Party, policy – or both?

Partisan biased processing of policy arguments in direct democracy[1]

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Abstract

How do party cues and policy information affect citizens' political opinions? In direct democratic settings, this question is particularly relevant. Direct democratic campaigns are information-rich events which offer citizens the opportunity to learn detailed information about a policy. At the same time parties try to influence citizens' decision procedure by publishing their own positions on the issue. The current debate on whether 'party' or 'policy' has more impact on political opinions has not yet yielded conclusive results. We examine the effect of policy arguments and party cues on vote intention in two Swiss referendum votes using panel survey data. To the simple dichotomous question of "party cues or policy information" we add an additional twist in asking how party cues affect the processing of policy information through processes of motivated reasoning. We find first, that both, policy arguments and party cues, have an independent effect on vote intention. However, in a second part of the analysis, we find strong evidence for partisan biased processing of policy arguments – that is voters tend to align their arguments with their preferred party's position. Our conclusions with regard to the democratic quality of these vote decisions are therefore ambivalent.

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[1] This paper is co-authored with Professor Hanspeter Kriesi

Introduction

How do voters make up their minds in direct democracy? Do they blindly follow party cues, or do policy arguments matter in their opinion formation? What role do processes of motivated reasoning play in this tension between simplifying the choice by using a partisan cue and making the cognitive effort to process detailed policy information? This party-over-policy debate is ongoing in political psychology, with some early experiments finding that party cues trump policy arguments most of the time, and that individuals follow their party even if they are exposed to controversial policy information at the same time (e.g. Cohen 2003). Later research, in contrast, has rehabilitated the role of arguments to some extent, showing that individuals are very well able to abstract from their preferred party's position when exposed to substantive policy information (e.g. Bullock 2011). Another recent research strand, under the heading of motivated reasoning theory, has pointed to the interaction between partisan predispositions and information processing and found that very often, our information processing is biased by our party preference (e.g. Bartels 2002, Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). The questions we address in this paper are therefore: *to what extent do citizens rely on policy information versus party cues in making their vote decisions*? *Do party cues substitute for policy-information or do they rather interact with policy-related arguments in their effect on vote intentions? To what extent do partisan preferences bias information processing during referendum campaigns?* In direct democratic settings, these questions are particularly relevant, because the legitimacy of the decisions depends, among other things, on how people form their opinions. Furthermore, direct democracy offers an ideal setting for analyzing party versus policy effects.

We test the effect of policy arguments and party cues on vote intentions using original panel survey data covering two referendum campaigns in Switzerland. We find, first, that citizens' vote intentions are determined by both, policy arguments and party cues. In a second step our study shows, however, that individuals tend to align their position on policy arguments to their preferred party's position over the course of the campaign. Party cues do therefore not substitute for policy information – as low information rationality would assume – but they trigger partisan biased information processing. With this study, we contribute to research in political psychology and public opinion in several ways. First, using panel data, we systematically test heuristic effects of party preference versus partisan biased systematic processing in political campaigns. Second, in contrast to many previous laboratory experiments, we investigate these questions in the real-world context of direct democracy, where citizens are faced with policy decisions which affect their life. Finally, we add results from the European context of Swiss direct democracy to this discussion which was so far mainly based on data from the United States (Bullock 2011).

Party over policy?

Direct democratic campaigns are information-rich events which offer citizens the opportunity to learn detailed information about a policy. At the same time parties try to influence citizens' decision procedure by promoting their own positions on the issue. In this context it is particularly interesting to know how party cues and policy information affect opinions and vote decisions for two reasons.

First, proponents suggest that direct democratic decisions reflect the will of the people more closely than decisions taken in representative systems (Bowler, Donovan, and Tolbert 1998, Lupia and Matsusaka 2004). This assumption does not hold, however, if we find that citizens rely mainly on party cues when making up their minds. The second reason has to do with the debate about citizens' political ignorance. Critics' resistance against direct democratic procedures is essentially based on the argument that citizens are not sufficiently qualified to participate directly in political decisions because they lack the necessary political knowledge to do so (Magleby 1984, Matsusaka 2004, Budge 1996). Public opinion research over the years largely tended to confirm the lack of political knowledge of ordinary citizens (Converse 1964, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, Zaller 1992, Neijens and de Vreese 2009).

However, the fact that most citizens lack detailed information about politics is not sufficient to assume that they are unable to make reasonable political choices. Research under the heading of 'low information rationality' has shown that citizens who lack detailed policy information can use simple heuristic shortcuts, such as following the position of parties or interest groups, in order to come to similar conclusions as their well-informed fellow voters (Bowler and Donovan 1998, Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000, Lupia and Matsusaka 2004, Kriesi 2005, Sciarini and Tresch 2011). This idea of using heuristic cues as decision-shortcuts goes back to so called-dual process models of information processing in social psychology (e.g. Chaiken 1980, Petty and Cacioppo 1986) and to the work of Kahneman and Tversky (1974) on decision heuristics.

Probably the most important heuristic cue in politics is the partisan cue[2]. Early on in political science research, the authors of *the American voter* have recognized 'the role of enduring partisan commitments in shaping attitudes toward political objects' (Campbell et al. 1960, 135). While in the election context using party cues implies relying on the candidate's party affiliation (Lodge and Hamill 1986, Rahn 1993), in the direct democratic context it means relying on the endorsements provided by the party one feels closest to (Kriesi 2005, Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014, Bowler and Donovan 1998).

However, even if heuristic cues allow voters to overcome their minimalism to some extent, they do not provide a guarantee against unreasonable decision-making. What is probably the most worrying downside of the reliance on cues such as party endorsements, is that it allows the possibility for the elites to manipulate citizens' opinions. The concern is that 'citizens conform too readily to the policy views of elites' (Bullock 2011, 496) and thereby ignore substantive information about policies. For the quality of democratic decisions, it is therefore essential that citizens do not blindly follow elite cues but that they also consider policy information in making their decisions[3].

The discussion about the relative importance of cues versus information is based on the idea of dual process models of thinking (e.g. Petty and Cacioppo 1986, Petty and Wegener 1999, Chaiken 1980, Kahneman 2011). Dual process models typically distinguish between heuristic

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[2] A range of other cues and heuristics might possibly play a role in political decisions, such as trust in government, status-quo heuristic, or affective and likeability heuristics.

[3] In Swiss direct democracy, parties are not the only elite actors which can provide information or cues, non-partisan information can come from initiative or referendum committees, civic society organizations or organized interest associations. However, as the final decision is always structured as a binary choice, where each side is supported by a coalition of actors, and at the same time the major parties issue a vote-recommendation in every case, we decided to focus on party cues in this study. Party recommendations also figure much more prominently than cues from other organizations among the reasons Swiss voters give for their decisions in post-ballot surveys (own calculations, based on Vox data).

opinion formation involving low cognitive effort and a systematic, cognitively effortful reasoning based on arguments and detailed information. In the present study, following a party cue corresponds to a heuristic strategy, while processing policy-arguments corresponds to systematic thinking.

So far, neither experimental, nor observational studies have come to consistent conclusions about the relative importance of party cues and policy information in voters' opinion formation. Early studies by Rahn (1993) and Cohen (2003) emphasize the overwhelming influence of party cues. More recent experiments conclude that policy information still has strong effects on opinion, even when citizens are exposed to party cues (Kriesi 2005, Bullock 2011, Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014). These latter authors argue that most of the time people do not have much information on, nor interest in specific policies. But in situations where they are provided with detailed information and policy-related arguments, people do take these arguments seriously and use them to form their opinion.

Direct democratic votes represent a situation where citizens have incentives to be informed on policy (because they can decide) and where there is usually a more or less intensive campaign, which provides them with the necessary informationTherefore, the first question we try to answer in this paper is: *to what extent do citizens rely on policy information versus party cues in making their vote decisions*? *Following recent research results we expect that both, party cues and policy information, affect citizens' vote intention in direct democratic votes* **(H1).**

Deep or shallow? Party cues as heuristics or as triggers of biased systematic processing?

Over the last years, research on party cue effects has developed further and the initial assumption that party cues simply substitute for detailed policy information has been questioned. Several recent contributions show that reliance on party cues does not necessarily reduce the amount of policy information voters elaborate or their cognitive effort in processing it (Petersen et al. 2013, Leeper and Slothuus 2014, Bullock 2011). Rather, when party cues are provided together with policy-information (as is the case in direct democratic campaigns), party cues affect the way in which this policy-information is processed. In other words, relying on party cues in this situation means that individuals choose the policy information their party proposes (Slothuus and de Vreese 2010, Bartels 2002, Gaines et al. 2007, Lenz 2013).

This research is based on motivated reasoning theory (Taber and Lodge 2006, Lau and Redlawsk 2006, Kunda 1990). Motivated reasoning describes a process whereby (political) reasoning is not necessarily guided by the goal to be accurate (an *accuracy goal*) – which would correspond to the normative ideal - but more often by *directional goals*, such as a personal motivation to protect existing beliefs or to follow a certain party line. Motivated reasoning is different from simple cue-taking (e.g. following a party cue to make a political decision) – which is used as a shortcut to avoid the effort of processing political information. In the case of motivated reasoning, individuals use arguments and information about the issue at stake – but they use it to confirm a certain position. Such biased systematic processing is particularly likely under two conditions (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994): when individuals have to deal with highly important tasks, and when they face ambiguous information with regard to these tasks. Both conditions apply to direct democratic votes, where citizens decide directly about often complex

and controversial policy issues which affect their personal life and the welfare of their country (Nai 2014).

The second research question we try to answer in this paper is therefore: *Do party cues substitute for policy-information or do they rather interact with policy-related arguments in their effect on vote intentions? Following motivated reasoning theory, we expect party cues to affect citizens' position on policy-arguments, so that they align their arguments with their party preference **(H2)**.*

The question is essential from a normative perspective because the two options entail very different consequences and possible remedies (Petersen et al. 2013; Leeper and Slothuus 2014). If party cues act as shallow heuristics and substitute for a lack of policy-information, then simply providing more detailed information should reduce partisan bias and lead to more considered opinions. If, by contrast, party cues activate a directional goal and lead to *biased systematic processing* (Cohen 2003) or *partisan motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006)*, more information will not lead to more balanced opinions. On the contrary, additional information will be processed in a partisan biased way and *more* information will lead to *more* partisan positions (see e.g. Zaller 1992, Taber & Lodge 2006).

The moderating effect of political knowledge

Traditionally, dual-process models postulate that the effort individuals decide to put into opinion-formation is mostly determined by two factors: their ability and their motivation (see e.g. Chaiken 1980, Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Ability, in the political context refers to someone's

political knowledge. There are different ways to conceptualize and measure political knowledge, such as for example general vs. issue-specific or long-term/static versus short-term/dynamic knowledge (Barabas et al. 2014, Gilens 2001, Shaker 2012). Particularly in the context of direct democracy, the claim has been made to use issue-specific knowledge as a measure of ability (Kriesi 2005). Motivation, in contrast, can be defined as an individual's political interest which is an indicator for the general willingness to engage in political reasoning and action. Another possible indicator for motivation is "need for cognition", which refers to an individual's "tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive endeavors" (Cacioppo et al. 1996).

In this paper, we focus on the effect of political knowledge or ability, which has been debated in motivated reasoning theory. Interestingly, some studies have found motivated reasoning and belief protection to be just as strong (Bartels 2002, Cohen 2003, Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009) or even stronger among politically highly knowledgeable individuals than among less knowledgeable ones (Meffert et al. 2006, Mutz 2006, Taber and Lodge 2006), while others found a reduction of bias among highly knowledgeable (Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013, Arceneaux 2008, Kam 2005, Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014). On the one hand, the more knowledgeable might be better able to understand and integrate policy information and update their opinions accordingly. On the other hand, if motivated reasoning holds, they might be more skilled in protecting their prior beliefs and to select and process novel information accordingly (see Zaller 1992).

Given these controversial results, we expect citizens with different political knowledge levels to use party cues and policy information differently. More specifically, *following motivated reasoning theory, we expect a stronger partisan bias in information processing for the highly*

knowledgeable (H2a). In other words, we expect high knowledge voters to be better able to align their policy information with their party preference than low-knowledge voters.

Research Design, Data and Measurement

Data

Our analysis is based on individual-level panel survey data collected for two national-level popular votes in Switzerland. The issues at stake were first, a familiar, salient, and easily understandable asylum law revision and, second, a technical, highly complex and unfamiliar corporate tax reform[4]. The surveys were designed by researchers at a Swiss University and conducted by a Swiss polling agency through computer-aided telephone-interviewing. The population consisted of Swiss citizens from 18 years on (voting-age) who live either in the German- or French-speaking part of Switzerland and speak one of the two languages sufficiently well[5]. The sample was drawn through a random-quota sampling strategy where the households were selected randomly, while the target person within a household was selected according to quota-criteria. These criteria were gender, age, education, and occupation. The sample is therefore representative of the Swiss population in these relevant variables.

The panels consisted of two waves. The first wave was conducted at the beginning of the 3-month referendum campaigns, the second wave immediately after the two votes respectively. Thus we have before- and after-campaign measures for both cases. We only include

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[4] A detailed description of the two cases can be found in the online appendix
[5] The Italian-speaking part was left out of the analysis for cost reasons

respondents who have answered both waves in the analysis, which means that the dataset is balanced. For our models, we are left with 1092 (asylum) and 1001 (corporate tax) respondents respectively. Every respondent constitutes an observation for each panel wave in which she participated, which means that every respondent contributes two observations. Descriptive statistics of the variables used can be found in the *Tables A1 and A2* in the *online appendix.*

Key concepts / Operationalisation

Vote intention

Our first outcome measure is the vote intention for both waves. For the first wave, the specific questionnaire item reads as follows: 'If there were a ballot tomorrow, would you strongly be in favour, rather in favour, rather against or strongly against [the proposal, e.g. the toughening of the asylum law]?' In the second wave, after the vote, we repeated a question similar to the vote intention question, which will be used here: 'Are you strongly in favour, rather in favour, rather against or strongly against [the proposal, e.g. the toughening of the asylum law]?' The variable is dichotomized by median-split, in order to distinguish between supporters and opponents of the proposition. We prefer the vote intention over the final choice in the second wave, because it allows us to include the respondents who have not participated in the vote [6].

Party preference

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[6] The results remain virtually identical when actual voting behavior reported in the second wave is used as the dependent variable.

Following previous studies (Slothuus and de Vreese 2010, Van der Eijk et al. 2006), we operationalize partisan preferences on the basis of a set of questions asking the respondents to indicate how likely it is that they will ever vote for each one of the four major Swiss parties – the Social Democrats (SPS), Christian-Democrats (CVP), the Liberals (FDP or LPS) and the Swiss People's Party (SVP) –, as well as for the Green party (GPS). These questions have been asked only once, at the beginning of the campaign, since we assume that voters do not change their partisan orientation during a short issue-specific campaign.

The responses range from 'will never vote for this party' (score 0) to 'will certainly vote for this party at some time in the future' (score 10). Based on this information, we define a respondent's partisan predisposition with respect to a given proposal as the difference between his or her greatest likelihood to vote for a party in the alliance supporting the proposal, and his or her greatest likelihood to vote for a party in the alliance opposing the proposal. Respondents with clear cut partisan allegiances will get high (negative or positive) values on this indicator, while respondents with weak or ambivalent allegiances will get values close to zero. In order to make our two independent variables, party preference and policy arguments, more comparable, we standardize them with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Only 3.4 percent of the respondents in the sample do not have a value on this indicator of partisan predispositions.

Party cue knowledge

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We can only assume that party preference affects vote intention through the use of a partisan heuristic if an individual actually knows her preferred party's position. Therefore, we introduce an additional, dichotomous variable which takes 0 for respondents who do not know their preferred party's position on the proposition and 1 for those who know it. Only the latter are able to use party cues.

Policy arguments

For each one of the two proposals, the interviews included a list of arguments[7] related to the ballot proposition in both waves. At the beginning and at the end of the campaign, the respondents were asked how much they agreed with these arguments: 'We would now like to ask you about your personal opinion about various positions. Please, tell me from 1 'do not agree at all' to 5 'fully agree', how much you agree with these positions'. Thus for each argument, respondents received a score from 1 to 5. The list of arguments included the key arguments of the pro- and the contra-camp as well as some secondary arguments which had also been used during the campaign.

We created a single additive index of respondents' argument position in the following way: First, we build the sum of the pro-argument scores and the con-argument-scores separately. Second, we subtract the sum of the contra-scores from the sum of the pro-scores. Positive values on this index signify support for the proposition while negative values represent opposition to it: the stronger (positive/negative) the value, the stronger the argument position. Again, we standardize this indicator with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. This

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[7] The online appendix shows the key arguments of each campaign

approach to measuring policy arguments is in line with previous Swiss research on the effect of arguments and on correct voting (Kriesi 2005, Nai 2015, Lanz and Nai 2015, Milic 2012).

In addition to these main variables of the analysis, we included a set of standard control variables which includes gender, age, education level (below secondary vs. secondary/tertiary education), and political knowledge. Political knowledge was measured as issue-specific knowledge, by asking respondents 3 questions on the content of the propositions. From these three questions we build a simple additive index which ranges from 0 (no knowledge) to 3 (full knowledge). The three questions were included in both waves. For the analysis we use the respondents' average value, assuming this to be an appropriate indicator of the overall level of knowledge of respondents on the proposals[8].

Empirical Results

The analysis proceeds in two parts. First, we estimate the *effect of party cues and policy arguments on vote intention* during the referendum campaigns. In a second step we estimate *the effect of party preference on policy arguments* to test the partisan biased processing hypothesis. All effects are estimated separately for the two cases.

Results - part one: Direct effects of party preference and policy arguments on vote intention and campaign effects

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[8] As table A3 in the online appendix shows, low knowledge scores decreased while high knowledge scores increased from t1 to t2, which indicates learning effects during the campaign.

Table 1 presents the coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses) of a random-intercept logit regression[9] with vote intention (support vs. opposition of the proposition) as outcome variable. We use a random-intercept model because this allows us to account for the panel structure of the data and at the same time to estimate the effect of party preference, which does not vary over time.

Models 1 (for both cases) show the effect of policy arguments only, holding control variables constant, while in models 2, we add party preference. The first two rows show the coefficients for the effect of party preference and policy arguments on vote intention The two subsequent rows show interaction effects for the same variables at t2, which is right after the vote. The remaining rows present the coefficients for the control variables as well as the t2-constitutive term. To test whether the effect of party preference is really due to the use of party cues we need to compare this effect for respondents who know their party's cue and those who do not. For this purpose, we calculate the full models separately for respondents *with* and *without* knowledge of their party's position. Models 3 present the results for respondents *without* knowledge of their preferred party's cue[10]. As table A2 in the appendix shows, by the end of the

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[9] A Hausman test (Prob>chi2 = 0.136) shows that the coefficients of our random-effects model are not systematically different from those of a fixed-effects model (for the time-varying covariates). Possible bias introduced through omitted individual-level time-invariant characteristic is thus negligible and the use of random effects model is appropriate.

[10] Table A4 in the appendix presents the full models including an interaction effect between party orientation and party cue knowledge as an alternative way to display the moderating effect of cue knowledge. In both cases, the interaction effect between party orientation and party cue knowledge is statistically significant and positive. This means that the effect of party orientation on vote intention is significantly stronger for respondents who know their party's position (marginal effect 0.17, p< 0.001) than for those who don't (marginal effect 0.06, n.s.). This underlines the robustness of the results presented in table 1.

campaign, a large majority of respondents know their preferred party's position (78.34% in the asylum law case and 75.64 in the corporate tax case[11]).

First, in models 1, we can see that at the outset of the campaign (t1) policy arguments have a strong and statistically significant effect on vote intention. This effect diminishes only slightly once we introduce party cues in models 2. Thus both, party preference as well as policy information have an, positive, and statistically significant effect on vote intention, holding all other variables constant. As expected however, the effect of party preference is substantively stronger and statistically significant only for the respondents who know the party cue (models 3), which indicates that party preferences affect vote intention through the use of party cues. Our first hypothesis is thus confirmed (H1). This is true for both issues, the asylum law reform and the corporate tax reform. In other words, respondents' vote intention is significantly associated with their party preference (provided they know the cue), as well as with their position on policy arguments. Interestingly, the effect of argument position is also markedly stronger for respondents who know the party cue as compared to those who don't know it. This result is very much in line with the argument we develop in the second part of the paper – it is likely that citizens tend to adjust their argument position to their party preference.

Furthermore, as rows three and four show, the campaign has a significant reinforcing effect on party preference and policy information in the simple case of the asylum law. This means that the association between the respondents' party preference and their vote intention, as well as the association between their policy position and their vote intention was strengthened during

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[11] Furthermore, the participation rate is higher among respondents who know the party cue than among respondents who don't know it (table A5 in the online appendix). This correlation is stronger in the complex corporate tax case. This suggest that party cues might facilitate participation in referendum votes.

the campaign. In contrast, for the complex case of corporate tax reform, only the argument effect was (statistically) significantly strengthened during the campaign.

<Table 1 about here>

In order to better understand the substantive effects of our main explanatory variables, table 2 presents the marginal effects of party preference and policy arguments on vote intention for the full models, and for respondents who know their party's cue – so table 2 corresponds to models 2 in table 1. The marginal effects correspond to the increase in the probability to vote yes for a given proposition which is associated with a one standard deviation increase in the explanatory variable. The table shows the initial effects at t1, the additional campaign effects at t2, as well as the total effects (in bold).

First of all, the association between vote intention and policy arguments is substantively very strong. At t1, the probability of voting yes increases by 40.5 (asylum law) or 41.2 (corporate tax) percent for one standard deviation change in the pro-direction of the policy argument scale. For party preference by contrast, the probability of voting yes increases by 7.6 or 16.3 percent respectively for one standard deviation change towards the right. At the end of the campaign, the corresponding marginal effects amount to 24.0 or 14.8 percent for party preference, and to as much as 70.4 or 54.4 percent for policy arguments. These percentages are not directly comparable as the two measures represent substantively different concepts, but we can see

that the effect of arguments remains substantial, even if we control for party cues. Comparing

the two cases, party cues have, a stronger initial effect in the complex corporate tax

referendum. By contrast, the initial effect of arguments does not differ between the two cases.

<Table 2 about here>

To sum up this first part of the analysis, party cues do not substitute for policy information,

arguments have an independent effect on vote intention, even if we control for the

respondents' party preferences. The effects of the campaign are stronger in the easy, asylum

case.

Results - part two: Does party preference affect position on policy arguments?

Table 3 presents the results of lagged regression models. In order to test our biased processing

hypothesis, following Bartels (2002), we regressed argument position at t2 on lagged argument

position at t1 (at the outset of the campaign), party preference, a constant term, as well as a set

of controls. We present this analysis only for the respondents who know the party cue. The

coefficient of interest for us is shown in row 2: the effect of party preference on argument

position after the vote, when controlling for the initial argument position. The columns present

the results for all subjects as well as separately for low- and high-knowledge subjects.

Looking at all subjects first, we clearly see our second hypothesis (H2) on partisan biased

processing confirmed for both cases. Party preference has a statistically significant effect on

argument position after the vote, even if we control for respondents' initial argument position.

Not surprisingly, lagged argument position is the strongest determinant of argument position at

t2, but at the same time party preference still exhibits a significant effect on argument position

during the campaign. As party preference does not change over time, this means that

respondents align their argument position with their party preference in the course of the

campaign[12].

Substantively, among all subjects, the maximum amount of change in t2-argument position

associated with a change from the radical right pole of the party spectrum to the radical left,

when controlling for initial argument position, is 0.68 or approximately 12% of the argument-

scale for the asylum law, and 1.1 or approximately 19% of the argument-scale for the corporate

tax case. These effects are also substantively meaningful.

<Table 3 about here>

Comparing once more the two cases, this biased processing effect seems to be stronger for the

more complex corporate tax referendum. In the easy case, t2 argument position is more

strongly determined by t1 argument position. However, as to our hypothesis H2a on biased

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[12] Table A6 in the appendix underlines these results: it presents the effect of party orientation on vote intention, excluding argument position. When not controlling for argument position, the effect of party orientation is substantially stronger. This indicates that a part of the effect of party orientation on vote intention acts through arguments position, as a mediator variable.

processing for different political knowledge levels, the results are mixed. In the easy asylum law case, the biased processing effects are stronger for the highly knowledgeable than for the less knowledgeable respondents. Thus highly politically knowledgeable individuals display a stronger partisan bias in information processing than less well-informed ones. This is not true for the corporate tax case, however, where both, the well and the little informed respondents exhibit comparable biased processing effects.

To sum up this second part, party cues interact with arguments in the course of the campaign, they shape the way subjects change their position on arguments during the campaign. In other words: the change in argument position during the campaign is strongly associated with respondents' party preference.

Discussion

First, we find that vote intention is associated with both, party cues and policy information at the same time. Thus the idea that voters are either well-informed about the policy details or, if not, they resort to party cues as a simple heuristic shortcut does not seem to hold. Saying that, in direct democracy, 'people base most of their choices, even complex and important ones, on very simple kinds of information [...] rules of thumb or heuristics' because they lack the cognitive capacity to 'know detailed information, or conduct rigorous research, on the consequences of every choice they face' (Lupia and Matsusaka 2004, 468) does not tell the whole story.

Rather, in line with democratic norms, voters hold meaningful opinions, which are based at least to some extent on substantive policy arguments. Not only do policy arguments in our study have a statistically significant effect on vote intentions even which holds up even when controlling for party position, they are also substantively more strongly associated with vote intentions than party cues. This finding is well in line with some recent experimental findings, questioning the radical 'party-over-policy-hypotheses' (Cohen 2003) and finding policy information to be relevant, even if party cues are present (Bullock 2011, Boudreau and McKenzie 2014).

While party preference does not vary, vote intention and argument position vary over the campaign. With the present data we cannot exclude reverse causation effects of vote intentions on argument positions and this is probably the main limitation of our study. In comparison to previous experimental studies on the party-over-policy question we do not directly expose respondents to new information and therefore cannot observe their direct reaction to this information. In other words, we do not know whether respondents adapt their vote intention to their argument position or the other way around – but, that said, we think that the association between these two variables and its change throughout the campaign is already a very interesting finding, which lines up well with other studies that use experimental methods to better determine the direction of causality. The question of causality between vote intentions and argument positions is at the heart of recent studies on correct voting in Swiss direct democracy (see Nai 2015, Lanz and Nai 2015, Milic 2012).

Despite these optimistic findings showing that policy information is relevant, the processing of this policy information is found to be strongly affected by party preference. We find a clear

partisan biased processing effect, meaning that voters tend to align their position on substantive policy arguments with their party preference during the campaign if they know their party's position on the issue. This also means that party preference influences vote intention not only directly through the use of party cues, but also indirectly, through the biased processing of arguments. The fact that, by the end of the campaign, more than 75% of the voters know their preferred party's position lends additional strength to this point and indicates that these partisan biased processing effects are pervasive[13]. With regard to political knowledge levels our results are mixed. In the easy case of the asylum law reform, we found the biased processing effect to be stronger among highly knowledgeable citizens. When it is relatively easy to gather information, well-informed citizens are apparently better able to align their arguments with their preferred party's position. In the more complex corporate tax case in contrast, biased processing did not differ between the well- and the poorly informed. In this case, where people generally have a hard time understanding the facts, everyone appears to rely strongly on party positions for their interpretation of the policy-arguments. These mixed results might also be due in part to our rather crude measure of political knowledge though.

These findings are in line with motivated reasoning theory, which assumes all political thinking to be directional and goal-oriented. Recently, Bolsen et al. (2014, 245) have defined directional reasoning as "the default method to forming evaluations in political contexts". Our study contributes an additional piece of evidence to this research. Furthermore, it is also in line with

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[13] Another possible limitation we would like to point out here however, is that the results of the referendums themselves may affect the partisan bias. As our dependent variable argument position at t2 is measured after the outcome of the referendum is known, we cannot exclude that the fact of being a winner or a looser of the referendum affects the estimated partisan bias. This is in itself an interesting question, which goes beyond the scope of this paper however.

the early insight of the authors of *the American voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) that partisan preferences are crucial social ties which shape our attitudes towards political objects, and they support Bartels' (2003, 117) conclusion that 'party identification is a pervasive and dynamic force shaping citizens' perceptions of, and reactions to, the political world'.

To some extent, this second finding of our study qualifies the optimistic first conclusions drawn above. If voters process information in a biased way, preferring information which conforms to their party preference, and disregarding or devaluating incompatible information at the same time, this is problematic from a democratic point of view. Such a process clearly does not correspond to the ideal of deliberative debate, where citizens listen to both sides and base their decisions on the force of the better argument.

Not only does partisan motivated reasoning hinder deliberative debate, it is also difficult to remedy. If citizens are incompetent because they lack information and arguments about specific policies, the most obvious answer is to provide them with more and better information; or at least to provide them with suitable elite cues which allow them to reach reasonable conclusions. If, however, the problem lies in the partisan processing of information, these strategies will hardly help. Here it is important to remember however, that party cues might have a positive effect as learning aids, facilitating participation for citizens. The fact that participation rates are higher among respondents who know the cues hint in this direction.

Conclusion

As our study and other recent findings suggest, it is not *either* party *or* policy, but most probably party cues *and* policy information which affect opinions. In consequence, it is not true, as has

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often been suggested, that citizens ignore policy information once they are exposed to party cues (Cohen 2003, Rahn 1993, Zaller 1992, Popkin 1991). The present study provides further evidence for the claim that having arguments and policy-related information, is in fact important for individuals. ~~Thus voters do not simply copy and paste their party's position onto their ballot paper, but rather base their position to a great extent on substantive policy arguments.~~ At the same time, we find however, that policy arguments are processed to be in line with partisan orientation. This latter finding somewhat relativizes the optimistic conclusion that arguments play a central role in decision making.

The idea of party cues as shortcuts and substitutes for policy information, as one of the most important ideas in political psychology of the recent decades, needs to be revisited. Our result, in line with other recent studies, suggests that this is not the only mechanism through which party cues work. Cues do not necessarily reduce the elaboration of policy arguments, the two types of information act in parallel, at the same time, and indeed they interact with each other. In other words, party orientation affects vote intention directly, through cue taking, as well as indirectly, through motivated reasoning processes.

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Table 1: Regression of party preference and policy arguments on vote intention, including controls

model	ASYLUM LAW REFORM			CORPORATE TAX REFORM		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
	argument only cue know=1	full model cue know=1	full model cue know=0	argument only cue know=1	full model cue know=1	full model cue know=0
party orientation		0.355	0.216		0.730	0.078
		(0.159)*	(0.133)		(0.169)***	(0.135)
argument position	2.158	1.888	0.815	2.129	1.851	0.819
	(0.285)***	(0.280)***	(0.179)***	(0.256)***	(0.244)***	(0.186)***
t2*party orient.		0.646	-0.019		-0.067	0.272
		(0.244)**	(0.291)		(0.203)	(0.235)
t2*argument pos.	1.587	1.392	1.273	0.658	0.593	0.186
	(0.343)***	(0.345)***	(0.378)***	(0.277)*	(0.279)*	(0.270)
t2	1.452	1.432	0.960	0.580	0.567	0.657
	(0.277)***	(0.277)***	(0.282)***	(0.221)**	(0.219)**	(0.235)**
gender	0.642	0.576	0.065	-0.352	-0.153	-0.124
	(0.236)**	(0.230)*	(0.210)	(0.235)	(0.227)	(0.216)
age	0.006	0.000	0.008	0.143	0.043	-0.061
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.083)	(0.081)	(0.070)
education	-0.683	-0.683	-0.252	-0.038	-0.015	0.539
	(0.406)	(0.395)	(0.330)	(0.412)	(0.395)	(0.322)
political knowledge	-0.174	-0.129	-0.061	0.033	0.060	0.234
	(0.120)	(0.117)	(0.106)	(0.125)	(0.123)	(0.121)
_cons	0.545	0.789	0.110	-0.292	-0.041	-0.647
	(0.554)	(0.548)	(0.457)	(0.597)	(0.574)	(0.479)
lnsig2u	0.337	0.056	-2.316	0.962	0.754	-1.041
	(0.631)	(0.768)	(6.063)	(0.393)	(0.443)	(1.504)
sigma_u	1.184	1.029	0.314	1.618	1.458	0.594
	(0.374)	(0.395)	(0.952)	(0.318)	(0.323)	(0.447)
rho	0.299	0.243	0.029	0.443	0.392	0.097
	(0.133)	(0.141)	(0.171)	(0.097)	(0.106)	(0.132)
N	1,126	1,126	536	1,151	1,151	533

Note. Logit coefficients and standard errors in parentheses; dependent variable: vote intention dichotomized;   * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$. Cue know refers to whether respondents know their preferred party's position on the issue.

Table 2: Marginal effects of party preference and policy arguments on vote intention

		ASYLUM LAW	total effects	CORPORATE TAX	total effects
Party preference	t1	0.076		0.163	
		(0.035)		(0.038)	
	t2	+0.164	= **0.240**	-0.015	= **0.148**
		(0.061)		(0.046)	
Policy arguments	t1	0.405		0.412	
		(0.058)		(0.052)	
	t2	+0.290	= **0.704**	+0.132	= **0.544**
		(0.071)		(0.062)	

Notes. The table presents results for the full model and for respondents with party cue knowledge, corresponding to models 2 and 5 in table 1. Marginal effects (and standard errors in parentheses) are calculated under the assumption that random effects = 0. The numbers represent the increase in probability to vote yes for a given proposition associated with one standard deviation increase in the explanatory variable. Total effects over both t1&t2 are shown in bold.

Table 3: Regression of lagged argument position (at t1) and party preference on argument position at t2.

	ASYLUM LAW			CORPORATE TAX		
	all subjects	low knowledge	high knowledge	all subjects	low knowledge	high knowledge
Lagged argument position	0.793	0.664	0.812	0.564	0.509	0.590
	(0.026)***	(0.066)***	(0.027)***	(0.031)***	(0.049)***	(0.041)***
party preference	0.146	0.090	0.156	0.287	0.308	0.274
	(0.024)***	(0.057)	(0.026)***	(0.031)***	(0.045)***	(0.042)***
gender	0.093	0.011	0.094	-0.146	-0.209	-0.087
	(0.043)*	(0.100)	(0.048)*	(0.061)*	(0.089)*	(0.084)
age	0.000	-0.004	0.001	-0.060	-0.075	-0.059
	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.001)	(0.021)**	(0.032)*	(0.028)*
education	-0.106	0.035	-0.178	-0.102	-0.178	-0.052
	(0.071)	(0.142)	(0.082)*	(0.108)	(0.160)	(0.145)
_cons	-0.022	0.197	0.003	0.505	0.597	0.474
	(0.097)	(0.223)	(0.109)	(0.146)***	(0.221)**	(0.195)*
R^2	0.74	0.56	0.77	0.50	0.48	0.51
N	651	132	519	652	267	385

Note. OLS coefficients and standard errors in parentheses; dependent variable: argument position at t2; * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$. Only respondents with knowledge of party position are included in the analysis.