

**Are Voter Decision Rules Endogenous to Parties' Policy Strategies?
A Model with Applications to Elite Depolarization in Post-Thatcher Britain**

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Abstract

While spatial modelers assume that citizens evaluate parties on the basis of their policy positions, empirical research on American politics suggests that citizens' party support often drives their policy preferences, rather than vice-versa. Building on previous findings that partisanship is less salient to European citizens than to Americans, we argue that when European party elites are polarized on salient policy dimensions, citizens will update their partisanship to match their policy beliefs, but not vice-versa. We further argue that because policy salience declines when parties converge on policy, European citizens may cease to update their partisanship in response to parties' policy positions when the parties are not sufficiently polarized on a focal policy dimension. We evaluate these hypotheses via individual-level analyses of British election panel survey data between 1987 and 2001.

The reciprocal relationship between citizens' policy preferences and their party support has motivated extensive scholarly research, in both Europe and the United States. Numerous studies assess whether citizens evaluate parties on the basis of policy considerations, a *policy-driven* process, or whether parties instead cue their pre-existing partisans to adopt the party's policy outlook, a *party persuasion* process (see, e.g., Carrubba 2001; Evans and Andersen 2004; Carsey and Layman 2006; Goren 2005;). These issues are critical for understanding elections, party strategies, and political representation. With respect to representation (e.g., Dalton 1985; Powell 2000; Erikson et al. 2002; McDonald and Budge 2005; Golder and Stramski 2010), if party elites shape citizens' policy beliefs then public opinion may simply mirror these elites' own viewpoints, and the correspondence between mass and elite opinion tells us little about whether parties provide faithful policy representation. With respect to parties' policy strategies, the spatial model of elections (e.g., Downs 1957; Kedar 2009; Meguid 2009) posits that citizens choose parties based on their policy positions, rather than vice-versa, and proceeds to analyze how vote- or office-seeking parties should position their policies so as to attract electoral support. However, if the real-world causal relationship actually runs from voters' party support to their policy positions, then the spatial approach is problematic for illuminating parties' policy strategies.

We develop two arguments about the reciprocal relationships between European citizens' policy preferences and their party attachments. First, building on previous findings that partisanship is less salient to European citizens than to Americans (e.g., Shiveley 1979; Westholm and Niemi 1992), we argue that when rival European parties stake out polarized positions on a policy or ideological dimension, this dimension becomes more salient to voters so that their policy beliefs drive their partisanship, rather than vice-versa (the *policy salience hypothesis*). We further argue, however, that policy considerations are not always salient to voters. When party elites adopt less polarized positions on a focal policy dimension, the dimension becomes less salient to voters and thereby exerts less influence on their party attachments. Thus, we argue that citizens' decision rules are an *endoge-*

nous function of parties' relative policy positions (the *political context hypothesis*). This latter hypothesis, which builds on important research by Carsey and Layman (2006), Highton and Kam (2009), and others, implies that a core spatial modeling assumption, that voters' policy preferences drive their party support, may not hold when moderate parties confront each other, even if the policy differences between these parties (for instance between parties of the center-left versus parties of the center-right) are meaningful.

We evaluate the policy salience and the political context hypotheses via individual-level analyses of British election survey panel data between 1987-2001, a time period when Labour and Conservative party elites converged on the Left-Right ideological dimension¹, and find support for both hypotheses. Specifically, we conclude that during the initial part of the 1987-2001 period, when the parties were polarized on policy dimensions relating to Left-Right ideology, British citizens reacted to the parties' positions by updating their partisanship to match their ideology, but not vice-versa – a pattern that supports the policy salience hypothesis. However, during the latter part of this period, when British voters perceived ideological depolarization between Conservative and Labour party elites, citizens ceased to update their party attachments to match their ideological preferences, even though citizens continued to perceive meaningful policy differences between these parties. Thus, the influence of British citizens' policy preferences on their partisanship declined (and ultimately disappeared) as the ideological gap between the parties narrowed – a finding that supports the political context hypothesis. At no point during the 1987-2001 time period do we detect substantively significant influences of citizens' party attachments on their policy preferences.

¹ We restrict our analysis to the 1987-2001 time period because the 2005 British Election Study (BES) survey omits the policy questions which are the basis of our analysis, while the pre-1987 BES policy questions have different end-points and (in some cases) different question wordings.

We believe our findings are important for three reasons. First, our European-based findings in support of the policy salience hypothesis stand in sharp contrast to the findings reported by American politics scholars. The U.S.-based literature on the reciprocal linkages between partisanship and policy attitudes find that the predominant pattern is for citizens to update their policy preferences to match their party ID, not vice-versa (Carsey and Layman 2006; Goren 2005; Layman and Carsey 2002). By contrast, we conclude that during periods of elite polarization, the causal influence of British citizens' policy viewpoints on their partisanship is stronger – and the effect of British citizens' partisanship on their policy beliefs is weaker – than it is in the United States.

Second, our findings have an important – and positive – implication for political representation, namely, that when European party elites take polarized positions on a salient policy or ideological dimension, voters will choose parties based on their policy views, rather than vice versa. This pattern is reassuring since it is arguably most critical that citizens apply such policy-based voting criteria to salient dimensions that sharply divide the parties (e.g. Powell, 2000; McDonald and Budge 2005; Golder and Stramski 2010). By contrast, our findings suggest that citizens eschew policy-based voting when the policy dimension is less salient, which is likely to occur when the parties are not significantly polarized on the dimension. Yet in these latter scenarios, policy-based voting by citizens is arguably less critical for policy representation.

Third, with respect to British politics, our analyses document the dramatic shift away from the policy-based electoral politics of the Thatcher era to the current period of British politics, in which voters' policy beliefs no longer drive their party attachments. Clarke et al. (2004, 2009) document that the British general elections of 2001 and 2005 turned primarily on citizens' performance-based “valence” considerations relating to party elites' abilities to manage the economy, to address security issues such as crime and terrorism, and to efficiently deliver public services. We believe that our analyses – which demonstrate that British citizens' policy beliefs drove their party attachments during the Thatcher era, but that during the post-Thatcher period citizens have ceased to

update their partisanship in response to policy considerations – traces the evolution towards the era of performance-based politics that Clark et al. document.

The Reciprocal Relationships between British Citizens’ Policy Preferences and their Party Support: Hypotheses

In the United States, the debate over the reciprocal influences of citizens’ partisanship and policy beliefs has intensified in recent years. The conventional wisdom of the 1970s and 1980s – that mass partisanship was weakening and was largely driven by other political evaluations, including policy-based considerations (e.g., Fiorina 1981; Page and Jones 1979; Wattenberg 1984) – has been challenged by research that documents strengthening partisan ties that exert increasing effects on vote choice, and which are largely exogenous to short-term political evaluations (e.g., Bartels 2000; Green et al. 2002; Hetherington 2001). Over the past decade scholars have extended this debate by analyzing the reciprocal partisan-policy influences across different issue domains including political values (Goren 2005) and racial, social welfare, and cultural issues (Layman and Carsey 2002; Carsey and Layman 2006; Highton and Kam 2009). Although these studies reach conflicting conclusions about whether (and to what extent) citizens’ attitudes influence their partisanship, they uniformly conclude that partisanship influences citizens’ policy attitudes and political values. This latter finding suggests that partisanship remains central to American partisans’ identities, and that partisan loyalty, while perhaps not the “unmoved mover” posited by the authors of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), remains sufficiently salient that citizens experience pressure to bring their policy beliefs in line with their political affiliations.

Studies on European political behavior suggest several reasons why European citizens’ partisanship may be less central to their self-images than are policy beliefs and political values. First, European scholars question the meaning of party identification in Western Europe, and its correspondence with the concept in the United States. Whereas party identification shows notable stability in

the U.S., it is less stable in Europe and reflects (but does not anchor) current party support (see Butler and Stokes 1969). This suggests that the assumption that party identification represents a defining, salient identity is problematic in a European context. European scholars also emphasize the political salience of other voter attributes such as social class and religion, which shape voters' social identities – and their policy attitudes – to a greater extent than party identification (Shiveley 1979; Westholm and Niemi 1992; Thomassen 2005). Indeed, some scholars argue that the concept of party identification as a social identity simply does not apply to British voters (Bartle 1999; Clarke et al. 2004, 2009) or to European electorates more generally (e.g., Dalton 2008, chapter 9). Additionally, the American and European electorates display contrasting over-time trends in mass partisanship. Whereas the strength of party identification has increased in the United States over the past two decades (e.g., Bartels 2002; Heatherington 2001), a reverse process of *partisan dealignment* has occurred across much of Europe (see Berglund et al. 2005), which is linked to increased voter sophistication along with political parties' perceived inability to solve pressing social, economic, and environmental problems. This partisan dealignment pattern is most clearly documented in Britain (Whiteley and Seyd 2002; Denver 2003; Clarke et al, 2009; Clarke and McCutcheon 2009). As European voters become less attached to political parties we expect partisanship to exert weaker effects on citizens' policy beliefs.

The considerations outlined above imply that, *contra* Americanists' findings that partisanship consistently sways citizens' policy beliefs, the dominant causal relationship in Europe should run from citizens' policy/ideological beliefs to their party attachments. Moreover, we expect European voters' policy beliefs to exert the maximum effects on their party attachments when elites take polarized policy positions. If parties do not offer distinct positions on a policy dimension then voters cannot use that dimension to compare the parties (Downs 1957; Hellwig 2008; Green 2007), and, furthermore, party elites have little incentive to campaign on issues that do not distinguish the party

from its opponent(s). By emphasizing policy dimensions where parties diverge, parties can increase the saliency of that dimension to voters. These considerations motivate our first hypothesis:

H1 (The Policy Saliency Hypothesis): When European parties are polarized on a policy or ideological dimension, voters will update their partisanship to match their policy/ideological beliefs on that dimension, rather than vice-versa.

Policy-based influences on partisanship: The importance of party positioning

In their empirical analyses of the reciprocal relationships between Americans' policy beliefs and their partisanship, Carsey and Layman (2006) find that citizens update their partisanship in response to policy-based considerations only when they perceive policy differences between the parties and consider the issue to be salient. In all other scenarios, i.e., those where citizens fail to perceive party policy differences and/or where citizens do not find the issue to be salient, the authors find no effects of citizens' policy beliefs on their party attachments. In important, related, research, Highton and Kam (2009) demonstrate that debates relating to economic, racial, and cultural policies were more salient to Americans during the 1980s and the 1990s – a period when Democratic and Republican elites polarized over these issues – than was the case during the 1970s, when the parties offered less polarized positions. The authors also conclude that citizens' views on these dimensions drove their partisanship during the 1980-1990s period of party polarization, but that citizens' policy viewpoints did not substantially move their party attachments during the 1970s period of elite consensus.²

The Carsey-Layman and Kam-Highton findings suggest that voters' tendencies to update their partisanship to match their policy preferences are endogenous to party elites' policy positioning:

² With respect to this latter point, Highton and Kam conclude that survey respondents' policy beliefs exerted substantial lagged effects on their partisanship during the 1982-1997 wave of the Political Socialization Panel Study, but that this was not the case during the 1973-1982 wave of this study.

specifically, the less polarized the parties' positions on the focal policy or ideological dimension, the less we should expect citizens' positions on this dimension to drive their partisanship. This is true for two reasons. First, when the policy distance that separates rival parties declines, citizens are less likely to perceive policy differences between the parties, which Carsey and Layman (2006) identify as a necessary condition for citizens' policy beliefs to move their partisanship. Second, as discussed above, party elites have fewer incentives to campaign on policy dimensions on which the parties are not polarized, so that such dimensions may be less salient even to those voters who perceive party differences. These considerations motivate our second hypothesis:

H2 (The Political Context Hypothesis). As European parties converge on a focal policy or ideological dimension, voters' positions on this dimension exert less influence on their partisanship.

Finally, we note that the political context hypothesis does not address how party elites' policy convergence mediates the effects of citizens' party attachments on their policy beliefs. This is because we do not have strong theoretical expectations about this relationship. On the one hand, elite convergence plausibly makes policy considerations less salient to voters relative to their party attachments, an effect which may prompt citizens to update their policy views to match their partisanship, rather than vice-versa. On the other hand, because citizens are less likely to perceive policy differences between less polarized parties, elite convergence weakens the policy cues that party elites provide to their supporters. These conflicting considerations do not support a clear prediction about how policy convergence affects party elites' abilities to sway their supporters' policy views.

Empirical Analyses

Great Britain is an ideal testing ground for the hypotheses outlined above because the two dominant political parties, Labour and the Conservatives, were polarized on economic and social welfare policy during the 1980s (the Margaret Thatcher era) which allows to us to evaluate the policy

salience hypothesis, but the parties depolarized on these issues post-1990 (e.g., Budge 1999; Norris 1999; Webb and Farrell 1999), which allows us to evaluate the political context hypothesis.³ Regarding the former period, the Conservatives' selection of Margaret Thatcher as party leader in 1975 ended the 'Postwar Settlement,' a long period of policy consensus between Labour and Conservative party elites. Thatcher, who became Prime Minister following the Conservative victory in the May 1979 General Election, shifted her party's policy orientation dramatically rightward by advocating reduced state intervention in the economy, an expanded role for the free market, a diminished role for trade unions, and the virtues of personal responsibility, hard work, and entrepreneurship. This right-wing policy emphasis sharply differentiated the Conservatives from the left-leaning Labour Party which strenuously opposed Thatcher's policy initiatives (Norton 2001). The postwar policy differences between Labour and the Conservatives had never been greater.

The party policy convergence that has characterized British politics in the period following Thatcher's resignation as Prime Minister (and Conservative Party leader) in 1990 stems primarily from four factors. First, Thatcher was succeeded by a series of leaders (notably John Major from

³ Although other parties, particularly the Liberal Democrats, have at times played important roles in British politics, we restrict our analysis to the Labour and Conservative parties. Between 1987 and 2001 (the period of our study), the Conservatives (from 1987-97) and then Labour (from 1997-2001) governed in single-party governments and thereby exercised a virtually monopoly on policy-making influence. Furthermore, the Liberal Democrats are more likely than the major parties to conduct locally-based, candidate-centered campaigns similar to those in U.S. Congressional elections (Katz and King 1999), and citizens' attachments to the Liberal Democrats tend to be weaker than towards the two main parties (Russell and Fieldhouse 2004). These considerations suggest there may have been systematic differences in how citizens reacted – i.e. updated their partisanship or policy preferences – when the Liberal Democrats changed their policy positions.

1990-1997 and William Hague from 1997-2001) who advocated more moderate policy approaches, particularly on public services. Second, the Conservatives' well-publicized internal policy divisions during the 1990s hindered their ability to convey a clear message to the public, thereby blurring their image as a strongly right-wing party (see Denver 1998). Third, Tony Blair, who was the Labour Party leader from 1994-2007 and Prime Minister from 1997-2007, dramatically moderated Labour's policy platform by advocating lower taxes and reduced welfare dependency, and by emphasizing law and order, fiscal prudence, and personal responsibility. Finally, the policy polarization between Labour and Conservative party elites largely evaporated with the election of Conservative leader David Cameron in 2005 (Prime Minister as of May 2010), who sides with the moderate faction of his party and who took the party into the Conservative-Liberal coalition government.

Trends in British Election Study (BES) respondents' party placements on the policy scales included in these surveys confirm that the British electorate perceived the Labour-Conservative policy polarization during the Thatcher era, along with the striking post-Thatcher depolarization. Table 1 reports the mean positions that BES respondents ascribed to the Labour and Conservative parties along the four policy scales that were included in each BES between 1987 and 2001, that relate to preferences for providing social services versus cutting taxes; support for income redistribution; preferences for fighting inflation versus lowering unemployment; and, support for nationalization of industry. (We restrict our analysis to the 1987-2001 time period because the 2005 BES did not include these policy scale questions, while the pre-1987 BES policy questions have different endpoints and (in some cases) dramatically different question wordings.) These mean party placements are along a series of 1-11 scales for which higher numbers denote a more right-wing position, while the computations reported in the rows labeled "Lab-Con gap" present the difference between respondents' mean placement of the Conservative Party and their mean placement of Labour along the focal policy dimension. (The texts of the policy scale questions are presented in Appendix A.) The computations show that in 1987, during the Thatcher era, BES respondents placed Labour roughly five

units to the left of the Conservatives (on average), an immense distance along the 1-11 policy scales (see the bottom row of Table 1). However voters' perceptions of Labour-Conservative policy differences shrank dramatically during the post-Thatcher period, as respondents' placements of Labour shifted sharply to the right while their placements of the Conservatives shifted left: between 1987-2001 the magnitude of the perceived Labour-Conservative policy gap across the four policy scales declined from 4.97 policy units in 1987, to 4.33 units in 1992, to 3.61 units in 1997, and to 2.27 units in 2001, less than half the magnitude of the perceived policy gap in 1987, although respondents continued to perceive meaningful party policy differences in 2001. In the analyses presented below, we use time as a proxy for elite policy convergence. Table 1 suggests that this choice is consistent with BES survey respondents' perceptions of the differences between the two parties on these issue dimensions between 1987 and 2001.⁴

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The American literature on mass partisan polarization emphasizes the changing relationship between citizens' party loyalties and their policy beliefs. According to this *partisan sorting* perspective, the widening policy gap between Democratic and Republican party elites has prompted a sorting of Democratic and Republican partisans' policy preferences in the electorate, i.e., the difference between the mean policy preferences of rank-and-file Democratic partisans versus the policy beliefs of Republican partisans has increased over time (see, e.g., Carmines and Stimson 1989; Abramowitz

⁴ In supplementary analyses, we estimated models of changing partisan support and attitude positions as a function of perceptions of ideological depolarization between the two main parties. While these models do not allow us to parse out the causal relationship between partisan support and policy attitudes – the question addressed in our study – they revealed strongly significant effects of perceived declines in Labour and Conservative policy distance on the two constructs under examination.

and Saunders 1998; Fiorina and Levenduski 2006; Hetherington 2009). Table 2, which reports BES respondents' mean self-placements on the policy scales, displays partisan sorting trends in Britain. For each policy scale in each election year, the table reports the mean self-placement computed for all respondents, for all Conservative partisans, and for all Labour partisans.⁵ We also report the policy distance between the mean self-placements of Conservative and Labour identifiers (the 'Labour-Conservative partisan gap' variable), which provides an index of the degree of partisan sorting on the policy scales. The computations show that in 1987 Conservative partisans placed themselves roughly 2.8 units to the right of Labour partisans (on average) along the 1-11 policy scales (see the bottom row of Table 2), but that the gap between the mean self-placements of the rival parties' supporters narrowed over time, to 2.4 units in 1992, to 1.8 units in 1997, and to 1.7 units in 2001. To the extent that this mass-level partisan sorting was a response to elite depolarization, this raises the question: Did citizens switch their party support to match their policy beliefs, or did they shift their policy beliefs to match their preferred party's policy platform?

Finally, we highlight an interesting contrast between the policy depolarization patterns of British party elites and their supporters. The computations in Table 1 showed that BES respondents perceived that Labour and Conservative party elites converged continuously on policy over the entire 1987-2001 period, and that this perceived elite convergence actually accelerated later in this time period, when the mean perceived Labour-Conservative policy gap declined from 3.61 units in 1997 to 2.27 units in 2001, along the 1-11 policy scales. By contrast, the figures reported in Table 2 show that the British parties-in-the-electorate depolarized significantly between 1987 and 1997, but that this partisan sorting process slowed considerably between 1997 and 2001, with the gap between the rival supporters' positions remaining approximately stable across this latter period. We will argue

⁵ Party identification categories were computed using the question, 'Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as... [Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat...] or what?'

below that our political context hypothesis, which posits that the electoral salience of a focal policy or ideological dimension declines when party elites depolarize on this dimension, explains why the process of mass-level depolarization in Britain slowed dramatically after 1997, even as the mass public perceived increasing elite-level policy convergence post-1997.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Research design: Structural equation models applied to British panel data

The dramatic changes in British voters' perceptions of elite policy differences between 1987 and 2001 allow us to evaluate our hypotheses. The policy salience hypothesis implies that during the early part of this time period, when the public perceived Labour-Conservative polarization on economic and social welfare policies, citizens should have updated their party attachments to match their policy beliefs, but not vice versa. The political context hypothesis implies that as party elites moderated their policies during the middle and later parts of this period, voters' economic and social welfare policy positions should have exerted a declining influence on their partisanship. To evaluate these hypotheses, we analyze data from BES panel studies from 1987-1992, 1992-1997, and 1997-2001.⁶ We evaluate our hypotheses using cross-lagged structural equation models, where we estimate latent constructs for citizens' partisanship and their ideological positions using survey responses across multiple waves of each panel study.⁷ The use of structural equation modeling allows us to

⁶ As discussed above we cannot measure British citizens' policy beliefs post-2001 because the 2005 BES did not include policy scale questions, and we cannot compare citizens' policy beliefs pre- and post-1987 because of changes in the policy scale question wordings and endpoints beginning in 1987.

⁷ The structural equation modeling (SEM) approach uses observed variables to estimate the latent constructs, and then estimates the effect of the latent variable on each observed variable. The SEM approach also estimates the measurement error associated with each observed indicator.

estimate the reciprocal relationships between citizens' ideology and their partisanship, while controlling for citizens' prior ideological preferences and partisanship.⁸

Measuring citizens' partisan attachments and ideologies. American politics scholars typically conceptualize partisanship using a unidimensional scale ranging from strong Republican to strong Democrat, with independents located in the middle. However, because Britain features a major third party, the Liberal Democrats, along with several smaller parties that consistently gain parliamentary representation⁹, we model British citizens' attachments to Labour and the Conservatives along two separate scales. This is advisable because use of a single, unidimensional, scale (anchored by strong attachment to Labour at one end and by strong attachment to the Conservatives at the other) would force us to make questionable coding decisions about how to classify partisans of the Liberal Democrats (and of other, smaller, parties) on a scale where we must also place independents (see Clarke et al. 1979; van der Eijk and Niemöller, 1983).

The two latent constructs, *Labour Attachment* and *Conservative Attachment*, are each modeled using two indicators. The first is a feeling thermometer for the party. The second is a combination of two BES questions regarding party identification and the strength partisan identification,

⁸ Consistent with the specifications of Goren (2005), Carsey and Layman (2006) and Highton and Kam (2009), we estimate lagged as opposed to simultaneous effects between citizens' issue positions and their party attachments. As in these studies, we are interested in the causal effect of issue positions on party attachment (and vice versa). See these earlier studies for discussions of this issue.

⁹ These smaller parties include the Democratic Unionist Party, the Ulster Unionist Party, the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, the Green Party, the UK Independence Party, and the British National Party. We note that the combined vote shares of the Liberal Democrats and these smaller British parties exceeded 23% in each general election held between 1983 and 2010.

which we combine to create a single variable for each respondent with respect to each party, which runs from 0 which denotes no attachment to the Labour (Conservative) Party, to 1 which denotes a strong attachment to the party. (The texts of the BES questions that were used to create the party attachment constructs are given in Appendix A).

The latent construct for respondents' positions on the Left-Right ideological dimension is estimated using the four policy scales introduced earlier, which relate to income redistribution, support for social services, nationalization of industry, and, tradeoffs between unemployment and inflation. Each issue relates to long-standing debates in British politics that pertain to the Left-Right economic dimension.¹⁰ All variables are rescaled to fall between 0 and 1, with higher numbers denoting a more right-wing emphasis.

Modeling the Reciprocal Relationship between Ideology and Party Attachment. Equations 1-3 below present our models of the reciprocal effects of an individual i 's party attachments and ideology:

$$\begin{aligned} Ideology_i(t) &= \alpha_1 + \lambda_1[Ideology_i(t-1)] + \beta_1[Conservative Attachment_i(t-1)] \\ &+ \beta_2[Labour Attachment_i(t-1)] + \varepsilon_{1i}(t) \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

$$\begin{aligned} Conservative Attachment_i(t) &= \alpha_2 + \lambda_2[Conservative Attachment_i(t-1)] \\ &+ \beta_3[Ideology_i(t-1)] + \varepsilon_{2i}(t) \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

$$\begin{aligned} Labour Attachment_i(t) &= \alpha_3 + \lambda_3[Labour Attachment_i(t-1)] \\ &+ \beta_4[Ideology_i(t-1)] + \varepsilon_{3i}(t) \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

¹⁰ While the factor loadings associated with our analyses (presented in Appendix B) suggest that all four issue scales tap a unidimensional construct – which we label the Left-Right ideological dimension – we also estimated separate models for each issue scale to address the possibility that the different scales tap different dimensions (Goren 2005) and our substantive conclusions were unchanged.

The parameters denoted by λ represent the effects of the latent construct during the first time period ($t - 1$) on the same construct in the second time period t . For example, in equation 1, the parameter λ_1 denotes the effect of the respondent i 's ideology at time ($t - 1$) on her ideology at time t , while in equation 2 the parameter λ_2 denotes the effect of the respondent's attachment to the Conservative Party at time ($t - 1$) on Conservative attachment at time t , and so on. These λ parameters capture the *stability* of the constructs over time, with higher numbers denoting greater stability. The cross-lagged effects, expressed by the β parameters, denote the effect of one latent construct on another latent construct. Thus, in equation 1, β_1 represents the impact of the respondent i 's attachment to the Conservative Party in the first period ($t - 1$) on her ideology in the second period t , while in equation 2, β_2 denotes the effect of i 's ideology in period ($t - 1$) on her attachment to the Conservative Party in period t . Although we estimate separate models for each panel the use of identical survey questions and standardized coefficients allows us to compare effects across panels.

Because we use multiple indicators to estimate each of our latent constructs, we can correct for measurement error by allowing for over-time correlations of the measurement errors associated with each indicator.¹¹ This is a less restrictive assumption than the traditional Wiley-Wiley model which specifies that the error variances are uncorrelated over time (Wiley and Wiley 1970). Finally, while each of the BES panel studies contained at least three waves, the "middle" waves in each study omitted some (and in one case, all) of the policy scale questions, so that our primary models are based on two-wave analyses of the first and last waves of each panel.¹² However in supplementary

¹¹ To provide a scale for the latent constructs, we constrain the factor loading for one observed indicator to be equal to one.

¹² The benefit of using three or more waves of observations is that this allows the analyst to correct for measurement error, in situations where the analyst has only a single indicator for one or more of the latent variables (Green and Palmquist 1990; Krosnick 1991). However in situations where the

analyses (available on our web site) we calculated parameter estimates for three-wave models based on analyses of a reduced set of survey questions. These estimates supported similar substantive conclusions to the two-wave estimates we report below.

Results

Table 3 reports the estimates of the stability coefficients (the coefficients λ_1 , λ_2 , and λ_3 in equations 1-3) for all three latent constructs (ideology, Labour attachment, Conservative attachment) in each panel, as well as the estimates of the cross-lagged effects of party attachments and ideology (the coefficients β_1 , β_2 , β_3 , and β_4 in equations 1-3).¹³ In all three panels, the model fits the data well. All three models have a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.04 (values around .05 indicate good fit), a χ^2 /d.f. ratio of less than 5 (indicating reasonable fit), and a CFI greater than .90 (also indicating reasonable fit). To facilitate comparisons across panels we report the standardized estimates for all parameters, which give the effect of a one standard deviation shift in the lagged construct on the current latent construct.

Regarding the stability coefficients, the figures reported in Table 3 show that for the initial panel (1987-1992), the stability coefficient estimate for ideology (0.98) greatly exceeds the stability

analyst has multiple indicators for each latent variable – as we do here – one can correct for the measurement error using only two waves (see, e.g., Layman et al. 2010).

¹³ We limit our analysis to respondents who were interviewed at both panel waves, however we do not omit respondents who failed to answer one or more of the survey questions used. The models are estimated using AMOS 7.0, which uses maximum likelihood techniques to obtain estimates even in the presence of missing data (Andersen 1957). We also estimated the models using only those respondents who answered all questions and obtained comparable results. For clarity of presentation, factor loadings have been omitted. These estimates are presented in Appendix B.

coefficient estimates on attachment to Labour (0.65) and attachment to the Conservatives (0.69), but that for the second and third panels, which cover the time periods 1992-1997 and 1997-2001, the stability coefficient estimates on ideology decline sharply, to 0.81 for the 1992-97 panel and to 0.64 for the 1997-2001 panel, while the stability estimates on party attachments increase from about 0.65 in the 1987-1992 panel to above 0.85 in the 1997-2001 panel. These estimates suggest that British citizens' ideologies were relatively stable during the Thatcher period, when Labour and the Conservative party elites were polarized on policy, but that citizens' ideologies destabilized during the post-Thatcher period as the parties converged. The estimates also denote an increase in the stability of party attachments as party elites depolarized.

The cross-lagged effects of party attachments and ideology, also presented in Table 3, are critical to our evaluation of the policy salience and the political context hypotheses. The policy salience hypothesis implies that during the time period of the first panel study (1987-1992), when Labour and Conservative party elites were polarized on economic and social welfare policy, British citizens updated their party attachments to match their policy beliefs, but not vice versa – i.e., that our lagged estimates of the effects of citizens' ideologies on their party attachments (represented by the coefficients β_3 - β_4 in equations 2-3) should be large and statistically significant for the 1987-1992 BES panel, but that the coefficient estimates on the lagged effects of party attachments on ideology (coefficients β_1 and β_2 in equation 1) should be small and statistically insignificant for this period. The political context hypothesis implies that as party elites converged on policy during the post-Thatcher period, the estimates of the effects of citizens' ideologies on their party attachments should decline, i.e., these estimates should be smaller for the 1992-1997 and 1997-2001 BES panels than for the 1987-1992 panel.

The parameter estimates reported in Table 3 support the expectations outlined above. For the 1987-1992 panel, which covers a period when Labour and Conservative party elites were polarized on ideology, we find that British citizens' ideologies significantly influenced their party attachments,

but not vice versa – patterns that support the policy salience hypothesis. Specifically, the standardized coefficient estimate -0.28 ($p < .01$) of the lagged effect of BES respondents' ideologies on their Labour attachment implies that a one standard deviation shift to the right in a respondent's ideology in 1987 was associated with an approximate 0.28 decrease in this respondent's attachment to Labour in 1992. Similarly, the coefficient estimate $+0.28$ ($p < .01$) of the lagged effect of BES respondents' ideologies on their Conservative attachments implies that a one standard deviation rightward shift in a respondent's ideology in 1987 was associated with an 0.28 standard deviation increase in this respondent's attachment to the Conservatives in 1992. Thus, during the 1987-92 period, citizens' ideologies exerted statistically and substantively significant lagged effects on their party attachments. By contrast, we find no evidence that citizens' attachments to the Labour and Conservative parties in 1987 influenced their ideologies in 1992, i.e., the coefficient estimates on the lagged effects of citizens' Labour and Conservative attachments on their ideologies during this period are near zero and are statistically insignificant. These patterns support the policy salience hypothesis, that when European parties are polarized on a policy or ideological dimension, voters update their partisanship to match their policy beliefs on that dimension, but not vice-versa.

A comparison of the estimated effects of ideology on party attachments across the three panels also supports the political context hypothesis, that as party elites converge on a focal policy or ideological dimension, voters' positions on this dimension exert less influence on their partisanship. As discussed above, we conclude that BES panel respondents' ideologies exerted large effects on their party attachments between 1987-1992, a period when party elites were polarized. However the estimated impact of ideology on party attachments declines across the later time periods, as the parties depolarize on policy: for the 1992-1997 panel the standardized coefficient estimate of the lagged effect of respondents' ideologies on their attachments to the Conservatives is only $+0.16$ ($p < .01$), while the coefficient estimate on the lagged effect of ideology on Labour Party attachment is only

-0.15 ($p < .01$). These estimated impacts of ideology on party attachments for the 1992-1997 panel are statistically significant, but they are only slightly more than half of the magnitudes of the estimated effects for the earlier 1987-1992 panel. And, for the 1997-2001 panel the estimated effects of respondents' ideologies on their party attachments disappear entirely, i.e., the coefficient estimates on these variables are near zero and are statistically insignificant. Thus, as Labour and Conservative party elites shifted from their polarized positions of the Thatcher era to less polarized positions post-Thatcher, we estimate that the impact of citizens' ideologies on their party attachments declined from being noticeably strong between 1987-92, to being weaker (but statistically significant) between 1992-97, to being statistically undetectable (between 1997-2001). This pattern supports the political context hypothesis.

We emphasize that our finding that the 1997-2001 panel respondents' ideologies did not move their party attachments does not imply that these respondents failed to perceive policy differences between Labour and Conservative party elites. In fact, as documented earlier in Table 1, BES respondents placed Labour more than three policy units to the left of the Conservatives (on average) on the 1-11 policy scales in 1997, and more than two units to the left of the Conservatives in 2001, i.e., respondents continued to perceive meaningful elite policy differences during the 1997-2001 period, although these differences were less pronounced than during the Thatcher era. However, the elite-level policy differences that the 1997-2001 BES panel respondents perceived did not move their party attachments. This strongly suggests that this “no effects” finding for ideology's influence on partisanship arises because the 1997-2001 panel respondents attached little importance to economic and social welfare policy, i.e., that these policy debates – which were highly salient to voters during the Thatcher era – were no longer salient in the post-Thatcher era.

Finally, although our estimates of the lagged effects of party attachments on ideology in 1992-1997 and 1997-2001 do not bear directly on our hypotheses, these estimates suggest that panel respondents' attachments to the Conservatives did not influence their ideologies across these periods,

while respondents' attachments to Labour exerted modest (but statistically significant) impacts on their ideologies, i.e., respondents who were more attached to Labour in the first wave of the 1992-1997 and 1997-2001 panels tended to shift their ideological positions modestly to the left at the second wave, compared to respondents who were less attached to Labour at the first wave.¹⁴ These findings are consistent, in part, with those of Evans and Andersen (2004). While it is beyond the scope of our study to parse out these patterns, it seems plausible that the Labour Party's superior ability to persuade the public during the 1992-2001 period reflects the positive public image of Labour's leader, Tony Blair, in comparison to the Conservative leaders John Major (1990-1997) and William Hague (1997-2001), who were widely perceived as ineffective and lacking in charisma.¹⁵ We reiterate, however, that our estimates suggest that panel respondents' Labour attachments exerted only modest effects on their ideologies between 1992-2001 (and exerted no statistically significant effects between 1987-1992), and that these effects were weaker than the reciprocal effects that respondents' ideologies exerted on their party attachments between 1987-92. We do not find evidence of a de-

¹⁴ Specifically, the standardized coefficient estimate -0.12 on the lagged effect of respondents' Labour attachments on their ideologies for the 1992-97 panel implies that a one standard deviation increase in panel respondents' Labour attachments in 1992 were associated with a leftward shift of about 0.12 standard deviation in their ideological position in 1997, *ceteris paribus*. The coefficient estimate for the 1997-2001 panel, -0.18 ($p < .01$), has a similar substantive interpretation.

¹⁵ The Conservatives were also beset by a series of political scandals and intra-party divisions during this period, which damaged their image for competence and integrity and which contributed to their decisive defeats in the 1997 and 2001 general elections (see, e.g., Denver 1998; Butler and Kavanaugh 2002, chapter 3). These factors may have hampered Conservative elites' abilities to persuade their supporters on policy.

crease in party identification effects as political competition became more consensual in Britain over this period (see Schmitt 2009).

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

In toto, our statistical analyses paint an interesting picture of the British public's reactions to elite depolarization on economic and social welfare policies between 1987 and 2001. As we documented earlier (see Table 2), the Labour and Conservative parties-in-the-electorate converged sharply on these policies between 1987 and 1997 – a mass-level pattern that mirrored elite-level depolarization – but mass depolarization slowed markedly between 1997-2001, even as the British public perceived ever-increasingly depolarization between party elites during this latter period (see Table 1). Our findings help us parse out the extent to which the mass-level partisan sorting of 1987-1997 reflected a *party switching* process whereby citizens updated their party attachments to match their policy beliefs, as opposed to a *party persuasion* process whereby political elites cued their existing partisans to update their policy preferences; and, our findings also illuminate why mass-level depolarization slowed after 1997. We conclude that between 1987 and 1992, when party elites were polarized on policy, mass-level partisan sorting was driven by citizens' shifting their party attachments to match their policy beliefs, but not vice versa. However as Labour and Conservative party elites depolarized on policy during the post-Thatcher period, citizens' tendencies to update their party attachments to match their ideologies weakened between 1992-1997, and then vanished entirely during the 1997-2001 period. We believe that this latter finding illuminates why the parties-in-the-electorate essentially stopped converging on policy after 1997, even as the British public perceived dramatic elite convergence between 1997 and 2001: namely, that economic and social welfare policies were no longer salient to rank-and-file voters, and so these voters experienced no pressure to update their policy positions on these issues during this period.

Conclusion

While spatial modelers posit that citizens evaluate parties based on their policy positions, empirical research on American politics suggests that this causal relationship is often reversed, i.e., that citizens' party support often drives their policy preferences. Building on previous findings that partisanship is less salient to European citizens than to Americans, we argue that when European party elites are polarized on salient policy dimensions then citizens will update their partisanship to match their policy preferences, rather than vice-versa (the policy salience hypothesis). We further argue, however, that because policy salience declines when party elites depolarize on policy, European citizens may cease to update their partisanship to match their policy beliefs when elites are insufficiently polarized on a focal policy dimension – even if, in absolute terms, the parties remain meaningfully divided on the dimension (the political context hypothesis). We report individual-level analyses of British election panel survey data between 1987-2001, which support both hypotheses.

As we noted in the introduction, we believe that our empirical support for the political context hypothesis illuminates the findings of Clarke et al. (2004, 2009), who document that the British general elections of 2001 and 2005 did not turn on debates relating to the Labour and Conservatives' social and economic policies, but instead revolved around voters' "valence" evaluations of the parties' abilities to efficiently deliver public services and to address security issues such as crime and terrorism. Our findings that British citizens' policy beliefs drove their party attachments during the Thatcher era, but that during the post-Thatcher period citizens have largely ceased to update their partisanship in response to policy considerations, trace the evolution of electoral politics away from "spatially-based" party competition of the Thatcher period towards the era of performance-based politics that Clark et al. document in contemporary Britain. The value of the political context hypothesis is that it illuminates why voters' party attachments were not moved by economic and social welfare policy considerations after 1997, despite the fact that voters continued to perceive meaning-

ful elite policy differences during this period: namely, these policy debates were no longer salient to rank-and-file voters, and so they experienced no pressure to bring their policy beliefs into line with their party attachments.

With respect to the above point, we believe our findings have important implications for parties' election strategies and for spatial models of elections. First, the policy salience hypothesis implies that when political parties are polarized on a major policy dimension and one of the parties contemplates shifting its position, party's elites should project that citizens will react by updating their party support in response to this party's policy shift – exactly as spatial modelers posit, and in line with the British electorate's behavior between 1987-1992. Second, however, the political context hypothesis implies that when rival political parties are not polarized on a policy domain – so that the domain is not highly salient to voters – a party's policy shift, particularly one that entails further convergence towards its opponents' policies, may prompt little or no partisan updating by rank-and-file voters. This hypothesis illuminates the British public's lack of partisan sorting in response to the Labour Party's perceived policy convergence towards the Conservatives after 1997. Between 1997 and 2001 the public perceived that Labour and Conservative parties-in-parliament continued to depolarize on policy, but the policy positions of the British parties-in-the-electorate remained stable. This pattern cannot be explained by the standard spatial model of elections, but it is consistent with the political context hypothesis.

In future research we plan to extend our analyses to other European countries in which the major parties have dramatically polarized (or depolarized) on policy over time, in order to investigate whether we find the same pattern observed in Britain. We also plan to explore the implications of our findings for the evolution of mass policy preferences and for macropartisanship over time (e.g., Erikson et al. 2002; Bartle, Dellepiane, and Stimson n.d.) and for spatial models of elections. With respect to this latter topic, our findings imply that party elites face a complex strategic calculation when they attempt to project the electoral consequences of shifting their policies, because they must

account not simply for how such a policy shift will affect the party's spatial *proximity* to the voters in the electorate, but also for how this shift alters the *salience* that voters attach to different issue dimensions (see, e.g., Meguid 2009). Our paper suggests that incorporating these effects into the spatial model can create a more realistic model of real world electoral competition – a development that enhances our understanding of parties' election strategies and of political representation.

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Table 1. Respondents' Mean Placements of the Labour and Conservative Parties, 1987-2001

		1987	1992	1997	2001
Social Services	Labour	3.03	2.83	3.59	4.17
	Conservatives	7.16	7.06	6.94	6.21
	Lab-Con gap	4.13	4.23	3.35	2.04
Nationalization	Labour	2.92	3.59	4.66	5.45
	Conservatives	9.14	8.38	8.00	7.50
	Lab-Con gap	6.22	4.79	3.34	2.05
Inflation/unempl	Labour	2.33	2.98	3.14	3.73
	Conservatives	6.38	6.44	6.16	5.88
	Lab-Con gap	4.05	3.46	3.02	2.15
Redistribution	Labour	2.95	3.08	3.49	4.65
	Conservatives	8.43	7.90	8.21	7.47
	Lab-Con gap	5.48	4.82	4.72	2.82
Average Lab-Con gap (4 scales)		4.97	4.33	3.61	2.27

Notes. The numbers reported in the table are the mean positions that British Election Study respondents ascribed to the Labour and Conservative parties along the issue scales, computed, for each scale in each year, over all respondents who gave a valid party placement on the scale (Appendix A gives the wording of the issue scale questions). The rows labeled “Lab-Con gap” report the difference between the mean placements of the Conservative Party and the mean placement of the Labour Party. All four scales are from 1 to 11, with higher numbers denoting more right-wing responses.

Table 2. Changes in BES Respondents' Mean Self-placements on the Policy Scales, 1987-2001

		1987	1992	1997	2001
Social Services	All	4.5	4.1	3.7	3.9
	Lab partisans	3.6	3.1	3.2	3.4
	Con partisans	5.2	5.0	4.4	4.6
	Lab-Con gap	1.6	1.9	1.2	1.2
Nationalization	All	6.4	5.6	5.3	5.1
	Lab partisans	4.4	4.1	4.6	4.5
	Con partisans	7.9	7.0	6.4	6.1
	Lab-Con gap	3.5	2.9	1.8	1.6
Inflation/unemp	All	3.5	3.5	3.6	4.0
	Lab partisans	2.3	2.8	3.0	3.5
	Con partisans	4.5	4.1	4.4	4.7
	Lab-Con gap	2.2	1.3	1.4	1.2
Redistribution	All	5.0	4.5	4.1	4.8
	Lab partisans	3.1	2.8	3.0	3.8
	Con partisans	6.7	6.1	5.9	6.6
	Lab-Con gap	3.6	3.3	2.9	2.8
Average Lab-Con gap (4 scales)		2.8	2.4	1.8	1.7

Notes. The numbers reported above represent the British Election Study respondents' mean self-placements on the policy scales relating to social services, nationalization of industry, tradeoffs between unemployment and inflation, and income redistribution (Appendix A gives the wording of the policy scale questions). Mean self-placements are given for all respondents ('All'); for all respondents who reported that they identified with the Labour Party ('Lab partisans'); and for all respondents who reported that they identified with the Conservative Party ('Con partisans'). The figures given in the rows labeled "Lab-Con gap" report the differences between the mean self-placements of Conservative and Labour partisans, on the policy scale. All four scales are from 1 to 11, with higher numbers denoting more right-wing responses.

Table 3. Party Attachment-Ideology Cross-Lagged Structural Models

	87-92	92-97	97-01
Stability Coefficients			
Strength of Labour Attachment	.65** (.73/.04)	.91** (.91.04)	.86** (.86/.03)
Strength of Conservative Attachment	.69** (.71/.05)	.64** (.64/.04)	.89** (.89/.03)
Ideology	.98** (.88/.10)	.81** (.81/.11)	.64** (.64/.06)
Structural Coefficients			
<i>Labour Party Estimates</i>			
Ideology → Labour Attachment	-.28** (-.58/.08)	-.15** (-.37/.10)	-.02 (-.04/.06)
Labour Attachment → Ideology	.04 (.02/.03)	-.12 (-.06/.03)	-.18** (-.08/.02)
<i>Conservative Party Estimates</i>			
Ideology → Conservative Attachment	.24** (.48/.09)	.16** (.32/.10)	.04 (.07/.06)
Conservative Attachment → Ideology	-.05 (-.02/.03)	-.08 (-.04/.04)	-.01 (-.00/.03)
Model Fit			
Robust X^2 /degrees of freedom	3.88	3.66	4.87
p value	0.00	.00	.00
Robust CFI	.98	.98	.98
RMSEA	.04	.04	.04
N	1608	1924	2445

Source: 1987-1992, 1992-1997, 1997-2001 British Election Studies panels. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < .01$.

Entries are standardized, maximum-likelihood estimates (the unstandardized estimates and the standard errors for these estimates are reported in parentheses). Factor variances, error variances, error covariances, and disturbances omitted for clarity.

Appendix A. BES Question Wording

Feeling Thermometer: “Please choose a phrase from this card to say how you feel about the Labour/Conservative Party? 1 = strongly against, 2 = against, 3 = neither in favour nor against, 4 = favour, 5 = strongly favour.”

Party identification: ‘Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as... [Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat...] or what?’.

Equalization of Incomes (Redistribution): Some people feel that government should make much greater efforts to make people’s incomes more equal. Other people feel that government should be much less concerned about how equal people’s incomes are. And other people have views somewhere in-between. Please tick whichever box comes closest to your own views about redistributing income.

I = ‘Make much greater efforts to make people’s incomes more equal’

II = ‘Be much less concerned about how equal people’s incomes are’

Inflation/Unemployment: Some people feel that getting people back to work should be the government's top priority. Other people feel that keeping prices down should be the government's top priority. And other people have views somewhere in-between. Please tick whichever box comes closest to your own views about unemployment and inflation.

I = ‘Getting people back to work should be the government’s top priority’

II = ‘Keeping prices down should be the government’s top priority’

Nationalization/Privatization: Some people feel that government should nationalise many more private companies. Other people feel that government should sell off many more nationalised industries. And other people have views somewhere in-between. Please tick whichever box comes closest to your own views about nationalisation and privatisation.

I = ‘Nationalize many more private companies’

II = ‘Sell off many more nationalized industries’

Tax/Spend (Social Services): Some people feel that government should put up taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services. Other people feel that government should cut taxes a lot and spend much less on health and social services. And other people have views somewhere in-between. Please tick whichever box comes closest to your own views about taxes and government spending.

I = ‘Government should increase taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services’

II = ‘Government should cut taxes and spend much less on health and social services’

Appendix B. Factor Loadings

Table B1: Factor Loadings

	87-92 Panel		92-97 Panel		97-01 Panel	
	1987	1992	1992	1997	1997	2001
Labour Attachment						
<i>Factor Loadings</i>						
Strength of Labour Attachment	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	.77	.83	.77	.80	.76	.81
Labour Feeling Thermometer	1.26	1.06	1.21	.75	.85	.86
	.97	.94	.97	.89	.89	.88
Conservative Attachment						
Strength of Conservative Attachment	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	.75	.80	.82	.82	.80	.82
Conservative Feeling Thermometer	1.19	1.06	1.03	1.06	1.07	1.03
	.93	.90	.91	.89	.84	.85
Ideology						
<i>Factor Loadings</i>						
Inflation Scale	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	.48	.44	.63	.50	.46	.40
Social Services Scale	.76	.96	1.09	.86	.92	.85
	.45	.55	.53	.54	.52	.50
Nationalization Scale	1.47	1.33	1.56	1.11	1.03	1.03
	.68	.62	.62	.57	.47	.51
Redistribution Scale	1.50	1.72	1.69	1.55	1.46	1.54
	.64	.68	.63	.70	.61	.66

Notes: Table entries are unstandardized, maximum-likelihood estimates (standardized estimates given in parentheses). All parameters significant at $p < .05$. Table B1 contains the estimates of the factor loadings for the latent constructs used in the party attachment-ideology cross-lagged structural models. These estimates denote the degree to which the indications (i.e. the observed variables) correspond with their respective latent constructs. The Labour attachment construct correlates well with the two indicators, ranging from .76 to .97, and explains 58-97% of their variance. Similarly, the factor loadings associated with latent Conservative party attachment range from .80-.93, and therefore, the latent construct explains approximately 94-86% of the variance in the indicators. Finally, the factor loadings associated with the BES issue scales and the latent construct of ideology range from .40-.70, indicating that they explain between 16-50% of the variance in the various issue scales.