

# **Party polarization and the balance between ideology and competence in Europe**

Federico Vegetti

Center for Doctoral Studies in Social and Behavioral Sciences

University of Mannheim, Germany

ELECDEM

[fede.vegetti@gmail.com](mailto:fede.vegetti@gmail.com)

Paper prepared for the ELECDEM Closing Conference, 28 – 30 June 2012,

European University Institute, Florence (IT)

**Very very first draft**

The question whether competence voting takes place conditional to some degree of ideological consensus is crucial for our understanding of citizens' verdict in electoral democracies. One of the main defining concepts of modern democracies is the one of accountability, i.e. a condition where rulers are held responsible for their actions by the citizens (Schmitter and Karl 1991). Still, to know what the public holds the rulers accountable *for*, and in which circumstances, is an important step to be taken if we want to make some normative claims over the quality of representative democracy, or if we simply want to understand an electorate's choice in its context. If voters do not seem to reward or punish their representatives based on their competence, that may imply that governments have less incentives to perform in a competent way to keep their position in office. On the other side of the coin, voters may be more concerned about the ideological position taken by a party, and use it as a heuristics to assess whether it may deliver a competent job according to their preferences. The former case would point a situation where accountability is not fully met (see Manin et al. 1999). The latter case would indicate that voters still value the quality of their rulers' performance, but they do it focusing on the means that they employ to achieve the goals (see Robertson 1976).

The aim of this paper is to analyze the impact of two alternative explanations of what voters hold the political parties accountable for, and to see whether and how this varies according to the context. The two theories discussed here formulate different expectations regarding what voters are focused on as they evaluate parties. The first, based on Downs' spatial model of voting, expects voters to reward or punish a candidate based on the position that he or she takes on a given ideological/policy dimension (Downs 1957). The second theory is based on the Stokes' valence model of politics, and expects voters to reward the candidate that is perceived as most competent in dealing with some widely-recognized important issues (Stokes 1963). The contextual characteristic which is expected to influence the extent to which these two factors influence the voters' choice is the level of ideological polarization of the party system. There are at least two reasons why one should expect polarization to play a role in this picture. First, abundant scholarship shows that in a country, the more the parties' positions diverge on a given issue domain, the more such an issue will be important for the voters as they evaluate parties (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Lachat 2011). The mechanism operating here is fairly simple: in more polarized contexts parties are expected to refer more often to their position, to differentiate themselves from the others. Thus, in such contexts the availability of information regarding parties' policy preferences should be higher, making it easier for the voters to rely on these criteria to evaluate them. This has been proven to be particularly true for the more encompassing ideological dimension (Hellwig 2010; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008). Second, the valence model of voting, i.e. the one that claims that voters are concerned about party competence rather than ideological proximity, is based on the

assumption that the policy goals are shared by all the public and the candidates, that is to say, there are no alternative positions but one (Stokes 1992). Clearly enough, the extent to which this assumption is true (or false) is captured by the level of polarization. In fact, some studies suggest that competence considerations should become more important as the parties ideological stances converge (see Green 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008).

However, empirical evidence supporting the latter point is fairly contradictory. Recent literature shows that competence can have an even stronger influence on voters' preferences the more the parties' positions diverge (Clark and Leiter 2010; Pardos-Prado 2012). These findings suggest that the impact of competence is not necessarily incompatible with the one of ideology, as the valence theory and previous empirical evidence seem to convey. Moreover, the findings suggest that competence assessments do not necessarily operate only when there is agreement over the policy direction. In other words, there may be no need for a “universally approved condition of good times” (Stokes 1992, 144) to make voters concerned about parties' ability to deliver. Indeed, the relationship between policy preferences and competence evaluations has been shown to be more complex than it was theorized in earlier studies. In a recent article, Sanders et al. find that policy considerations can have an effect on party preferences through competence assessments (2011). This suggests that voters can use the information that they have on parties' ideological positions to evaluate which one or which ones are more likely to lead the country towards the “good times”.

This relation can be explained referring to the distinction between the *goals* and the *means* to reach the goals. As it has been pointed out, while the first can be shared by all the citizens, the second can be object of positional dispute (Alt 1979; Pardos-Prado 2012; Robertson 1976). These two concepts refer to different levels in the process of achievement. The goals are expected to be perceived by the voters as ideals of future conditions, and therefore should be placed at a higher level of abstraction in their minds. The means should refer to practical actions which are meant to be undertaken in order to reach the goals, and therefore should come before and, in general, be perceived as more concrete. A person's tendency to focus on one level instead of another is surely a consequence of individual characteristics. However, this might be also influenced by the context. If higher contextual emphasis on ideology has an effect on its importance among voters' considerations as they make a party choice, it may also have an effect on their perception of the process of achievement, leading their focus on the means rather than on the goals. Thus, in countries where the level of ideological polarization is higher, voters' evaluation of parties' competence should be more influenced by their ideological stands, i.e. by the degree of ideological proximity.

This paper is organized in four sections. In the first section I report the theoretical background of the

spatial and the valence models of voting, and I discuss how competence and ideology can be related to each other. In the second section I present the data and discuss the quantitative analyses employed to investigate the research question. In the third part I will present the results. Finally, in the fourth part I will discuss the findings and their implications for our understanding of the role of competence and ideology in a context.

Given the interest on the role of the context, a cross-country analysis is the only way to go to provide the necessary variation in the covariates of interest. Therefore, for this paper I will employ data from the 2009 wave of the European Election Study. The project involves twenty-seven countries, and provides both micro-level data, through an extensive public opinion survey conducted on representative samples of the national populations around the time of the European Parliament election in 2009, and macro-level data, through a content analysis of the parties manifestos. Both these levels will be necessary for providing a robust test of the theoretical expectations.

## **1 Theory**

The question whether voters choose a party according to its ideological position or its competence in dealing with a country's most important problems lies at the basis of the distinction between spatial and valence models of voting behavior. The first type of account is based on the Downs' proximity theory of voting (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984). The model assumes that both citizens and candidates are distributed on some issue or ideological continuum, and voters choose their best option by selecting the one that is most proximate to their own ideal point on such a space. Over time, the original Downsian model has been both criticized and expanded to account for multiple issue dimensions and to include more sophisticated considerations (Kedar 2005; Merrill and Grofman 1999). One of the assumptions made by this model led to particular skepticism: the one of "ordered dimensions". According to Downs' perspective, candidates' and voters' preferences can be indeed ordered on the issue space, going from one extreme to another of a given dimension. However, this assumption requires voters to recognize the meaning of the positions which are effectively taken, and to be able to order them on one important dimension. The efforts to relax this assumption, and thus to make issue voting less demanding for the citizens, led to the "directional" model of choice (Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989) and to the theory of "valence" voting.

The latter model refers to the second type of account considered here, which was first proposed by Stokes (1963). According to the valence theory, issues are conceived as widely accepted policy goals, and voters simply choose the candidate that is seen as most likely to deliver on such goals. Thus, the assumption of ordered dimension is not necessary in this framework, precisely because it claims that in

the domain of policy preferences there is no room for alternative positions. In valence theory, preferences are general orientations towards future conditions, such as economic prosperity or no political corruption, and because of the focus on the goals of the policy action they are assumed to be the same for all (or the most of) the citizens. Given the consensus over the scope of the political action, the differentiation between parties is played over their ability to link themselves to such goals, i.e. in convincing the public that they are the most committed and the most competent in achieving them (Clarke et al. 2004; Stokes 1992; van der Brug 2004).

These two explanations come from two different sets of assumptions which, in turn, come from two different ways to conceptualize the nature of the issues. The Downsian model conceives issues as a space where different positions are possible. That is to say, every topic included in the political debate offers room for a number of possible policy outcomes. Thus, on an issue like immigration, there will be some voters (and candidates) who advocate more restrictive policies for visa issuing and controls for labor migrants, and some others who see immigration as a positive resource for economy and a good opportunity to increase multiculturalism. In this framework, the issue space is characterized by two extreme ends, and a potentially high number of midway positions, where candidates and voters take a meaningful stand according to their preferences. On the other hand, the valence model sees issues as conceptual constructs which do not necessarily offer two alternative positions. Thus, on an issue domain like the economy, all the citizens are expected to agree that the goal is to achieve prosperity. Here, parties or candidates do not compete by taking a position that is appealing for the most of the voters, but rather by convincing the electorate about their ability to lead the country towards economic good times. According to Stokes, in the valence framework “parties or leaders are differentiated not by what they advocate, but by the degree to which they are linked in the public's mind with conditions or goals or symbols of which almost everyone approves or disapproves” (1992: 143).

This conceptual difference has led to the general expectation that competence voting is more common in contexts where the political debate has reached ideological consensus over the desirable policy outcomes. However, while several studies assume ideological consensus as a precondition for valence voting (see e.g. Abney et al. 2011; Clark 2009), only a few have been interested in modeling explicitly this relationship or test it with empirical data. The only recent exceptions are substantially focused on the British electorate. Green proposes a formal model where the convergence of parties and citizens towards a common policy position leads voters to refer more on competence attribution regarding salient issues (2007). Moreover, Green and Hobolt show that in the UK, an increasingly smaller distance between the Labour and the Conservative party goes together with a shrinking importance of positional considerations on the one hand, and a growing effect of competence considerations on the

other, among the voters' criteria of choice (2008). Both these studies model the effects of ideological proximity and competence considerations on party preference as essentially independent from each other (see Heath et al. 2001: 160). With such a specification, as voters and parties converge on a consensual ideological position, the variation in the distances between the voters and all the parties should decrease, and the effect of proximity should lose significance. This should in turn sharpen the effect of competence considerations, raising them (other things being equal) to the role of the principal factor influencing vote choice (see Green 2007: 648).

A recent attempt to theorize a relation between spatial and valence considerations comes from Sanders et al. (2011). Here valence judgments are measured combining competence considerations over the most important problem facing the country, prospective competence evaluations regarding a number of issues, and party leader “like-dislike” ratings. The findings show that such judgments are indeed conditioned by ideological distances between the voters and the parties. However, two different arguments suggest that the relation between ideological preferences and competence assessments is far from being resolved. The first point regards the way in which valence considerations are operationalized. Given the interest of the authors for building a general, encompassing index of valence judgment, all the available components of what Stokes defines “the symbolic content of valence” should rightfully be included (1992: 147). Among these, the qualities of the leader are meant to contribute dramatically to the positive valence of a party. However, what can not be taken for granted using affect scales is that the object of the evaluation of the respondents is just the competence of the leader<sup>1</sup>. As research on party and candidate perception shows, people tend to infer the issue position of candidates from the knowledge that they have about their party's ideological position (Feldman and Conover 1983). Because of the generic nature of the like-dislike questions, it may be argued that the leader ratings included in the index of valence may be based at least in part on the leaders' policy positions which, in turn, may be based on party cues. Thus, even though the model proposed by Sanders et al. captures the effect of ideology on a theoretically-sound index of general positive valence, it does not tell much about the effect of ideology on the perception of competence.

The second reason why this topic deserves further investigation is more theoretical. According to Sanders et al. “perceived party locations reflect not only parties' current attempts to position themselves advantageously, but also the historically conditioned images that particular parties develop as advocates and administrators in different policy domains.” (2011: 301). Thus perceived party positions, and the consequent perceived distances from the voters, should in part contain information about how parties

---

<sup>1</sup> The question which is normally asked for the like-dislike scales has the following wording: “Using a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how do you feel about [name of the party leader]?” (Sanders et al. 2011)

are expected to effectively deliver on salient issues. This argument lends itself for two different interpretations. The first is that party positions, as voters perceive them, are endogenous to competence considerations. Thus, as an effort to rationalize their choice, voters *project* their own preferences onto parties' locations, with the result of “pulling” the favorite candidates close to themselves and “pushing” the disliked ones away (see Brody and Page 1972). However, this argument is rejected on empirical grounds by a number of exogeneity tests conducted for the purpose (see Sanders et al. 2011: 313-14).

A second interpretation for the theorized effect of policy distances on valence judgments is that voters indeed evaluate how likely parties are to perform in a competent manner based on their policy positions. This view is consistent with one of the main criticisms moved against Stokes' assumption of consensus: the one claiming that agreement over the *goals* of the political action does not imply agreement over the *means* used to reach such goals (see Pardos-Prado 2012). To give an example, while the general goal of economic prosperity is seen positively by the biggest part of the population, the policy choices that should lead to it may be object of harsh controversy. The classic economic left-right is probably the most typical case where there are two competing views regarding how to reach the general wealth of a country: through the “invisible hand” of the free market on one side, through the complete state control and planning of the economy on the other. Both these positions are supported by the majority of people whose interests are to maximize prosperity and, supposedly, to minimize the social unrest that can derive from extreme economic inequality. Nevertheless, the question whether one or the other policy direction should be taken by the government is, in many countries, subject of great dispute.

In this paper I argue that the extent to which voters rely on ideological or issue considerations when they evaluate party competence depends on which of these two aspects (i.e. the goals or the means) they are focused on. When the focus is mainly on the goals, spatial considerations should have a minimal effect on competence attributions. In such a case, an individual is expected to perceive an issue as purely valence, and therefore rely strictly on performance-related criteria, as he/she evaluates party competence. On the opposite side, when the focus is more on the means, individuals are expected to consider more carefully the policy positions that the different parties promote, and use this information to assess whether they are likely or not to do their interest. All in all, this distinction refers to how individuals represent “good” political action in their mind. For instance, a person can intend good policy making as the commitment to achieve economic prosperity, or as the willingness to make the job market more flexible by reducing the attrition that enterprises encounter in assuming or firing employees. In the first case, the focus on the goal may let the individual consider as more competent the party who emphasizes economy more strongly on its program, or the one which proposes

candidates with a stronger curriculum in activities that require bigger expertise in the field. In the second case, the focus on the means should let the individual attribute more competence to the party which promises to introduce more liberalization in the job market. If spatial models have any meaning, such policy proposals should be represented in a more economically-conservative position on the right of the center.

According to experimental evidence in social psychology, the focus on the goals or on the mean has an effect on the level of flexibility that individuals display as they are to perform an action. A focus on the goals can render individuals more flexible to switch their attention towards different means to look for those which seem to be more effective in helping them reaching what they aim for. On the other hand, a focus on the means can render individuals more rigid in their choice, keeping them from looking for different ways to achieve their goals (Marien et al. 2011). In the same way, goal-focused voters should be less influenced by mean-related (i.e. policy or ideological) considerations as they evaluate which party is more likely to deliver policies that will further the achievement of the goals of interest, while mean-focused voters should be more constrained by positional considerations.

This distinction can be fruitfully employed to investigate the relation between ideology and competence, and the extent to which this is related to the level of agreement over the policy means in a given context. Research over the effects of party system polarization demonstrates that higher levels of ideological dispersion of the political supply are associated with a higher importance of ideological considerations among the criteria of party choice among the voters (Hellwig 2010; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008; van der Eijk et al. 2005). The theorized effect lying behind this empirical finding is related to two the level of clarity of the policy alternatives in a given context. The more the parties are polarized, the more the policy positions that they offer are different from one another. This, in turn, will motivate parties to communicate more on policy, rather than on other topics, to distinguish themselves from the others. On the voters' side, this will provide more easily-available information about party policy preferences on the one hand, and will make the policy outcome of an election more likely to be different depending on which party will win on the other (Alvarez and Nagler 2004). Such a salience effect has been proven to deflate the effect of other non-policy considerations, such as party identification, but not of competence assessments (Lachat 2011; Pardos-Prado 2012). This suggests that a bigger emphasis on policy or ideological positions does not correspond to a smaller emphasis on valence or performance-related considerations. Rather, these results suggest that the more policy and ideology get salient, the more their role in competence evaluations becomes prominent.

In this study I contend that the salience effect of party polarization contributes to the way in which voters evaluate party competence by moving the focus of their attention from the goals to the policy

means that are proposed in order to achieve them. As a consequence, in more polarized countries, where parties' ideological differences are more salient to the voters, the attribution of competence should be more heavily influenced by the preferences for policies than in less polarized countries.

In the following sections I seek for two empirical expectations that can help recognizing whether this phenomenon is actually taking place. The first expectation is that more attention on the means should make voters more likely to look for the most competent party among those whose ideological positions are more similar to their own. Empirically, this effect should emerge as an overlap between the voting prediction generated by a spatial model of ideological voting and the one generated by a valence model of voting based on the evaluation of the best party to handle the most important problem in the country at the time of the election. This overlap should, in turn, be associated with higher levels of polarization:

H1: The higher the level of ideological polarization of the party system, the higher the overlap between the party choice predicted by a model of ideological voting and the one predicted by a model of competence voting.

A second empirical expectation of the effect of polarization on the voters' likelihood to focus on the means instead of the goals regards the determinants of competence evaluations. As reported by Sanders et al. (2011), policy considerations have an influence on valence judgments. However, if this influence can be accounted for by the individual focus of attention, it should vary according to the presence and intensity of factors that have an effect on it. Thus, given the hypothesized effect of polarization, the effect of ideological distance on competence attribution should be amplified in more polarized and muffled in less polarized countries:

H2: The higher the level of polarization, the stronger the effect of ideological considerations over the choice of which party is the best in handling the most important problem in the country.

In the next section I will describe the data and discuss the empirical model employed to test the two hypotheses.

## **2 Data and variables**

In this paper I employ data from the 2009 wave of the European Election Study (EES)<sup>2</sup>. Among several sources of public opinion data, the EES is particularly convenient since it offers the possibility to integrate (with more or less effort) individual level data for a representative sample of the population of

---

<sup>2</sup> EES (2009), European Parliament Election Study 2009, Voter Study and Euromanifesto Study, Advance Release, 22/06/2011 and 22/07/2010, ([www.piredeu.eu](http://www.piredeu.eu)).

27 countries members of the European Union, and party-level data from the same countries, coming from a content analysis of the programs as they are reported on their electoral manifestos<sup>3</sup>. Given the interest of this paper for the effect of a systemic-level indicator on individual evaluations, it is important that the data employed offer enough variation of context. Moreover, party-level data will be employed as controls.

The two main constructs on which this paper is focused are ideology and competence assessments. The first is measured indirectly using voters' self-placement and perceptions of all the relevant parties' positions on the left-right space. Such a dimension, which has been pointed out for long as the main dimension of party competition in European democracies (see Benoit and Laver 2006), is measured on an eleven-point scale. The way in which respondents perceive themselves and the parties to be positioned on this scale allows to compute the distances between each individual and each party. This, in turn, allows to model ideology in two different ways, which will both be employed in the analyses for testing the two hypotheses. The first is a simple appraisal of the party placed at the smallest distance from the voter. According to the spatial proximity model of voting, the closest party on the left-right dimension should be the one that offers the highest utility based on ideological considerations (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984). Thus, for an individual moved by pure ideology, this should be the party associated with the highest preference. The way in which ideological voting is measured for testing the second hypothesis is through the strength of the effect of left-right proximity on the party competence evaluations. In this case, the extent to which ideology contributes to party evaluations is expressed in the size of the coefficient that spatial proximity has in different contexts.

Competence assessments are measured with a question that asks which party the respondent thinks to be the most competent in handling the most important problem faced by the country at the moment of the interview. This variable comes after an open-ended question where the respondent is asked to indicate what he/she perceives the most important problem to be. The answers to this question have been coded and grouped into some categories, aiming to identify the issue domains that most concern the electorate. To reduce the number of topics, I further grouped such issue domains into wider topics following the UK version of the codebook of the Policy Agendas Project<sup>4</sup>.

The level of ideological polarization in each political system is measured using the mean perceived position of the parties on the left-right<sup>5</sup>. The formula to calculate the index of polarization is similar to

---

3 However, due to the absence of one of the variables employed in the model, Cyprus has been excluded from the analyses. Moreover, due to the peculiarity of its political system, Belgium has been split into two political systems, Flanders and Wallonia.

4 For a description and a link to the codebook: <http://www.policyagendas.org.uk/codebooks/index.php>

5 For each country, the choice of the parties for which the left-right position has been measured has been left in the hands of the national team conducting the survey. However, different national teams made different choices regarding the

the one used by van der Eijk et al. (2005):

$$Pol = \sum |\bar{x} - x_i| * w_i$$

Where:

$\bar{x}$  = the weighted mean of all the parties' positions on the left-right scale;

$x_i$  = the position of the party  $i$  on the left-right scale;

$w_i$  = the weight attached to party  $i$ , given by its relative vote share at the time of the election observed.

Substantially, the index is a sum of the absolute distances from the policy center, weighted for the strength of each party (given by the vote share obtained at the European Election 2009, normalized considering only the relevant parties). The level of the variable ranges from about 0.5 (Belgium-Flanders) to 2.6 (Czech Republic).

For the first hypothesis, the dependent variable captures whether ideological proximity and competence assessment overlap. The rationale behind this is that if the individuals are evaluating party competence focusing on the policy means, rather than on general goals of well-being, they will consider as most competent the party which offers the most congruent position on a set of alternative policy possibilities. This variable is operationalized by first measuring the distance between the individual self-placement and the position of the party addressed to be the most competent. Then, this distance is compared to the distance between the individual and the closest party. If the two values correspond, then the most competent party is also the closest one, and therefore the variable has value 1. Otherwise, the variable has value 0. This variable is put as dependent in a hierarchical logit model with individuals nested in political systems. Given the interest on the main effect of a level-2 variable such as polarization, the equation is specified for a varying-intercept model. However, some controls are added both at the individual level and at the system level. Among the controls, probably the most important is the number of parties that are taken into consideration for the calculation of the distances and the evaluation of competence. In fact, a small number of party will increase the possibility that the two different predictions overlap by chance. For example in Malta, where only two relevant party are considered, the baseline probability that the party indicated as the most competent is also the closest

---

criteria of inclusiveness about which parties to measure the ideological position. To alleviate this difference, for each country I included in my analyses only the *relevant* parties, according to the following rule: in general, the parties that are considered as relevant are those represented at the national parliament at the moment of the election. In Bulgaria, given the significant change of the party supply from the national election in 2005, I included the parties represented at the European Parliament after the 2007 election, which have been confirmed to be the most relevant ones at the following national election, later in 2009. From this general selection, I further excluded local parties (i.e. the regional parties in Spain). Exceptions include parties which are not represented but have been considered relevant (i.e. Front National in France, Jobbik in Hungary, PRM in Romania) and parties which are represented but have been considered irrelevant (i.e. Front National in Belgium, KDNP in Hungary, PC in Romania).

will be of the 50%, while in the Netherlands, where the relevant parties are ten, the probability will be of the 10%. Individual level controls include the strength of party identification, the individual extremity on the left-right, the interest for politics, the level of political knowledge, education and some other social-structural variables.

The test for the second hypothesis requires a slightly more complex model. In this case the dependent is a categorical variable indicating which party the respondent considers to be the best to deal with the most important problem of the country. To model this in a multi-country context, with the number of parties changing from country to country, it was chosen to reshape the data into a stacked (or long) form. In a stacked data matrix the single observations do not refer to individual respondents anymore, but rather to individual-party combinations. For instance in Germany, where the relevant parties are five, every individual is converted into five meaningful observations. Each of these observations measure the single party evaluation, and can have value 1 if the individual indicates that party as the most competent, and 0 otherwise. Thus, for every individual there will be only one observation with outcome 1, and  $n$  observation (with  $n$  being the total number of relevant parties minus one) with outcome 0. This is equivalent to a conditional logit model, with the only difference that the stacked data matrix is modeled in a multilevel setting, with observations clustered within individuals. As in the first model, individuals are further clustered into political systems.

The independent variable measuring the effect of ideology on competence assessments consists in the rough distance on the left-right between the individual and each party. In this case, the model is specified as a varying-intercept and varying-slope model, with the slope for the distances let free to vary across context. Then, to explain this variation, the variable is interacted with polarization at level-2. In order to claim the robustness of the effect of ideology and its covariation with polarization, two different models with two different types of control variables are proposed. In the first model, the main control variable measures the extent to which each party emphasizes on its manifesto the issue that the respondent indicated as the most important problem which the country is facing. The reason to include this variable builds on the “issue ownership” theory, which is commonly associated with valence issues (see Green and Hobolt 2008; Pardos-Prado 2012). According to this theoretical framework, parties emphasize issues over which they know they have a relative advantage over their competitors in terms of reputation (see Petrocik 1996). Such a reputation, in the view of issue ownership theory, is mainly in terms of competence (van der Brug 2004). Thus, a reasonable expectation would be that emphasizing an issue more than the others will increase a party's chance to be perceived as the most competent in dealing with it. This variable adapts perfectly to the stacked data matrix, as for each party it offers the relative proportion of statements made over the topic that the respondent chose to be the most relevant.

The topics in the manifesto and in the survey data were associated to each other through a common grouping within the broader categories of the UK Policy Agenda Project. Finally, to make the different issue domains comparable to each other, the total proportion of statements for each issue were rescaled from 0 to 1. In this way, even for a minor issue domain overlooked by all the parties (i.e. culture), the values of the variable are comparable to those of a bigger issue such as economics.

The second model focuses on a subgroup of the electorate, namely those who indicated the most important problem to be anything related to the main topic of economics. In this case the two main control variables refers to the retrospective and the prospective evaluation of the economic situation in the country of the respondent. This variables have been shown to be strong predictors of the competence of incumbent and opposition parties (see Sanders and Gavin 2004; Sanders et al. 2011). However, to allow the value of such individual level measurements to vary between the parties in the stacked data matrix, a further recoding is necessary. The two evaluations are measured on a five-point Likert scale, with the center indicating the neutral point (the level of economy stayed the same or will stay the same). Thus, the first step is to recode the positive evaluations as positive values, and the negative evaluations as negative values. These values have been successively rescaled, to let the variable go from -1 (a lot worse) to +1 (a lot better). Then, the variable is multiplied by 1 for the stacks regarding an incumbent party, and by -1 for the stacks regarding an opposition party. The logic is that a positive retrospective or prospective evaluation of the state of the economy should increase the chance to attribute competence to an incumbent party and decrease the chances for an opposition party, while a negative evaluation should have the opposite effect. Putting the two variables recoded in such a way in a model applied to the part of the electorate more concerned about economics should lead in both cases to positive coefficients.

Other control variables included in both models are, at level-2 the number of relevant parties considered for the stacking (the main effect is expected to have a negative coefficient, since more parties implies a lower probability to be chosen associated to each of them), and at level-1 the strength of party identification for the party of the stack, and some social-structural variables. Regarding the latter, since individual characteristics are not related to a party, it was necessary to perform a linear transformation to convert them in the form of *y-hats*, as abundant research using data in a stacked form suggests (see van der Brug et al. 2007; van der Eijk et al. 1996).

### **3 Results and (brief) discussion**

The first hypothesis of this paper regards the extent to which the party indicated as the most competent by the voter is at the same time the closest one on the left-right dimension. The rationale behind the

hypothesized effect is that when individuals' attention is more focused on the means, they will look for the most competent party among those which position is more congruent to their own in policy positional terms. Table 1 shows the results of two hierarchical logit models predicting the probability that the most competent party is also the most proximate one. The first model is a “baseline model”, i.e. a model including all the individual level predictors and the number of relevant parties at the system level. The second model adds polarization as predictor at the system level. The model is specified as a varying-intercept model, that is, all the individual effects are assumed to be constant among systems, and the effect of polarization is assumed to influence directly the dependent variable through the random intercept. All the individual level predictors are rescaled going from 0 to 1, so the coefficients express the change of the linear logit function of the dependent variable as the independent variables go from their minimum to their maximum.

#### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

As the coefficients in Model 1.2 show, the effect of polarization is positive and statistically significant. Substantially, this means that higher polarization is associated with a bigger overlap between ideological proximity and the attribution of competence. As expected, the number of relevant parties has a negative effect, for it “mechanically” reduces the number of options among which the individual can choose, increasing the probability to overlap by chance. Among the individual level predictors, the strength of party identification, the individual extremity on the left-right and the level of interest for politics have all a positive and (more or less) significant effect on the probability to overlap. The only social-structural condition that plays a significant role is the self-stated belonging to the Upper Class. The second hypothesis refers to the determinants of party competence attribution, more specifically to the influence of polarization on the strength of the effect of ideological distance on the choice of a party as the most competent to deal with the most important problem of the country. As it was described above, for this hypotheses I chose to offer two different models for two different control variables that are expected, according to previous research on valence theory and issue ownership, to have an effect on the attribution of competence to a party. Table 2 offers a model where the effect of ideological distance is tested together with the effect of the emphasis on party manifestos on the issue that the respondent indicated as to be the most important problem.

#### TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The main effect and the interaction with polarization is tested for both the variables together. There are two important points to be taken home from Table 2. First, left-right distance has indeed an effect on competence attribution, and this effect seems to become stronger the more the system is polarized. Second, issue emphasis does not seem to have a strong positive effect on competence evaluation, as predicted by previous theories and, although polarization seems to have a positive influence on it, its effect is not statistically significant. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the marginal effects of the two predictors (respectively, left-right distance and issue emphasis) as polarization goes from the minimum to the maximum value. While the effect of ideological distance grows negatively from a starting point of almost zero, the effect of issue emphasis seems to be as much negative as positive, with a weak positive push from the level of polarization.

#### FIGURE 1 AND FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

In the second model ideological distance is tested together with retrospective and prospective economic evaluations on a subgroup of the sample, namely those who have indicated economy as the most important problem of their country. The interaction effect of polarization on ideological distance is stable even when controlled for economic evaluations. What is more puzzling in this model is the negative effect of retrospective economic evaluations. Given the recoding of the variable, the coefficient means that a negative evaluation of the past economy has a positive effect in the attribution of competence to an incumbent party *or* a negative effect in the attribution of competence to an opposition party. This finding may be due to the recognition by the citizens of the effects of the economic crisis, which was in one of the highest peaks in 2009, and their hesitancy in attributing the responsibility to the governing party or parties.

All in all, the two hypotheses are confirmed by the data. Some points, especially the weak effect of issue emphasis and the negative effect of retrospective economic evaluation, will require some further investigation. However, the impact of ideology on attribution of competence is always strengthened by polarization, and its effect is robust to all the controls added in the model.

	Model 1.1		Model 1.2	
	Coefficient	Std. Error	Coefficient	Std. Error
Strength of Party Identification	0.46	0.08 ***	0.46	0.08 ***
Left-Right Extremity	1.28	0.07 ***	1.28	0.07 ***
Interest for Politics	0.17	0.09 †	0.18	0.09 *
Political knowledge	-0.02	0.10	-0.04	0.10
Education	0.06	0.11	0.07	0.11
Gender (1 = Female)	-0.03	0.05	-0.04	0.05
Age	0.00	0.00 †	0.00	0.00 †
Subjective Social Class (Ref. Cat. = Middle Class)				
Working Class	0.01	0.06	0.01	0.06
Lower-Middle Class	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.07
Upper-Middle Class	0.09	0.07	0.09	0.07
Upper Class	0.48	0.18 **	0.48	0.18 **
Weekly Church Attendance	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.06
Part of the Workforce	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.05
Number of Relevant Parties	-0.15	0.03 ***	-0.13	0.03 ***
Polarization			0.39	0.09 ***
Intercept	0.35	0.24	-0.35	0.26
Residual Variance Intercept	0.08		0.04	
AIC	12309		12297	
BIC	12424		12419	
Log-Likelihood	-6139		-6132	
Number Of Observations	9632		9632	
Number Of Groups	27		27	

\*\*\* =  $P < 0.001$ ; \*\* =  $P < 0.01$ ; \* =  $P < 0.05$ ; † =  $P < 0.1$

Table 1: Overlap between left-right proximity and evaluation of the most competent party to deal with the MIP.

	Model 2.1.1		Model 2.1.2	
	Coefficient	Std. Error	Coefficient	Std. Error
Strength of Party Identification	6.57	0.08 ***	6.56	0.08 ***
Issue Emphasis	0.55	0.29 †	-0.39	0.95
Left-Right distance	-0.20	0.02 ***	-0.03	0.05
Y-hat Class	4.26	0.33 ***	4.26	0.33 ***
Y-hat Church attendance	3.02	0.39 ***	3.01	0.39 ***
Y-hat Workforce	3.98	0.72 ***	3.97	0.72 ***
Number of Relevant Parties	-0.11	0.03 ***	-0.12	0.03 ***
Polarization			-0.09	0.32
Polarization*Issue Emphasis			0.59	0.57
Polarization*L-R distance			-0.11	0.03 ***
Intercept	-1.73	0.22 ***	-1.57	0.57 **
Residual Variance Intercept System	0.63		0.64	
Residual Variance Intercept ID	0.00		0.00	
Residual Variance Issue Emphasis	2.14		2.06	
Residual Variance L-R distance	0.01		0.00	
AIC	20111		20106	
BIC	20240		20262	
Log-Likelihood	-10040		-10035	
Number Of Observations	40849		40849	
Number Of Groups (ID)	8229		8229	
Number Of Groups (System)	27		27	

\*\*\* =  $P < 0.001$ ; \*\* =  $P < 0.01$ ; \* =  $P < 0.05$ ; † =  $P < 0.1$

Table 2: Attribution of competence for the MIP on stacked data matrix with distance and issue emphasis.

	Model 2.2.1		Model 2.2.2	
	Coefficient	Std. Error	Coefficient	Std. Error
Strength of Party Identification	6.97	0.10 ***	6.97	0.1 ***
Retrospective Economic Evaluation	-0.34	0.12 **	-0.99	0.37 **
Prospective Economic Evaluation	0.31	0.06 ***	0.34	0.19 †
Left-Right distance	-0.19	0.02 ***	-0.06	0.06
Y-hat Class	5.46	0.43 ***	5.47	0.43 ***
Y-hat Church attendance	3.27	0.49 ***	3.26	0.49 ***
Y-hat Workforce	4.25	0.94 ***	4.24	0.94 ***
Number of Relevant Parties	-0.12	0.03 ***	-0.12	0.03 ***
Polarization			0.24	0.14 †
Polarization*Retrospective Economic Evaluation			0.41	0.41 †
Polarization*Prospective Economic Evaluation			-0.02	0.12
Polarization*L-R distance			-0.08	0.03 *
Intercept	-1.59	0.17 ***	-1.96	0.29 ***
Residual Variance Intercept System	0.10		0.09	
Residual Variance Intercept ID	0.00		0.00	
Residual Variance Retrospective EE	0.32		0.28	
Residual Variance Prospective EE	0.02		0.02	
Residual Variance L-R distance	0.01		0.00	
AIC	13049		13051	
BIC	13214		13249	
Log-Likelihood	-6505		-6502	
Number Of Observations	28434		28434	
Number Of Groups (ID)	5378		5378	
Number Of Groups (System)	27		27	

\*\*\* =  $P < 0.001$ ; \*\* =  $P < 0.01$ ; \* =  $P < 0.05$ ; † =  $P < 0.1$

Table 3: Attribution of competence for the MIP on stacked data matrix with distance and economic evaluations.

Figure 1: Marginal Effect Left-Right Distance (Model 2.1.2)

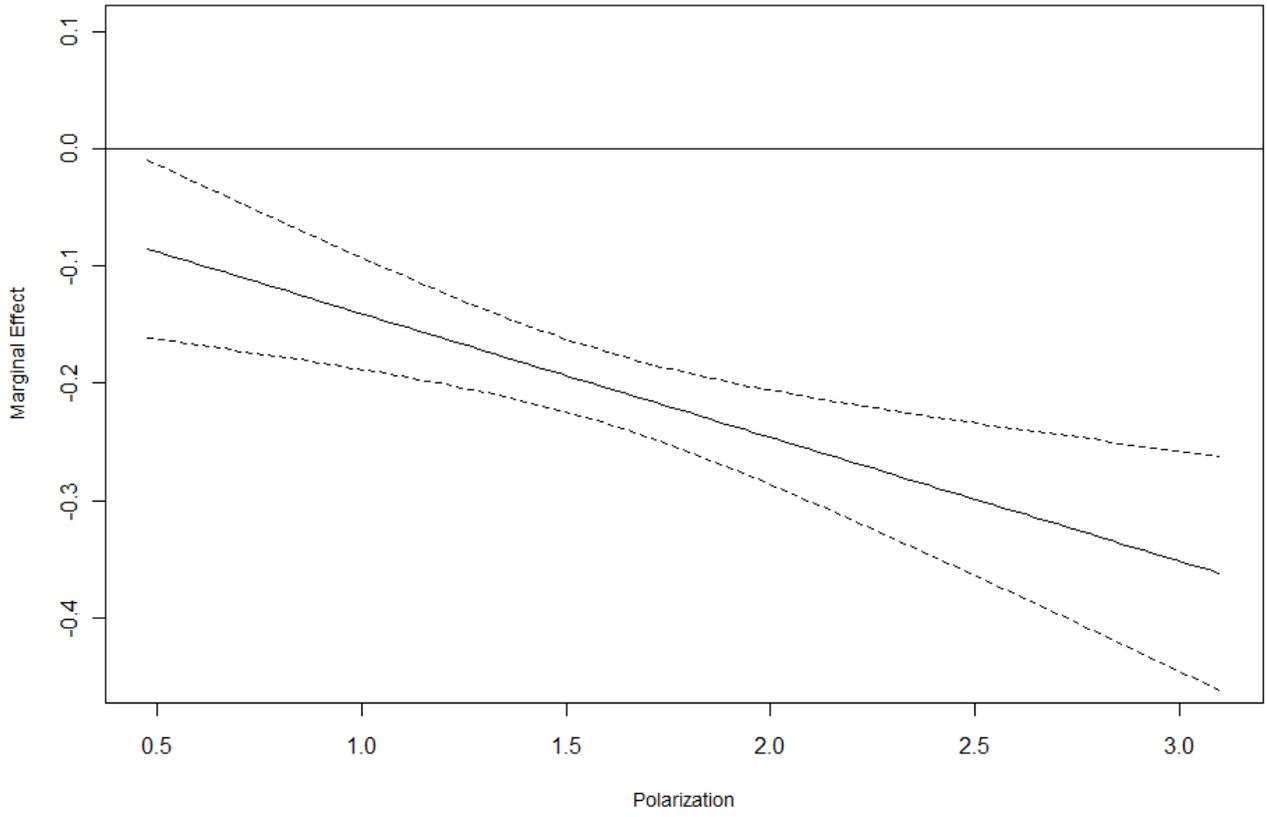


Figure 2: Marginal Effect Issue Emphasis (Model 2.1.2)

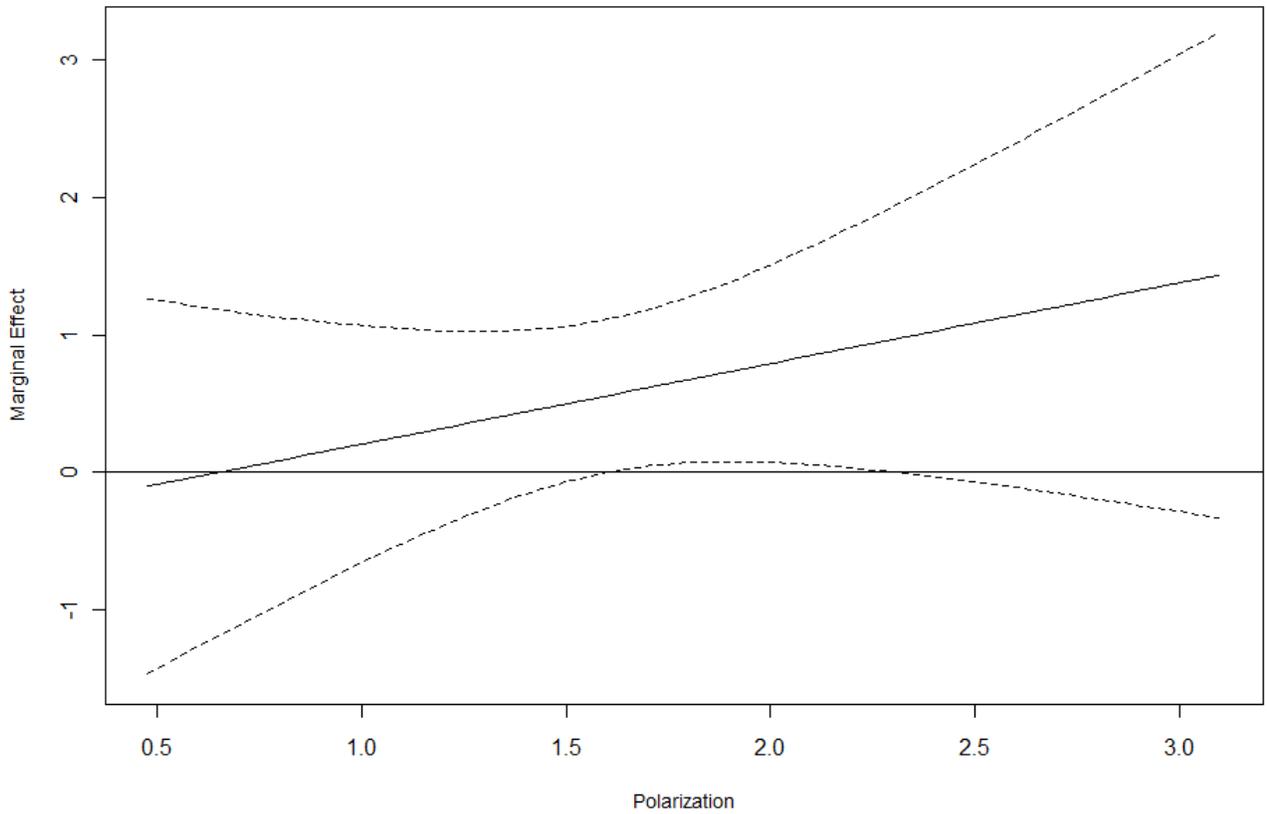


Figure 3: Marginal Effect Left-Right Distance (Model 2.2.2)

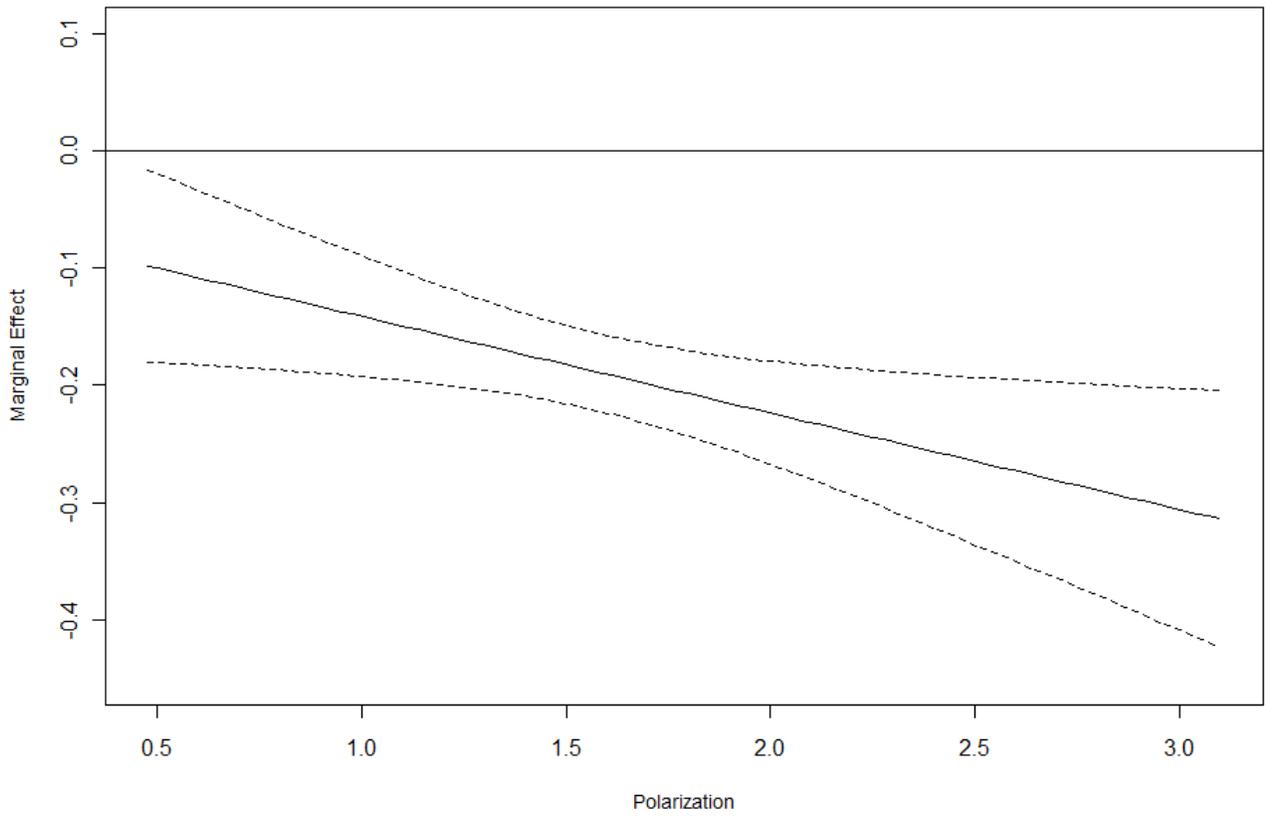


Figure 4: Marginal Effect Retrospective Economic Evaluations (Model 2.2.2)

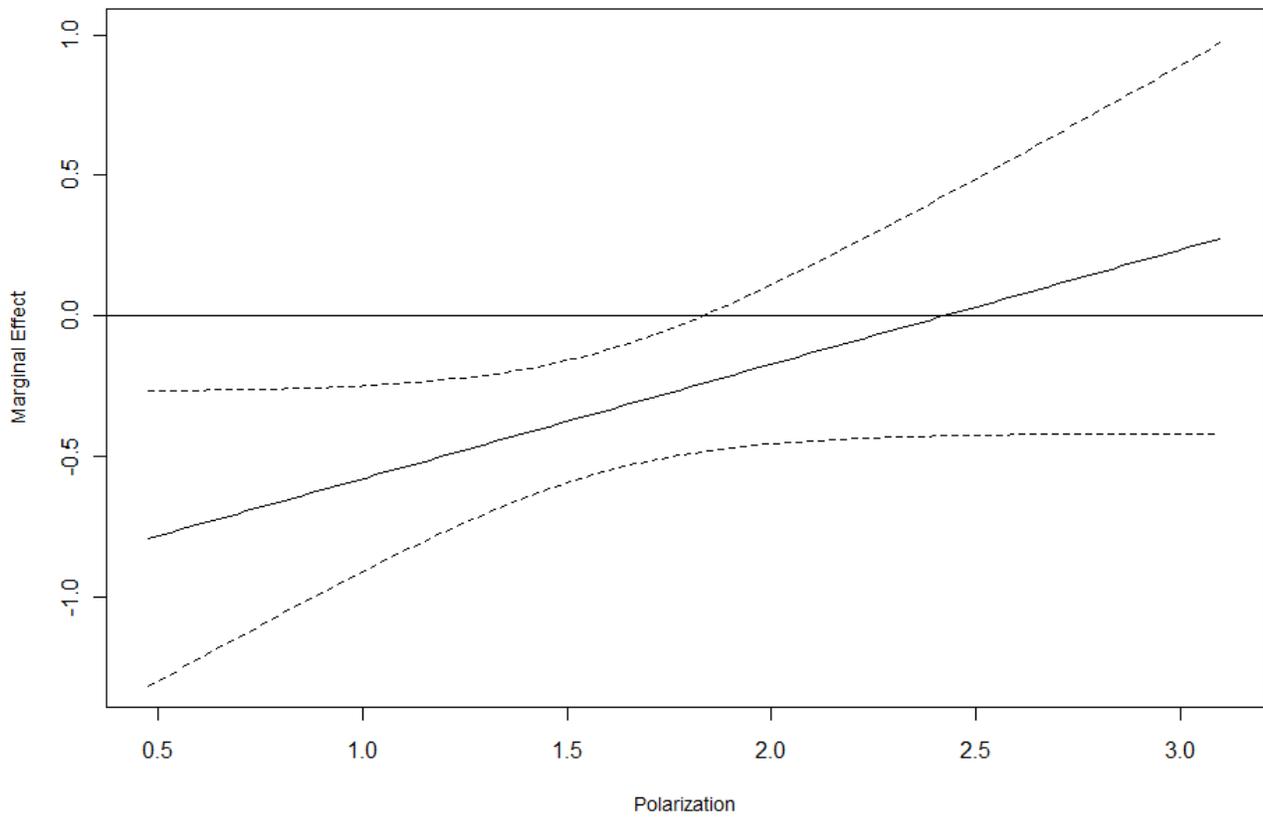
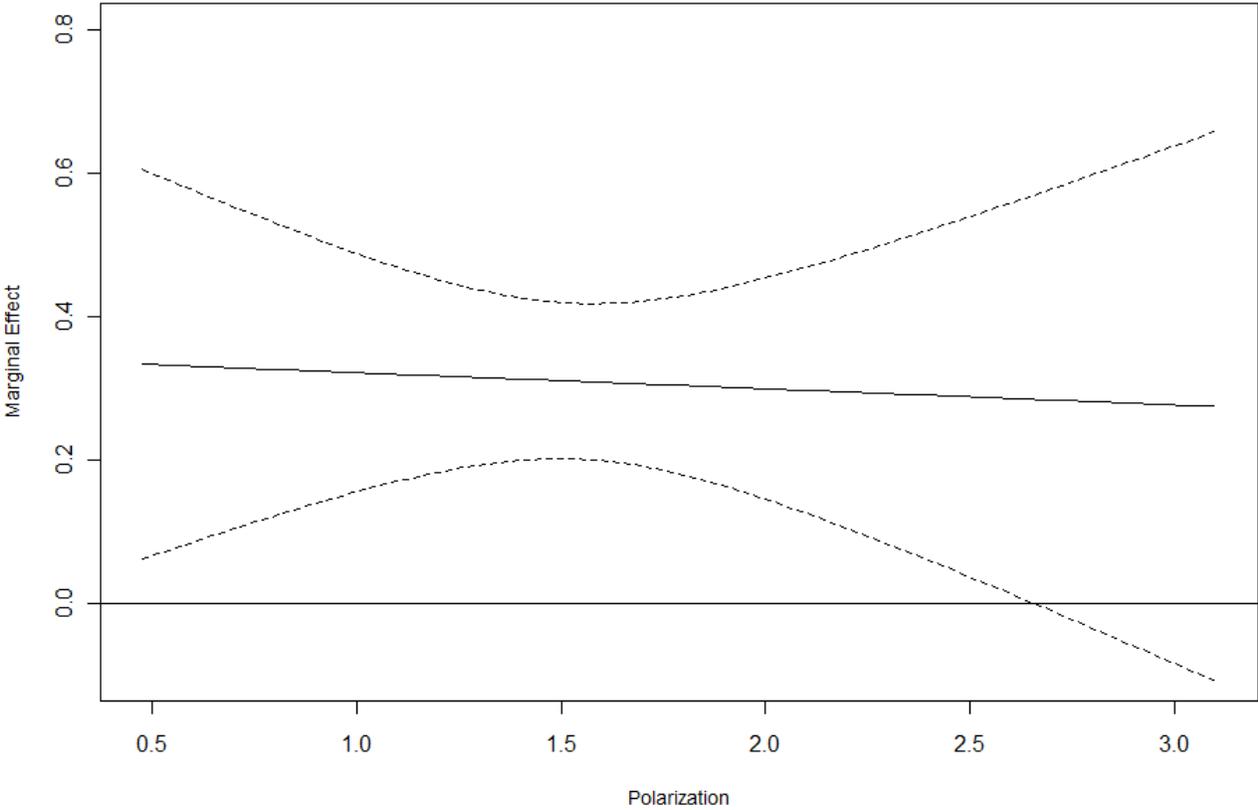


Figure 5: Marginal Effect Prospective Economic Evaluations (Model 2.2.2)



## References

- Abney, Ronni et al. 2011. "When does valence matter? Heightened valence effects for governing parties during election campaigns." *Party Politics*: 1–22.
- Alt, J.E. 1979. *The Politics of Economic Decline: Economic Management and Political Behaviour in Britain Since 1964*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alvarez, Michael R., and Jonathan Nagler. 2004. "Party System Compactness: Measurement and Consequences." *Political Analysis* 12(1): 46–62.
- Benoit, Kenneth, and Michael Laver. 2006. *Party Policy in Modern Democracies*. London: Routledge.
- Brody, Richard A., and Benjamin I. Page. 1972. "The Assessment of Policy Voting." *American Political Science Review* 66(2): 450–458.
- van der Brug, Wouter. 2004. "Issue ownership and party choice." *Electoral Studies* 23(2): 209–233.
- van der Brug, Wouter, Cees van der Eijk, and Mark Franklin. 2007. *The Economy and the Vote*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, Michael. 2009. "Valence and electoral outcomes in Western Europe, 1976–1998." *Electoral Studies* 28(1): 111–122.
- Clark, Michael, and Debra Leiter. 2010. "Does the Ideological Dispersion of Parties Mediate the Electoral Impact of Valence? A Cross-National Study of Party Support in Nine Western European Democracies." In Washington, USA.
- Clarke, Harold D. et al. 2004. *Political Choice in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van der Eijk, Cees, and Mark N. Franklin. 1996. *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- van der Eijk, Cees, Hermann Schmitt, and Tanja Binder. 2005. "Left-Right Orientation and Party Choice." In *The European Voter. A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, ed. Jacques Thomassen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 167–191.
- Enelow, James M., and Melvin J. Hinich. 1984. *The spatial theory of voting*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Feldman, Stanley, and Pamela Johnston Conover. 1983. "Candidates, Issues and Voters: The Role of Inference in Political Perception." *Journal of Politics* 45: 810–839.
- Green, Jane. 2007. "When Voters and Parties Agree: Valence Issues and Party Competition." *Political Studies* 55: 629–655.
- Green, Jane, and Sara B. Hobolt. 2008. "Owning the Issue Agenda. Party Strategies and Vote Choices in British Elections." *Electoral Studies* 27(3): 460–476.
- Heath, Anthony F., Roger M. Jowell, and John Cutrice. 2001. *The Rise of New Labour. Party Policies and Voter Choices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hellwig, Timothy. 2011. "Context, Political Information, and Performance Voting." In *Citizens, Context, and Choice. How Context Shapes Citizens' Electoral Choices*, eds. Russell J. Dalton and

- Christopher J. Anderson. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kedar, Orit. 2005. "When Moderate Voters Prefer Extreme Parties: Policy Balancing in Parliamentary Elections." *American Political Science Review* 99(2): 185–199.
- Kroh, Martin. 2009. "The Ease of Ideological Voting: Voter Sophistication and Party System Complexity." In *The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems*, ed. Hans-Dieter Klingemann. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lachat, Romain. 2011. "Electoral competitiveness and issue voting." *Political Behavior* 33(4): 645–663.
- Lachat, Romain. 2008. "The impact of party polarization on ideological voting." *Electoral Studies* 27(4): 687–698.
- Manin, Bernard, Susan C. Stokes, and Adam Przeworski, eds. 1999. *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marien, Hans, Henk Aarts, and Ruud Custers. 2011. "Being flexible or rigid in goal-directed behavior: When positive affect implicitly motivates the pursuit of goals or means." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48(1): 277–283.
- Merrill, Samuel, and Bernard Grofman. 1999. *A Unified Theory of Voting. Directional and Proximity Spatial Models*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pardos-Prado, Sergi. 2012. "Valence beyond consensus: Party competence and policy dispersion from a comparative perspective." *Electoral Studies* forthcoming: 1–11.
- Petrocik, John R. 1996. "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study." *American Journal of Political Science* 40(3): 825–850.
- Rabinowitz, George, and Stuart Elaine MacDonald. 1989. "A Directional Theory of Issue Voting." *American Political Science Review* 83(1): 93–121.
- Robertson, D. 1976. *A Theory of Party Competition*. London and New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Sanders, David et al. 2011. "Downs, Stokes and the Dynamics of Electoral Choice." *British Journal of Political Science* 41: 287–314.
- Sanders, David, and Neil Gavin. 2004. "Television News, Economic Perceptions and Political Preferences in Britain, 1997–2001." *Journal of Politics* 66(4): 1245–1266.
- Schmitter, Philippe C., and Terry Lynn Karl. 1991. "What Democracy Is... And Is Not." *Journal of Democracy* 2: 75–88.
- Stokes, Donald E. 1963. "Spatial Models of Party Competition." *American Political Science Review* 57(2): 368–377.
- Stokes, Donald E. 1992. "Valence Politics." In *Electoral Politics*, ed. D. Kavanagh. Oxford: Clarendon Press.