than the preferences of the uninformed who would benefit more from pro-market policies (Gilens, 2001; Lau and Redlawsk, 1997). However, fully clarifying this causal chain is an overly ambitious goal that is beyond the scope of this article; what is highly relevant for our research is to investigate the degree of generality of the aforementioned relationship (is the direction of the relationship consistent across countries?) and to estimate the size of the direct and indirect impact of information on the support for policies that are traditionally associated with the economic right.

Further discussion here is needed. In case there is a systematic right-wing bias of the information environment of citizens (as previously discussed), more exposure to political information would determine the (previously) uninformed to systematically endorse right-wing economic policies regardless of their underlying “true” preferences<sup>1</sup>. I call this the *propaganda* explanation, because it refers to the unequal articulation and socialization of political ideas due to the economic affluence, increased capabilities and privileged positions of certain groups (here, the supporters of pro-market policies).

Further, uninformed citizens tend to be less able or willing to provide information about their political attitudes when prompted by survey interviewers (Berinsky, 2002; Miller and Orr, 2008; Turgeon, 2009). If political ignorance predicts both support for economic redistribution and the probability of item non-response in attitude surveys, it is highly probable that surveys depict an image of collective preferences that is skewed in favor of the

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<sup>1</sup> The term here refers to the preferences citizens would have if they were fully aware of all the possible implications of the political alternatives facing them. It is generally assumed that knowledgeable citizens approximate this ideal more closely than their uninformed peers (Lau and Redlawsk, 1997; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001)

supporters of pro-market policies. I hypothesize, thus, that political information tends to increase the citizens' propensities to give valid answers to questionnaire items related to political attitudes. Finally, I predict that the predominance of low-information citizens tends to bias our survey-driven understanding of collective preferences in favor of pro-market views. This would imply an involuntary yet systematic and potentially consequential pro-market bias in our survey-driven understanding of public opinion. We call this the “*missing socialist*” theory (Weith, 2010).

The dominant view in the literature on information effects is that political knowledge (which is assumed to be generally unbiased) tends to bring the political attitudes and decisions of citizens closer to their true preferences (Luskin, 1990; Fishkin and Luskin, 1999; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001). An increase in the level of political knowledge, according to this view, would not systematically favor one side or the other of the political spectrum; it would make the natural<sup>2</sup> supporters of redistributive policies more likely to support redistribution and natural opponents of it more likely to oppose it. To the extent that the natural supporters of redistributive policies outnumber the natural opponents of it (at least among the politically uninformed), information gains should have an aggregate effect opposite to the one we would expect if the *propaganda* explanation holds true. We call this alternative (yet mainstream) theory the *sociological* explanation, because it refers to political ignorance as being part of the structural disadvantages that impede the ability of certain groups to articulate political views in line with their actual preferences. Based on this view, an increase in the level of political information would reveal the “true” preferences of the politically uninformed, thus decreasing (or even reversing) the aforementioned right-wing bias.

The two theories are not mutually exclusive. Even in predominantly pro-market societies, the natural supporters of the left are likely to develop pro-redistributive attitudes as a direct effect of a hypothetical information gain. However, the natural supporters of pro-market economic policies are the ones who are likely to benefit most from information gains in such countries precisely because of the interplay between the *sociological* and the *propaganda* effects. While I do not necessarily endorse this view, the propaganda effects can be seen as mere distortions of the sociological effects (however, I only propose this highly empiricist perspective for ease of argumentation). This being the situation, the *propaganda* effect is less

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<sup>2</sup> The word here refers to the likely beneficiaries of such policies. Generally it is expected that people who are economically worse off would benefit more from redistributive policies; however, a lengthy discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this proposal.

apparent whenever the *sociological* effect is in place; the two competing theories make identical predicaments for the natural supporters of the market – information gains will push them closer to the economic right – and opposite ones for the natural supporters of redistribution – the effects of information gains cancel each other out, making any increase of information virtually inconsequential. Not accounting for the *sociological* effect in our empirical assessment of the *propaganda* explanation will only lead to an increase in type II errors. However, the two effects cannot be easily separated empirically without constraining the macro-level equation of my model and limiting the number of degrees of freedom, thus rendering my tests powerless. With these tradeoffs in mind, I will proceed at focusing solely on the *propaganda* theory and leaving the *sociological* one for future reference.

**Hypothesis:** *The size of information effects and the pro-market influence of information gains are dependent on the availability of redistributive ideas in the information environment. The better the leftist economic views are represented at the level of the mainstream political discourse, the lower the right-wing biases of information gains and the weaker the information effects.*

### **The *propaganda* theory: macro level operationalizations**

Are citizens more likely to hear one side of the political debate or the other? Are they equally exposed to redistributive arguments as they are to pro-market ones? Are certain views more likely to be articulated than others? All these matters are likely to have an effect on how new information influences the partisanship and beliefs of citizens.

#### *Information environment*

There are three factors that I will use to account for the potential partisan character of the information environment of different countries. The distribution of the positions of political parties or candidates on certain policy dimensions related to welfare is indicative of the relative partisanship of the supply of political information in a certain polity. The farther away the average position of the politicians is from the average position of the informational underdogs (in this case, if the propaganda explanation holds, I am referring to the supporters of economic redistribution), the more likely it is that information increases would determine the uninformed to support right-wing economic policies.

In addition to this, the existence of a publicly funded television channel and the trade union density are also expected to reveal the likelihood of exposure to leftist economic views. Thus, the increase of political information in polities with high trade union densities in which there is a publicly funded television channel is less likely to lead to an increase in the support for pro-market policies than it is in countries with lower trade union densities that do not have publicly funded television channels. All these explanatory variables will be used in our final models, either as independent of each other or as part of an index of pro-market environmental bias.

### *Controls*

Lau and his associates (2008a; 2008b) made, arguably, the most ambitious studies on the effects of institutional variables on what they call “correct voting”, which is conceptually very close to “information effect”. While “correct voting” refers to the degree of correspondence between the values and political preferences of citizens and those of the candidates they vote for, earlier operationalizations of the term (Lau and Redlawsk, 1997; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001) consider whether citizens vote for the party or candidate they would have if they were fully informed as a token of “correct voting”. This being the case, the hypotheses that apply successfully to the concept of “correct voting” can easily be transferred to our study of information effects with the sole assumption that the vote is just a mere reflection of the political attitudes that people hold. As Lau and his associates suggested, volatility (in this case we refer to the aggregate rate of change in the public’s political attitudes across time) is likely to be positively related to our quantities of interest. After all, our theoretical model requires citizens to have political attitudes that respond to environmental or individual factors which are not always rigidly stable over time. In our final analyses, attitudinal volatility will be accounted for.

### **Data and method**

In order to test our hypothesis, we used the 2009 wave of the European Election Studies (EES) for the individual level data and the PIREDEU 2009 Euromanifestos Data for the wealth of country level information that it provides. Our country level dataset includes all 27 EU countries as of 2009, each of them with individual level samples roughly equal to 1000. List-wise deletion of cases sensibly reduced our sample sizes to 700-800.

The method that we employ for testing the effect of political information on attitudes is OLS regression with survey data as input. Political knowledge, based on the count of correct answers to various political quiz questions (7 true-false items were used, with a reliability of  $\text{Alpha} = 0.73$ ), is the main independent variable and the attitude towards redistribution constitutes the dependent variable. The latter is measured on a 5-point scale that ranges from 1 (fully disagree with the statement that the government should direct more resources to reducing inequalities in society) and 5 (fully disagree with the previous statement). Multiple demographic, attitudinal and behavioral variables were used as controls in the standard individual-level model that was eventually repeated for each country in the sample. Furthermore, all the possible two-way and three-way interactions with political information were included in the model as well; thus rendering the parameter estimates for the main model hardly interpretable and generating multiple situations of collinearity. The final goal of these models is to compute aggregate marginal effects of information on the attitudes towards redistribution; thus, such assumption violations are unlikely to be consequential. From a substantive point of view, it is apparent that information can influence political attitudes in a plurality of ways; the reliable assessment of the size and direction of information effects requires the specification of a large number of such plausible causal paths.

The main hypothesis of this article is on the macro level; hence, it will require more elaborate testing. The method used to this end (the “Bartelsian” simulation model) was developed by Bartels (1996) and is now widely used for estimating the impact of political information on aggregate outcomes. After regressing the attitude towards redistribution on political information, demographics, and all the possible two-way and three-way interactions, we estimate the “first difference”  $((\text{Exp}(Y)| \text{knowledge} = \text{knowledge}+1) - (\text{Exp}(Y)| \text{knowledge} = \text{knowledge}))$ . This approach results in having many regression coefficients that are sometimes hardly interpretable and a first difference the dispersion of which is not directly observable. However, the large number of parameters will much more accurately capture all the conceivable ways in which political information may influence attitudes. Furthermore, Monte Carlo simulations allow us to create confidence intervals around our best estimate of the first differences, thus overcoming the aforementioned single-observation problem.

Hence, our next step is to simulate an increase in the observed scores of the respondents on the political information variable in order to estimate the impact of such an increase on the distribution of the attitudes towards redistribution. By simulating this aggregate estimate we obtain the margin of error for the impact of information on the

distribution of economic attitudes, i.e. we can compute confidence intervals around the best estimate to estimate the size and significance of information effects.

After repeating the procedure for all the countries in the sample, the information effects thus estimated are regressed on our macro-level variable of interest: the average position of the legislators on the issue of welfare in each country. For taking into account the varied confidence intervals of these estimates across contexts, this analysis needs to be replicated for each bootstrapped estimate for the dependent variable, and the results for the bootstraps need to be aggregated using Rubin's (1987) rules. Our hypothesis on the country level, thus, is tested using linear regression with countries as units of analysis.

Due to scarcity of data, we were only able to run preliminary tests of our hypothesis, leaving important parts of our theory untested at the moment. This paper should only be read as work in progress until further tests are run.

### **Results; first trials**

Our results show notable variance in the size of information effects across the 27 EU countries. Table 1 shows the distribution of the simulated information effects for each country in the sample. Information gains are generally associated with less support for redistribution; however, there are large deviations from this pattern (see especially Portugal). The distributions of simulated information effects average sensibly above 0; what is even more disconcerting is that the direction of information effects is very inconsistent across simulations (Figure 1 below makes this graphically apparent).

[Table 1 around here]

[Figure 1 around here]

Information effects do not seem significantly correlated with the pro-market biases of the information environments. Neither the expected values of the dependent variable, nor the slope of information or the first difference can be predicted with acceptable levels of certainty using our independent variable of interest. The results are summarized in Table 2 below. With the exception of the first model in the table, where the dependent variable is the expected value of the public's attitude towards redistribution, the estimates for the slopes are smaller than the ones for standard errors. This makes it apparent that the lack of statistical

significance is not an artifact of the small number of cases that we have in our country level sample.

[Table 2 around here]

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

As stated previously, the information effects that we found are not sufficiently robust in most of the countries in our sample; and our proxy for the informational bias of the environment did not manage to account for the cross-country variations in information effects. There are multiple explanations that are equally plausible for this situation. Unlike most of the authors that have used the Bartelsian models for estimating information effects (see especially Bartels, 1996; and Sturgis and Smith, 2003), we included several attitude variables in our level1 model specification and interacted them with political information. Some of these variables are (at least in theory) logically endogenous to our dependent variable. Consequently, our estimates for the first differences do not only measure the impact of knowledge on the public's attitude towards redistribution, but they also measure the effect of the former on the level of agreement between the attitudes of the public towards issues that are expected to be internally constrained (Converse, 1964). This being the case, our models give increased leverage to the *sociological* explanation previously described, thus reducing our ability to see the information effects that can be attributed to what we called the *propaganda* theory.

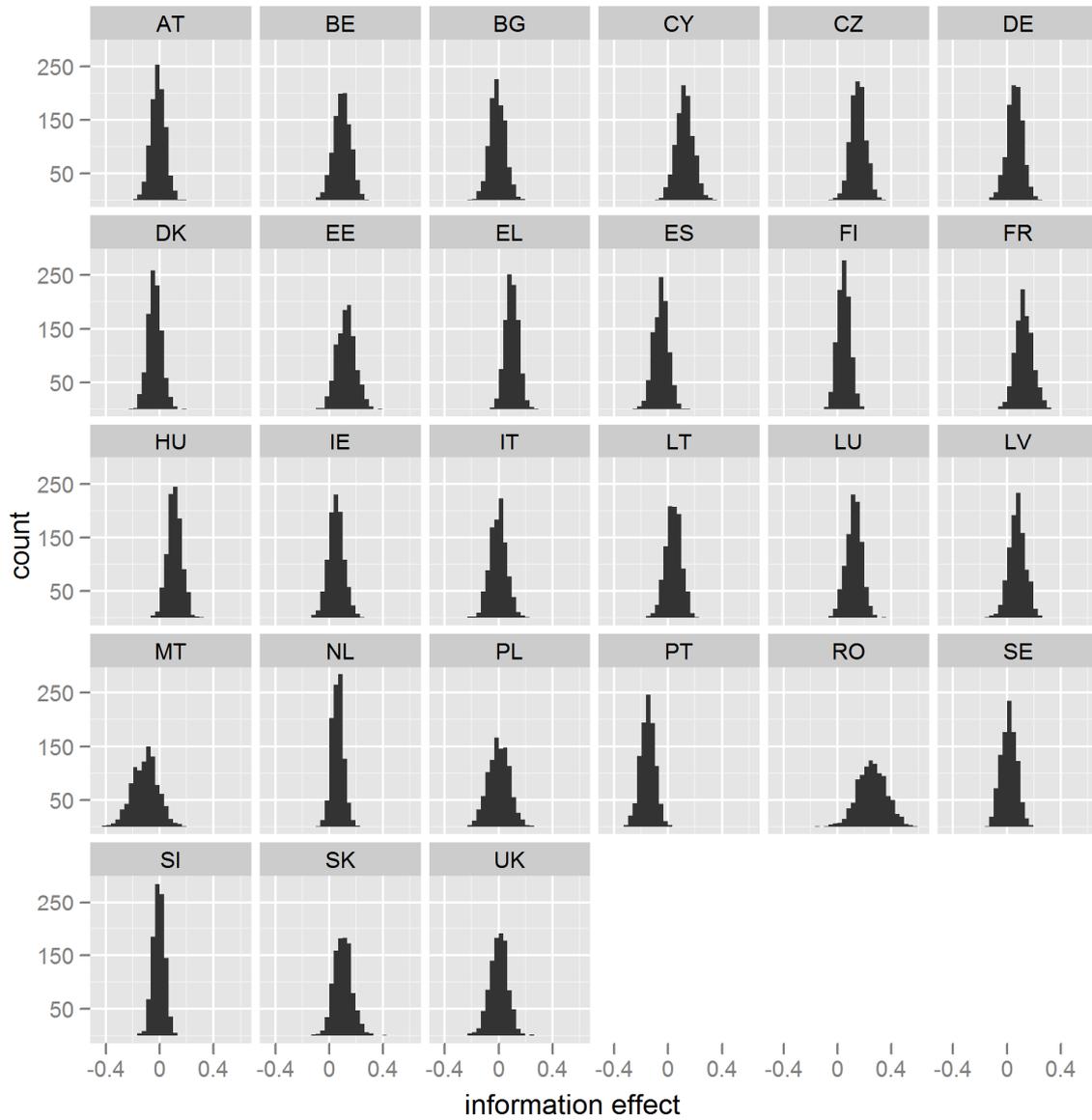
It is also possible that the positive results in the literature are only caused by certain peculiarities of the relatively small number of polities in which the respective studies were conducted. However, our study is not the first one to address the issue of information effects on a cross-country basis (Popescu et al, 2010; Lau et al, 2008a; Lau et al, 2008b), leading us to the conclusion that the it is our model that requires more elaborate testing.

Finally, the study presented here is, allegedly, underdeveloped. In order to reduce type 2 errors and get more reliable estimates of the effects of interest, the empirical tests need to account for all three explanations described in the text: the "sociological", "propaganda", and the "missing socialist" one. We are determined to incorporate these in more advanced versions of the current paper.

**Table 1.**

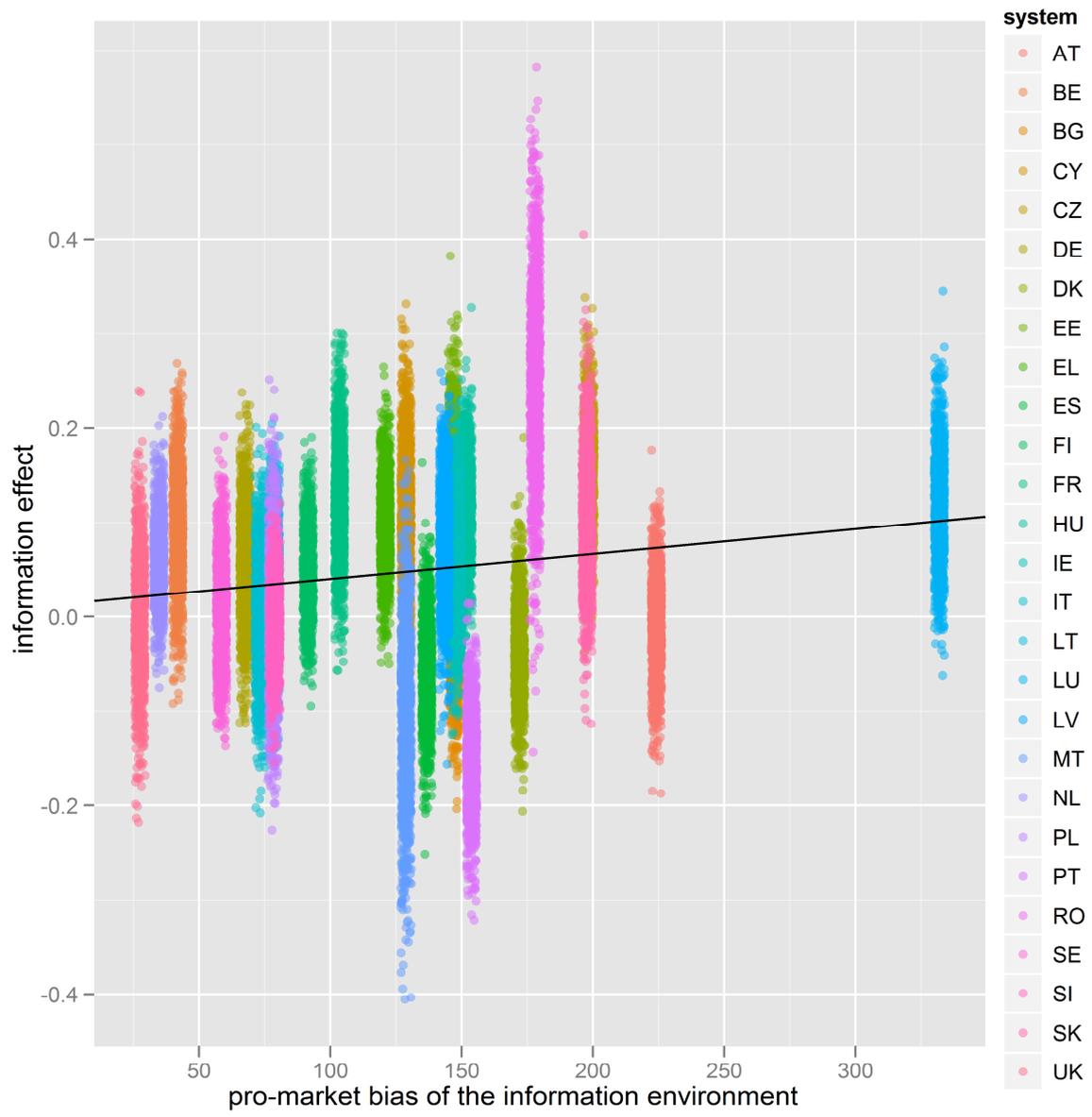
Information effect across 27 EU countries									
	AT	BE	BG	CY	CZ	DE	DK	EE	EL
Min.	-0.19	-0.09	-0.20	-0.07	-0.04	-0.11	-0.21	-0.08	-0.05
1st Qu.	-0.05	0.05	-0.05	0.08	0.11	0.02	-0.07	0.08	0.06
Median	-0.01	0.10	-0.01	0.12	0.15	0.06	-0.04	0.13	0.10
Mean	-0.01	0.10	-0.01	0.12	0.15	0.06	-0.04	0.13	0.10
3rd Qu.	0.02	0.14	0.03	0.16	0.19	0.10	-0.00	0.17	0.13
Max.	0.18	0.27	0.18	0.33	0.34	0.24	0.19	0.38	0.27
	ES	FI	FR	HU	IE	IT	LT	LU	LV
Min.	-0.25	-0.09	-0.06	-0.06	-0.13	-0.21	-0.15	-0.06	-0.16
1st Qu.	-0.09	0.01	0.08	0.08	0.01	-0.05	0.00	0.08	0.04
Median	-0.05	0.05	0.12	0.11	0.05	-0.00	0.04	0.12	0.08
Mean	-0.05	0.05	0.13	0.11	0.05	-0.00	0.04	0.12	0.08
3rd Qu.	-0.02	0.08	0.17	0.14	0.09	0.04	0.08	0.16	0.12
Max.	0.16	0.19	0.30	0.33	0.25	0.20	0.20	0.34	0.26
	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SE	SI	SK	UK
Min.	-0.41	-0.08	-0.23	-0.32	-0.14	-0.14	-0.15	-0.11	-0.22
1st Qu.	-0.18	0.03	-0.05	-0.19	0.18	-0.03	-0.04	0.06	-0.04
Median	-0.10	0.06	0.00	-0.15	0.26	0.01	-0.00	0.10	0.00
Mean	-0.11	0.06	0.00	-0.15	0.26	0.01	-0.01	0.10	0.00
3rd Qu.	-0.04	0.09	0.06	-0.11	0.33	0.05	0.03	0.15	0.05
Max.	0.17	0.21	0.25	0.01	0.58	0.19	0.12	0.40	0.24

**Figure 1.**



**Table 2.**

Country-level predictors of information effects					
Dependent	Term	Value	SE	t-stat	p-value
ev_eco4	(Int.)	3.692	0.166	22.224	0.000
	meanleg	-0.002	0.001	-1.479	0.139
be_know	(Int.)	3.931	0.634	6.203	0.000
	meanleg	-0.004	0.004	-0.939	0.348
fd_eco4	(Int.)	0.014	0.052	0.271	0.786
	meanleg	0.000	0.000	0.737	0.461



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