

The Polarization of Public Opinion about Competence

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Abstract

The existing literature on polarization has focused predominantly on spatial polarization and partisanship. This paper extends the focus of polarization to the literature on issue ownership, and competence. Using ANES data from 1972 to 2012, we identify a pattern of partisan polarization in competence assessments in parallel with elite polarization in the US and some evidence of increasing competence ratings for US parties as they polarize. Partisan polarization of competence assessments is robust to the inclusion of spatial proximity controls. As an additional test of our expectations and using British Election Study data from 1963 to 2014, we reveal partisan polarization followed by depolarization, consistent with elite-level dynamics in Britain. The implications are important for a) our understanding of the implications of polarization in the US, and of depolarization in the UK, and b) better general understanding of the dynamics of public opinion about competence.

Has partisan polarization in the US been coupled with the polarization of public opinion on a more diverse array of opinion measures than spatial attitudes alone? This paper argues that partisan sorting (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Erikson et al. 2002; Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Hetherington 2009; Levendusky 2009b; Hill and Tausanovitch, 2015) should apply to public opinion about competence. We advance three arguments in support of this expectation. The first draws on the literature pointing to the interaction of spatial and valence models of party competition. Political elites may diverge from the median voter because they have a valence advantage, or they may diverge in order to acquire a valence advantage (Fenno 1978; Burden 2004; Bruter et al. 2010; Clark 2014). Both expectations suggest that spatial polarization may be matched by polarization in competence assessments. The second argument draws on policy-seeking motives for political elites (Müller and Strøm 1999). If parties diverge to meet the preferences of their partisans, members and activists, then more polarized positions should lead to more intense partisan evaluations about competence. The third comes from the existing literature on partisan polarization of spatial preferences, which reveals that polarization heightens partisan updating of public opinion (Carsay and Layman 2006; Highton and Kam 2011; Baldassari and Gelman 2009; Claassen and Highton 2008; Milazzo et al. 2012). This causal direction should also apply to other aspects of public opinion. This paper also simply highlights the need to draw the literature on polarization together with the party competition literature on valence, issue ownership and performance.

We examine whether partisans rate their parties for competence with greater intensity under periods of polarization; a concept which reflects components of the concept of ownership, valence and performance, but which does not pretend to directly measure any one of these. We examine whether there is polarization of public opinion about competence in the US. Our analyses reveal that this is the case. As the parties have polarized, so there is some evidence of gains in competence ratings overall, and evidence of partisan polarization in competence evaluations, measured by a) the gap between partisans and rivals of each party, and b) the strengthening effect of partisanship on competence ratings over time. The results are robust to controls for spatial proximity, which is also related to assessments of party competence.

In order to give greater validity to our analysis, and to consider whether the relationships we identify indicate public opinion dynamics which are not unique to one country, we apply our analysis to an interesting test case where we have seen elite and partisan polarization, followed by later elite and partisan depolarization; the UK (Budge 1999; Norris 1999; Webb and Farrell 1999; Benoit and Laver 2006; Green 2007; Adams et al. 2012a; 2012b; Milazzo et al. 2013; Denver 2013). This enables us to test our expectations using a different measure of public opinion about competence, and to control, essentially, for the broader context in which elite polarization in the US has taken place. Our UK analyses support the underlying explanations and expectations regarding partisan polarization of competence assessments in the US and partisan polarization and then depolarization of competence assessments in the UK. There is somewhat weaker aggregate-level evidence at face value of partisan polarization and depolarization of competence assessments, but clearer evidence of a) weakening overall assessments for competence for each of the two major British parties in recent years corresponding with elite depolarization, and b) first increasing and then weakening effects of partisanship on competence evaluations over time.

The implications of our findings are threefold. The first is that we can understand US polarization as - in part - a process whereby the parties have gained in competence ratings among their partisans and also gained in overall competence ratings overall. We can understand UK depolarization in the reverse. These implications might be usefully applied to other country contexts. The second implication relates to party incentives. We can better understand the incentives of parties to polarize if that polarization is coupled by enhancements in reputations for competence, or perhaps the causal direction runs from improved competence to polarization. Either direction holds very important implications for our understanding of competitive incentives. The third relates to our understanding of the relationship between competence and partisanship. A debate exists between those arguing that partisanship is a running tally of performance (Fiorina 1977; 1981; Clarke and McCutcheon 2009; Clarke et al. 2015), and those arguing that competence evaluations are endogenous (Green and Palmquist 1990; Bartels 2002; Green et al. 2002; Evans and Andersen 2004; Pickup and Evans 2013; Evans and Chzhen 2015). Our findings suggest that these relationships may be contextually driven, in part, by polarization (and depolarization).

Why Competence?

When we think of polarization we think of the distance between elites, and partisans, in ideological space. But the debate about US mass polarization has moved - correctly - towards an understanding of polarization through the lens of partisanship (see, e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Fiorina et al. 2004; Hetherington 2001; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Layman et al. 2006; Jacobson 2007; Levendusky 2009a; 2009b). Once we understand that mass US polarization occurs at a partisan level - through the strengthening of partisan identification (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Bartels 2002; Hetherington 2001; 2009; Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Hetherington 2009; Levendusky 2009a), the degree to which there is partisan sorting at an issue-based level (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Erikson et al. 2002; Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Hetherington 2009; Levendusky 2009b) and the degree to which there is 'attitude constraint' among partisans (Converse 1964; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008), it is logical that these partisan ties will reveal evidence of polarization on different measures of public opinion. There is no reason to think that partisan polarization will be confined to spatial attitudinal measures alone.

Part of the research on polarization reveals that a highly polarized contexts leads to greater endogeneity in public opinion (Bartels 2000; Milazzo et al. 2013). Scholars find that party identification tends to lead respondents' issue positions under polarized contexts, whereas issue positions tend to lead partisanship under less polarized contexts. This suggests that we should find stronger partisan effects on different measures of public opinion too, especially those most relevant to polarized politics. We might find stronger partisan sorting of party evaluations beyond those typically measured to date (spatial measures). We focus on issue competence as our measure of public opinion where we expect greater partisan sorting to occur with elite polarization. We are especially interested in issue competence for three additional reasons.

Our theory-led interest in competence comes from the literature which argues that there is a relationship between spatial competition and valence-based competition. This leads us to consider that parties may polarize to demonstrate competence, as well as to demonstrate ideological clarity,

but they may alternatively polarize because they are judged as more competent (Fenno 1978; Burden 2004; Bruter et al. 2010; Clark 2014). Either proposition means that we should examine spatial polarization and expect to find polarization in public opinion about party competence. We are agnostic about the causal direction.

The literature on partisanship should expect a relationship between spatial polarization and competence - above and beyond the fact that elite polarization and stronger partisan identification is expected to lead to stronger partisan effects upon respondent attitudes and 'attitude constraint'. One of the explanations for elite polarization is informed by policy-seeking motivations, rather than office-seeking motivations (the latter would fit into the spatial models discussed above), see Müller and Strøm (1999). Policy-seeking elites polarize because they successfully pursue the incentives of gaining office which are to achieve the policy preferences of their party; those interests shared by members, partisans and elites, which are more ideologically divergent than the policy positions of the median voter. If this is the case, partisans should approve of a party's divergent policies more than when they are moderate (assuming that partisans are always more polarized than non-partisans or the median voter). A partisan will consider a party more competent if that party is pursuing policies a partisan agrees with most strongly. Citizens believe their policy priorities will lead to more desirable outcomes.

Our third reason is simply to highlight the gap in the literature on polarization to date, and the absence of integration across literatures on voting and spatial competition and the large body of research which focuses on party competition via the lens of issue competence, valence or issue ownership (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al 2003). We know from the literature on competence that a) parties tend to compete in elections by trying to raise the salience of their 'owned' issues; b) there is a relationship between issue ownership and vote shares; c) owned issues tend to be ones that members, activists, elites and partisans tend to care most about; and more widely: d) parties (and presidents) gain support in elections when they are judged as more competent in handling issues, irrespective of the concept of 'issue ownership'. If we assume that party evaluations on competence are important, there are three expectations that arise with respect to elite polarization which we address in this paper:

1. Do parties gain reputations for competence when they polarize? I.e. are the US parties judged as more competent today than they were in the 1970s when they were more moderate?
2. Are partisans more likely to judge their party more favourably on competence when they polarize, compared with when parties are more consensual?
3. Does elite polarization lead to stronger partisan priming of competence assessments? I.e. is there a stronger effect of partisanship on competence ratings when parties polarize?

The implication of the third expectation relates to debates about whether partisanship leads competence evaluations, or whether competence leads partisanship (Green and Palmquist 1990; Green et al. 2002). Those scholars who point to the endogenous nature of competence have predominantly focused on the economy (Evans and Andersen 2004; Pickup and Evans 2013) but the debate is starting to enter the field of broader assessments for competence on different policy issues, or claims made about the exogeneity of 'valence' assessments very widely (Evans and Chzhen 2015). The opposite claim, that competence assessments lead partisanship - is the central claim of

the argument that partisanship represents a running tally of performance (Fiorina 1977; 1981; Clarke and McCutcheon 2009; Clarke et al. 2015). Our focus upon competence and polarization therefore gets to the heart of the debate about whether partisanship is a running tally. Our expectation is that the answer to this debate is closer to the following: when parties polarize, partisanship more strongly influences ratings of competence. When parties are more consensual, there may be a stronger causal relationship in the other direction. We cannot test both sides of this debate here. We simply test the contextual nature of partisan effects upon competence and relate the competence and running tally literature to the literature on polarization. The steps we take are potentially very important for reconciling the running tally debate.

Finally, we highlight - and explore - the implications of US elite polarization for party systems in another country context. This results from an analytic step we believe is an important redress to the US polarization literature focusing on only one country. The problem with making causal assumptions about elite and mass or partisan polarization in America is that polarization coincides with growing economic inequalities, with globalization, with increasing mediatization of political campaigning, and so on. There is always the possibility that a missing variable Z leads - in part if not in full - to elite polarization (X) and mass or partisan polarization (Y), however measured. We gain substantial analytic power if we add a) other country comparisons, and b) comparisons in the reverse direction: i.e. using examples of elite (and mass/partisan) depolarization. We hold constant some of the exogenous economic and global changes which might be confounding effects and we add variance to be explained. This paper therefore examines the three questions above in the US, and also in the UK where elite depolarization has also been coupled with partisan depolarization (see Adams et al 2012a; 2012b; Milazzo et al. 2013; Green 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008), and where this depolarization was preceded by clear elite level polarization, prior to and during the 1980s. This use of a reverse additional case also allows us to cross-validate our results using alternative measures of competence; for which the data sources are explained in detail below.

Operationalizing Competence (and Polarization's Relevance for Competence)

We do not claim in this paper that we explore whether there is *issue ownership* polarization. In other work we argue for much clearer conceptual development than currently exists in the area of issue ownership research, distinguishing between the relative issue strengths and weaknesses parties tend to hold over time (but not without considerable variation), and the issue-specific fluctuations by which incumbents are judged for their handling of issues (which only rarely alters ownership), see Green and Jennings (forthcoming (a)). We have also highlighted the problems in the term 'valence' and how it is used (and abused), see Green and Jennings (forthcoming (b)), and we have argued for a new concept in public opinion about competence which refers to the broad level of confidence the public has towards parties on issues, which tends to transcend different issues (Green and Jennings 2012b).

In this paper we suggest that elite polarization should result in greater intensity of issue competence evaluations among partisans. This concept of intensity relates to various notions of ownership and competence. If parties tend to have issues on which they are better rated in general (either due to competence, long-term representation or association - which all may be related to 'ownership'), then elite polarization should lead to a higher average rating of any owned issue. This does not mean

the issue may not have been owned previously, just that the intensity of the evaluation has been accentuated. The concept of intensity of issue competence evaluations could also relate to short-term fluctuations which don't infer a long term ownership of an issue. Competence intensity does not mean that parties own more issues, or that there is greater or less positive or negative change in issue ratings over time. We simply expect partisans to rate their party more favourably when the party polarizes, and rival partisans to rate their own party more favourably. In each case we expect partisans to rate the rival party less favourably. Hence polarization in public opinion about competence will result in a widening gap between the average rating of each party's partisans for their own party, and each party's partisans to the rival party. We measure competence intensity as the average rating of a party for handling, trust or competence.

We do not claim that competence assessments are perfectly (or even mostly) conceptually or empirically distinct to spatial ones. This depends upon measurement and on which kind of concept of competence we are interested in. In terms of intensity, we expect a correspondence between rating a party higher for competence and handling and agreeing with a party's policies. For this reason we introduce controls for spatial proximity into our empirical models. The data, variables and methods of analysis are discussed in the following section.

Data and Methods

To measure our dependent variable, i.e. issue competence evaluations, we use the question from the American National Election Studies (ANES) about which party is considered best at handling the 'most important problem' (MIP) facing the nation; using the *ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File*. This was first asked as part of the ANES in 1972 (variants of this survey question have been fielded by Gallup since as early as 1943), and it was subsequently included in the 1976, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1988, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2012 sweeps of the ANES. As such it provides a measure of issue competence over an extended time period that enables us to examine long-term trends in the polarization of evaluations at the individual-level. The best party on the MIP measure has been similarly used as a measure of issue competence assessments in other studies (e.g. Clarke et al. 2004; 2009; Green and Jennings 2012a). The specific wording of the ANES survey questions is as follows:

"What do you think are the most important problems facing this country? Of all you've told me, what would you say is the single most important problem the country faces?" (VCF0875)

"Which political party do you think would be most likely to get the government to do a better job in dealing with this problem --the Republicans, the Democrats, or wouldn't there be much difference between them?" (VCF9012).

This question was then used to construct a dichotomous measure of whether or not a respondent considered the Democratic (Republican) Party would do a better job in dealing with the MIP, coded as equal to 1 where the Democratic (Republican) Party was named as most likely to do a better job, and coded as equal to 0 where there was "Not much difference", "Don't know", "Other" (1972 only) or "Neither" and where the opposing Republican (Democratic) Party was named as more likely to do a better job handling the MIP.

To measure strength of party identification, we use a four-point scale for each of the parties, derived from the ANES seven-point scale (Strong Democrat, Weak Democrat, Independent Democrat, Independent-Independent, Independent Republican, Weak Republican and Strong Republican) that is constructed using the following questions.

“Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”

(IF REPUBLICAN OR DEMOCRAT) “Would you call yourself a strong (REPUBLICAN/DEMOCRAT) or a not very strong (REPUBLICAN/DEMOCRAT)?”

(IF INDEPENDENT, OTHER OR NO PREFERENCE) “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?”

This assigns the scale of party identification a value of 0 for non-identifiers (i.e. independents and those indicating no preference), a value of 1 for independents who are “closer” to the party, a value of 2 for those weakly identifying with the party (“not very strong”), and a value of 3 for those who strongly identify with the party. Our base category for each party is therefore independents/non-identifiers, and we drop partisans of the rival party. (We estimated the models using the full seven-point scale of party identification and the results are largely consistent with what we find here, but less easily interpreted.)

In addition to this we include a measure of time, which is simply the calendar year of the ANES (with values ranging from 1972 to 2012). This captures any linear trend in assessments of the best party to handle the MIP over time. We then include an interaction of time with our four-point scale of party identification in order to model the effect of polarization over time. This enables us to consider whether assessments of party issue competence are subject to the same trends as observed for elite polarization as shown by Layman and Carsey (2002), McCarty et al. (2006), and Poole and Rosenthal (1997).

Finally, we include a control for the spatial distance between the respondent and the party. This is measured as the absolute difference between self-placement of the respondent on an ideological seven-point scale (ranging from Extremely Liberal, Liberal, Slightly Liberal, Moderate/Middle of the Road, Slightly Conservative, Conservative, Extremely Conservative) and their placement of the party on that same scale. We recode any “don’t know” responses as equal to the mid-point of the scale to avoid the loss of data.

“We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?” (VCF0804)

“We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place the Democratic (Republican) Party (on this scale)?” (VCF0503/VCF0504)

This measure enables us to controlling for spatial distance between voters and parties, which we know will (a) confound with 'best party' measures and also (b) be a function of elite polarization.

Logistic regression models takes the form:

$$\text{BestParty(MIP)}_i = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 \text{PartyID}_i + \beta_2 \text{Year}_i + \beta_3 \text{PartyID}_i * \text{Year}_i + \beta_4 \text{Proximity}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

We supplement our data for the US from the *ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File* with a new and unique merged dataset compiled from all surveys of the British Election Study (BES) between 1963 and 2014.¹ There is no single consistent question regarding assessments of issue competence. The best party on the MIP question was first asked by the BES in 1963 but not used again until 2001. This has led other work to construct an aggregate measure of common variance in issue competence evaluations over time (Green and Jennings 2012b). We are concerned here with assessments of competence at the individual-level, however. As a solution, we compiled data on all questions asked regarding the competence of parties across a large number of issues (including the MIP, but also issues such as health, crime, foreign affairs, strikes, the economy, inflation, taxation, housing, unemployment, the economy, pensions, immigration, education and defence). Some of these questions ask respondents which party is better on a particular issue. Others ask about whether a given party in government or opposition would handle a particular issue well or badly. Combining issue measures is argued to be a preferable way of assessing issue voting (Anscombe et al. 2008).

For each question we construct a dichotomous measure of whether or not a respondent views the Labour (Conservative) Party as likely to do a good/better job in that issue, coded as equal to 1 where the Labour (Conservative) Party was named as the best party on that issue or where they were considered to be handling that issue "well" or "very well". It is coded as equal to 0 for "Don't knows", "Other" or other responses indicating no difference between the parties, and – for 'best party' formulations of the question, where the opposing Conservative (Labour) Party was named as best on that issue. This means we have competence assessments for up to 12 issues in a given year (as in 2005) and on average around 8 issues. We then calculate the mean score for each respondent across all issues in that cross-section, and where this is below a threshold of 0.5 we code the value as equal to 0, and where it is equal or above it we assign it a value of 1. We do not have a comparable measure of spatial distance asked consistently over time, so we are unable to control for proximity.

Results

In Figure 1 we present the overall proportion of respondents naming the Republicans as the best party on the MIP in each ANES cross-section for most presidential (and mid-term) elections since 1972. This reveals a broadly consistent level of competence for the Republican Party between 1972 and 2012 among the population as a whole (bold line). There are fluctuations with peaks coinciding with the election of President Reagan in 1980, his re-election in 1984 and the Gingrich Revolution in 1994, but there is no obvious trend consistent with elite polarization. The period between 2000 and 2012 hints at an increase in overall competence intensity for the Republican Party, but its magnitude is small (and this coincides in the longest gap in the ANES). Figure 1 also reveals an increasing gap

¹ This includes data from the 'Continuous Monitoring Survey' run by the BES between 2004 and 2013, and Waves 1, 2 and 3 of the 'Internet Panel Study' run by the BES in 2014.

throughout the period between the proportion of respondents who consider the Republican Party as likely to better handle the MIP among Republican partisans compared to the proportion among Democrat partisans. In 1972 the partisan-rival partisan gap was equal to 0.34. By 2012 it was 0.78. The gap widens despite the strong possibility of ceiling effects for partisans and floor effects for non-partisans. It is indicative of partisan polarization in competence assessments for the Republicans.

Figure 1 about here

Figure 2 presents the data on the Democrats as the best party on the most important problem over the same time period. It reveals some similarities and some interesting differences in relation to the pattern that was observed for the Republicans in Figure 1. Firstly, it reveals less obvious change or polarization in the ratings of the Democrats among rival partisans. This is arguably (if not obviously) due to the floor effect of the much lower issue competence ratings for the Democratic Party among Republican partisans throughout the period. Starting at a proportion of around 0.13 in 1972, these ratings had nowhere to go. Despite this, there is still some evidence of a systematic decline after 1992, falling to just 0.04 in 2012. The reverse is true for Democrat identifiers whose initial high level of confidence in Democratic Party issue handling (0.81) is higher than the comparable rating among partisans for the Republicans (0.62) at the start of the ANES data series. Figure 2 reveals much higher partisan polarization towards the Democrats throughout the whole series, but even with this higher overall polarization there is an increasing partisan divide in Democrat competence assessments. The gap in 1972 is 0.68 points and by 2012 is 0.88 points. The second clear difference for the Democratic Party is a stronger upward trend in their average competence rating among the general population. The party enjoy a substantial increase in the period between 1994 and 2012.

Figure 2 about here

Figures 1 and 2 support two of our expectations given the trend of elite polarization in America throughout the period from 1972 to 2012. The first is that there would be an increase in the average issue competence of parties overall which coincides with elite polarization. This is more evident for the Democrats than for the Republicans. A parallel increase is possible because the proportion of “don't know” responses can vary so that an increase (decrease) in issue competence evaluations of the Republicans does not necessitate a decrease (increase) in the issue competence evaluations of the Democrats. It could also arise if the issue priorities of the public are diverging, such that the Democrats are increasingly seen as the best party on a highly salient issue, and the Republicans are increasingly seen as the best party on another highly salient issue. This kind of opinion polarization would be another consequence or correlate of elite polarization. It is beyond the scope of this paper to test, but further research could explore whether these dynamics exist in longitudinal data.

The second expectation is supported with evidence of partisan polarization in issue competence assessments, with partisans being more likely to rate their own party positively (or more intensely) over the period in which US elites become more distinct, and with partisans being more likely to rate their rival party negatively (more intensely) over the same period. This is most evident for the Republican Party.

Our analysis now proceeds to test our third expectation, namely that there will be a stronger effect of partisanship on competence assessments over time, and that this will remain the case when we control for spatial proximity, which should influence competence assessments but not be equivalent.

That is, we expect that the partisan polarization of issue competence should be robust to effects of spatial distance between voters and parties.

Table 1 presents the results of three models, estimated as a logistic regression, with the coefficients indicating log-odds. The first model tests for the effect of different strengths of Republican partisan identification (taking independents as the base category). The second introduces the interaction of partisan strength with the year of survey (as well as the main effect for year). The third model controls for the distance between the respondent's ideological self-placement and their placement of the Republican Party.

Table 1 about here

The reported regression models support our expectations that a) the effect of partisan strength will increase significantly with survey year (i.e. over time), and that b) these effects are robust to spatial proximity. In the base model we see that strength of partisanship is, unsurprisingly, associated with an increase in the likelihood of naming the Republican Party as better able to handle the MIP. Note, however, that the difference of the effect between Closer-Republicans and Weak Republicans is not significant at the 95 percent confidence level, although both groups are significantly different from the base category of Independents. In the second and third models we see that the interaction of strong partisans with year of survey is positive and significant (0.02, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that the effect of partisanship on competence assessments has increased over time. We expected proximity to significantly relate to responses to the question about the party better able to handle the MIP. However, including this variable has no impact on the significance or the substantive contribution of the interaction effect for partisanship and year. The contribution to model fit of proximity is also modest.

Interpreting the substantive effects of interaction terms in the context of logistic regressions can be difficult. As Brambor et al. (2006) note, the conditional effect of x on y cannot be deduced from the magnitude and significance of the interaction term alone; it is necessary to plot the combined marginal effect across the full range of values of y in the sample. The marginal effect of partisanship combined with its interaction with time is therefore calculated as $\beta_1 \text{PartyID}_i + \beta_3 \text{PartyID}_i * \text{Year}_i$ across values of year between 1972 and 2012. In Figure 3 we plot smoothed predictive margins of the effect of party identification, for different strengths of identification, over time for the full model, including the control for spatial proximity. This confirms the inference from the coefficient that the effect of party identification on competence assessments has increased over time for strong party identifiers, while the 95 per cent confidence intervals suggest that the change has not been significant for either group of weak identifiers (i.e. the upper confidence interval of the marginal effect in 1972 is higher than the lower confidence interval in 2012), and that the effect for these groups is indistinguishable, as the confidence intervals overlap throughout the period. The effect of partisanship is thus significant for the strongest party identifiers, but not for those expressing a weaker partisan affiliation with the Republicans. The strongest partisans demonstrate partisan polarization with respect to competence assessments of the Republicans during this period of elite polarization in America.

Figure 3 about here

In Table 2 we present the results for a logistic regression of issue competence assessments of the Democratic Party. This provides confirmation of the findings above for the Republicans. In the base model there is a significant effect of the strongest Democrat partisans rating the Democrats more intensely for competence, while the difference between weaker partisan identifiers ('Closer' and 'Weak' Democrats) is not statistically significant. The positive and significant interaction term (0.02, $p < 0.05$) observed in the second and third models suggests the effect of strong partisan attachments strengthens over time (coinciding with elite polarization). This effect remains robust to inclusion of the control for spatial proximity, while its addition does not contribute to a superior model fit.

Table 2 about here

It again is helpful to inspect the predictive margins of the effect of party identification, for different strengths of identification, over time. These are plotted in Figure 4. Here we see that the predictive margins for the Democrats exhibit a similar pattern to the Republicans – with strong party identifiers displaying a positive and significant increase in their propensity to assess their own party as more competent in handling the MIP. Again, the 95 per cent confidence intervals suggest that the change over time has not been significant for respondents with weaker Democrat attachments – and that the effect for these groups is indistinguishable (as the confidence intervals overlap).

Figure 4 about here

These results suggest that partisan polarization has been evident in the competence assessments of the parties in the US, as measured using the question about the party considered most likely to do a "better job" dealing with the MIP that has been asked regularly in the ANES since 1972. For the strongest partisan identifiers, the relationship between partisanship and competence assessments has strengthened over time; there has been increasing sorting of partisan competence ratings.

Partisan Competence Polarization and Depolarization in the UK

The final part of this paper explores whether adding data from another country and examining the dynamics in the same direction (elite polarization), and in the reverse direction (depolarization) - provides further support for the claims we set out earlier. Recall that the UK witnessed growing polarization of its two main political parties between 1964 and 1987, followed by substantial depolarization between the 1992 and 2010 general elections.

Figure 5 presents the overall proportion of respondents making a positive assessment of the issue competence of the Conservative Party across all issues in each BES cross-section within the general population and among Conservative partisans and rival (Labour) partisans, between 1963 and 2015. The first notable pattern in Figure 5, in contrast to those found in Figures 1 and 2 for the US, is that the gap between the average partisan and rival partisan rating is lower throughout. We think this may not arise from country differences in the nature of partisanship (although partisanship is thought to be somewhat less salient in the UK in general, in relation to the US, Shiveley (1979); Westholm and Niemi (1992)). Instead we suspect these differences arise because the question about "which political party" is considered more likely to do a better job on the MIP (as asked in the ANES) is particularly susceptible to partisan priming; that is, to endogeneity. The second clear pattern we observe in Figure 5 is an increase in overall competence assessments at the 1979 election which is

then followed by a precipitation in Conservative Party ratings for issue competence. The slight upturn in 2010 (when the Conservatives won the election following the economic crisis under the Labour government in 2007-2008) by no means reverses what appears to be a secular decline in the proportion of respondents offering positive competence evaluations of the party. This coincides with the period of moderation by the British Conservatives; a period of depolarization. Particularly intriguing is the timing of the largest peak and the timing of the decline. The peak of Conservative elite polarization was in 1987, according to the same BES survey data (Green 2015),² and so the peak of Conservative competence precedes the peak of ideological polarization. This presents a fascinating puzzle. For now it is sufficient to observe a decline which corresponds with elite depolarization, as well as partisan depolarization in the form of widely noted partisan dealignment (Dalton 2008; Denver 2013). Finally, Figure 5 reveals no clear widening of the gap between partisans in the 1980s, nor a declining gap between partisans from the 1990s onwards. This may again be a product of the survey questions. Rival partisans revise their competence assessments of the Conservative Party and Conservative partisans remain very loyal in their assessments, until 2010 (when the Conservatives entered coalition with another party - the Liberal Democrats). Overall, then, the data for the UK Conservative Party is consistent with an overall increase and then decline in average competence assessment among the general population, which corresponds with elite polarization and depolarization, but a less clear picture with respect to partisan polarization and depolarization.

[Figure 5 about here](#)

Figure 6 presents the same measures for the UK Labour Party. These data demonstrate much more stability in competence assessments but with a decline after 1974 and a steeper decline following the 2001 general election. This decline is particularly evident among the general population and among rival partisans, whereas Labour partisans exhibit a greater tendency to retain a positive assessment for competence in their party. The figure hints at a slight narrowing of the partisan gap in the period when the UK parties become most similar, between 2001 and 2010, and the gap is narrower in the earliest part of the time series as well, when the parties were also more consensual. The gap between Labour and rival partisans is greatest when the parties were polarized.

[Figure 6 about here](#)

The UK data provide a less clear picture than our findings for the US. This may arise due to different (and less regular) survey question wordings, different partisan characteristics and the party system, etc. However, we observe two interesting trends at the aggregate level which are consistent with our expectations. The first is that the average competence ratings of both parties declines alongside a period of elite depolarization, and the competence ratings of the Conservative Party appear to increase substantially just prior to the Conservatives' well documented shift to the right. We make no causal claim regarding these trends, but it is interesting and significant that the declines run in different directions as partisan strengthening occurs in the US, and partisan dealignment occurs in the UK. The second is that there is some weak evidence of a widening gap between partisan evaluations when the parties were more distinct, and of a narrowing gap when the parties were more similar. This latter relationship is much weaker in the UK than it appears to be in the US.

² Using a question: "Considering everything the Conservative and Labour parties stand for, would you say there is a great difference between them, some difference between them, or not much difference between them?"

We next turn to models of partisanship and competence assessments for the UK. If there is indeed a relationship between partisan depolarization and the period of elite depolarization we should find a weakening of the relationship between partisanship and UK competence evaluations in the period of elite depolarization and a strengthening beforehand. This would bring clarity to bear on the interpretation of the aggregate level figures.

Table 3 presents the results of logistic regression models of issue competence assessments for the Conservatives Party, over the period between 1963 and 2014. The results provide partial support for our expectations. In the base model we find a consistent effect of partisanship for each of our three groups of partisans: weak, fairly strong and very strong Conservatives, where each group is more likely to rate the Conservative Party positively relative to non-identifiers. In the second model, the effect of year of survey is negative and significant (-0.05, $p<0.001$), indicating a decline in positive assessments of issue competence in general. This points to significant decreasing overall intensity in competence assessments in the UK. Similar to the results for the US, the interaction of strength of party identification and year of survey are positive and significant. This might suggest that the strength of effect of partisan attachments is in fact increasing in the UK. However, as noted above it is essential to plot the combined marginal effect across the full range of values in the sample in order to make substantive interpretations concerning this relationship. This is especially important here because the relationship between log-odds, and probabilities, is non-linear.

Table 3 about here

In Figure 7 we plot predictive margins of the effect of party identification, for different strengths of identification, over the period between 1963 and 2014. Here we see that the predictive margins of the effect of partisanship increase steadily from 1963 until the mid-1980s (consistent with elite polarization during the period) then start to decline, especially among weak/fairly strong partisans, thereafter. The non-linear relationship between the log-odds and predictive probabilities means that the positive coefficient for the interaction Table 3 produces a curvilinear relationship in the figure. These results are consistent with the pattern of elite polarization - followed by elite depolarization, throughout the entire period.

Figure 7 about here

Table 4 presents the results for the same analysis for issue competence assessments of the Labour Party and finds the same relationships and conclusions. The base model confirms that partisanship structures issue competence assessments, while the multiplicative interaction model again reveals a negative and significant effect of time (year of survey) on issue competence assessments, both overall (denoting a significant decline in Labour assessments) and as a function of partisan strength.

Table 4 about here

Again it is necessary to inspect the predictive margins to interpret the effect of partisanship that is conditional on time. Figure 8 displays predicted margins of the effect of partisanship, for different strengths of partisan attachment. Similar to the pattern observed for the Conservatives above, partisan effects on issue competence assessments of the Labour Party rise steadily from the 1960s until the late 1980s and then start to weaken and decline for weak and fairly strong party identifiers. This is consistent with the polarization-depolarization dynamic observed in the UK. There has been a

weakening in the effect of partisanship on competence ratings in the UK since the 1980s, consistent with expectations of elite depolarization and effects upon partisan de-sorting, though this is not observed for strong partisans. Once again, we find significant effects of partisan strength on competence evaluations, but it is the interaction of partisanship with time that provides important clues regarding a relationship between public opinion and elite polarization and depolarization.

Figure 8 about here

It is not possible to control for spatial distance in our analysis of the competence polarization for the UK parties, due to the lack of a comparable survey questions on the spatial position of respondents and/or parties in the BES data between 1963 and 2014. However, we find trends of partisan polarization and depolarization in issue competence in the UK in directions consistent with the suggested explanations for patterns of partisan polarization in competence in the US. We suggest that elite polarization is coupled with partisan polarization in competence assessments, and elite depolarization is coupled with a weakening of partisan polarization on issue competence.

Conclusions

There has been a keen debate about the degree to which elite polarization in America has been coupled with mass polarization, with scholars concluding that mass level polarization occurs at a partisan level and the greatest attention given to partisan polarization of spatial preferences. This paper extends this debate to public opinion about competence. We reveal that the US parties have seen increases in the intensity with which the general public evaluates their competence, visible more clearly for the Democrats than for the Republicans. There has been a widening of the partisan gap between evaluations of the Republicans and Democrats for issue competence, and an increase - among the strongest partisans - in the effects of partisanship on assessments of party competence. This partisan polarization in public opinion about competence is robust to spatial distance, although spatial distance is certainly a good predictor of public opinion about competence (using the available measure based on the most important problem and subsequent 'party best' questions in the ANES).

In order to better evaluate the reliability of assumptions about a causal link between elite and partisan polarization, we explored whether there is a relationship between elite and partisan polarization and then depolarization in the UK. Using a uniquely compiled cumulative dataset of issue competence evaluations from the British Election Studies, beginning in 1963 and running to 2014, we find an increase in Conservative Party evaluations which appears to precede Conservative Party polarization, and a parallel decrease in the competence ratings of the Labour and Conservative parties in the recent period of ideological convergence. The relationship between partisan strength and issue competence ratings appears to confirm the relationship with elite polarization and partisan polarization of competence ratings; the effects of partisanship follow a similar curvilinear pattern to the pattern of elite polarization in the 1980s and depolarization from the 1990s onwards.

Of course, further research would provide greater confidence in the patterns that we reveal here. Our measures of competence intensity are subject to underlying variation in the salience of issues, which comprises variation in responses to the party better able to handle the MIP question we use for the US, and the issue handling questions asked by the BES vary over the period between 1963 and 2014. Future analysis needs to probe these underlying differences to shed greater light on the

content meaning of the variance we identify. We would also like to explore the causal questions we identify using panel data, insofar as this is available, and the broader relationships between elite polarization and partisan polarization of competence evaluations using large N cross-national data.

Notwithstanding the limitations of available data, there are several implications of the analyses we present in this paper.

The first relates to a possible relationship - and the incentives this would highlight - between elite polarization and improving assessments (in intensity) for competence. We cannot disentangle a causal relationship here, and the relationship is far from perfect, but there is sufficient evidence to warrant this question as an area for further research. It raises doubt for those theories which point to an association between ideological moderation and an increase in valence (see MacDonald and Rabinowitz 1998; Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000; Groseclose 2001; Adams et al. 2011). Do parties diverge because they have a competence advantage, or do they gain a competence advantage by appearing more ideologically distinct? It is possible that partisanship is more closely related to competence when parties polarize simply due to elite cues and to partisan sorting of attitudes and evaluations. It is also possible that partisans believe polarized parties are more competent, and this strengthens partisan attachments. There are many other reasons to think the Democrats may have gained a competence increase in recent years, not least driven by changes in the salience of issues that benefit them. It is even possible that more divergent parties are actually more competent in exogenous terms, and this is detected correctly by the general public. This is an area that we would like to investigate further.

The second implication relates to a better understanding of US mass opinion in terms of its party evaluations, and also of public opinion in the UK. The comparisons suggest that our understanding of public opinion in other countries - and even in a generalisable sense - might be aided through greater analysis of elite divergence and public opinion on a wider set of measures than used to date.

The third implication is important for debates concerning the exogenous or endogenous nature of public opinion about competence. The degree to which partisanship is a “running tally” may be contextually dependent upon a) the degree of elite polarization, and b) strength of partisanship. Our analyses point to the importance of context in understanding the associations between partisanship and competence. Answering this more definitively would require panel data to tease out causation.

Finally, just as there may be an important contextual aspect to the link between partisanship and competence, so there appears to be a contextual aspect to the level of intensity of public opinion about party competence. While we do not claim to measure issue ownership *per se*, the literature on issue ownership, performance or valence might usefully consider how competence evaluations can vary with elite polarization - and depolarization.

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FIGURES

Figure 1: Republicans the Best Party on the Most Important Problem, 1972-2012

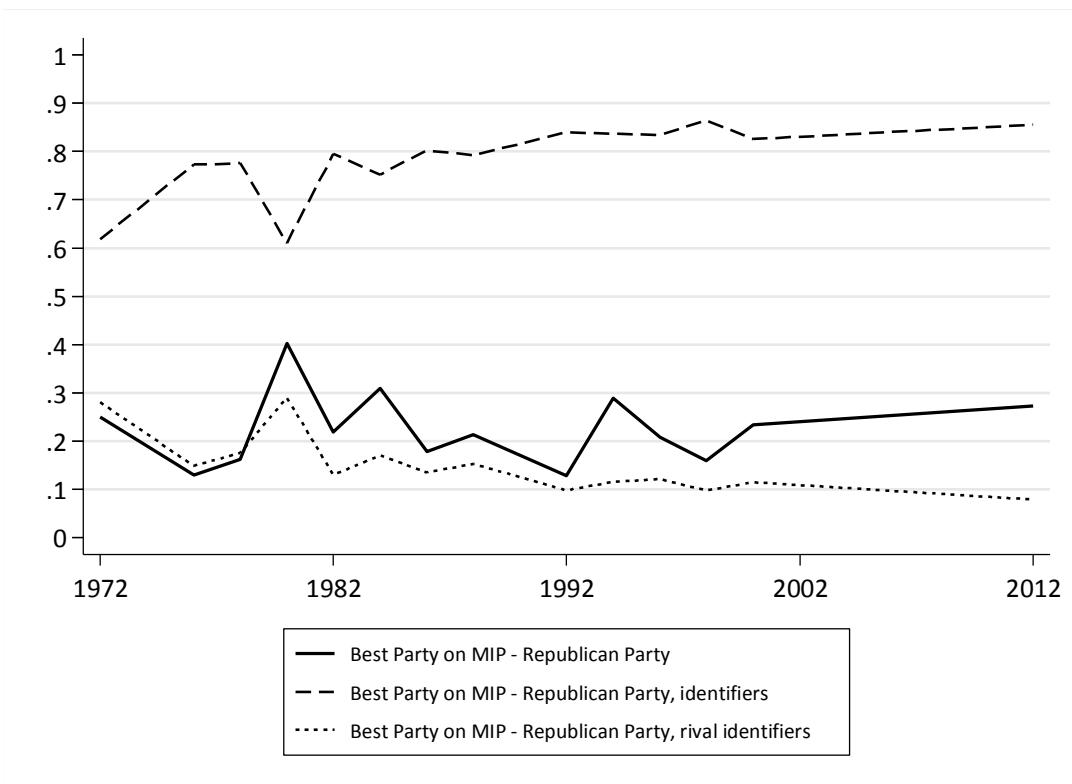


Figure 2: Democrats the Best Party on the Most Important Problem, 1972-2012

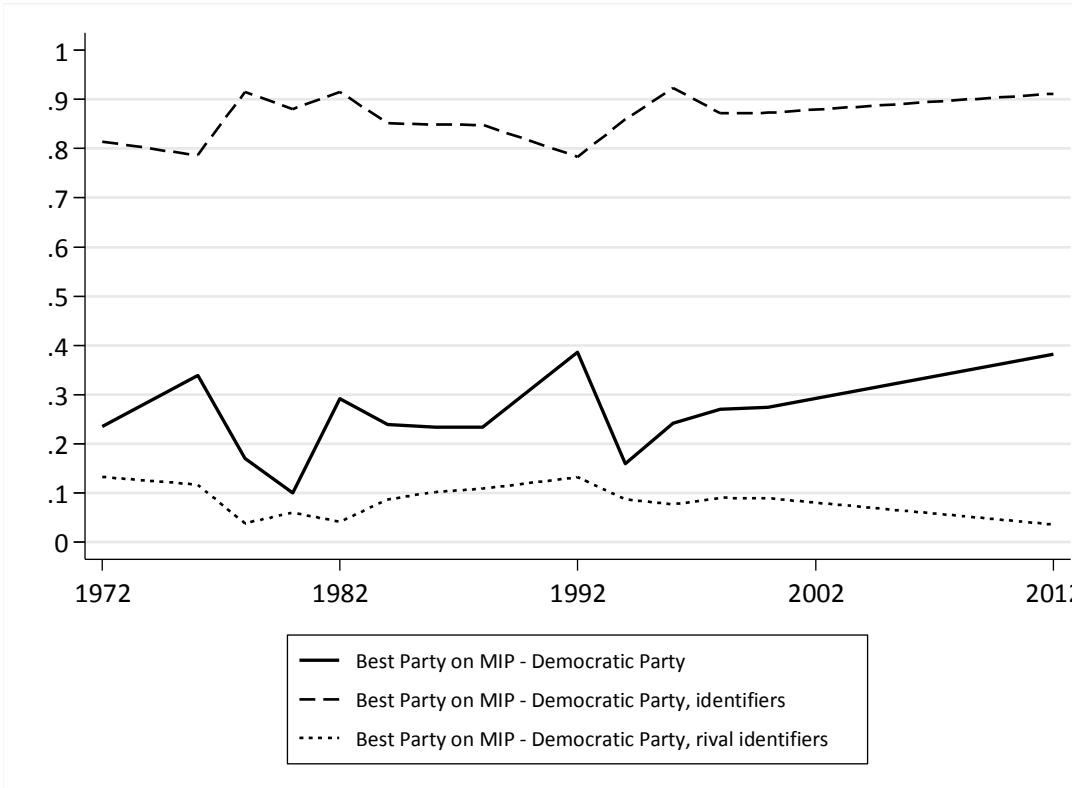


Figure 3: Predictive margins, by party identification, Republican Party

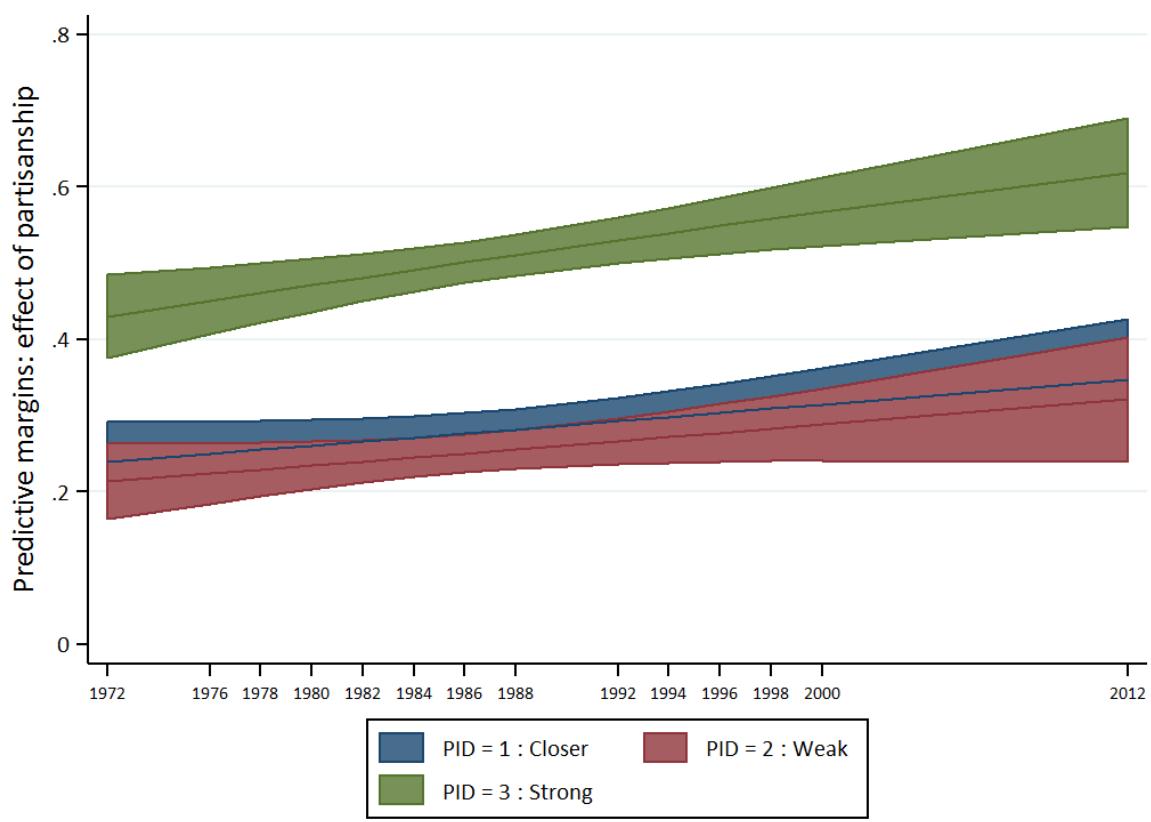


Figure 4: Predictive margins, by party identification, Democratic Party

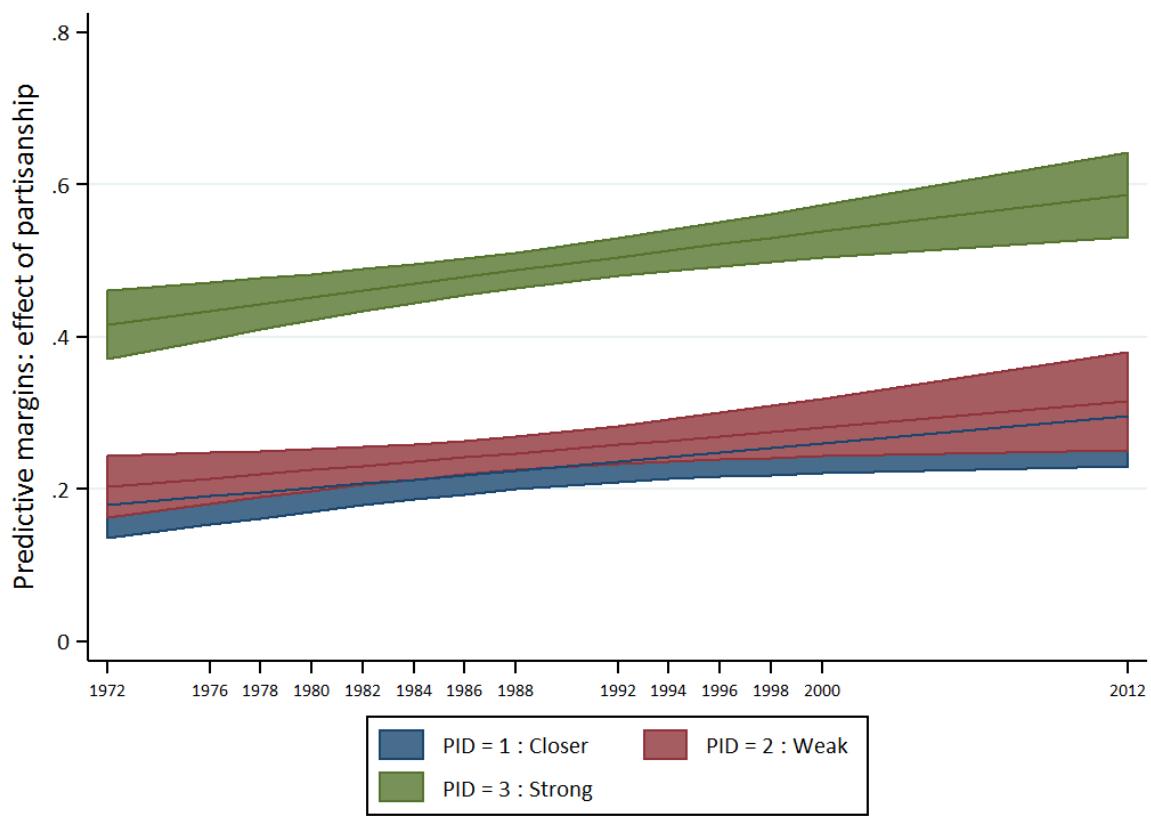


Figure 5: Conservative Party Mean Handling Rating, 1963-2014

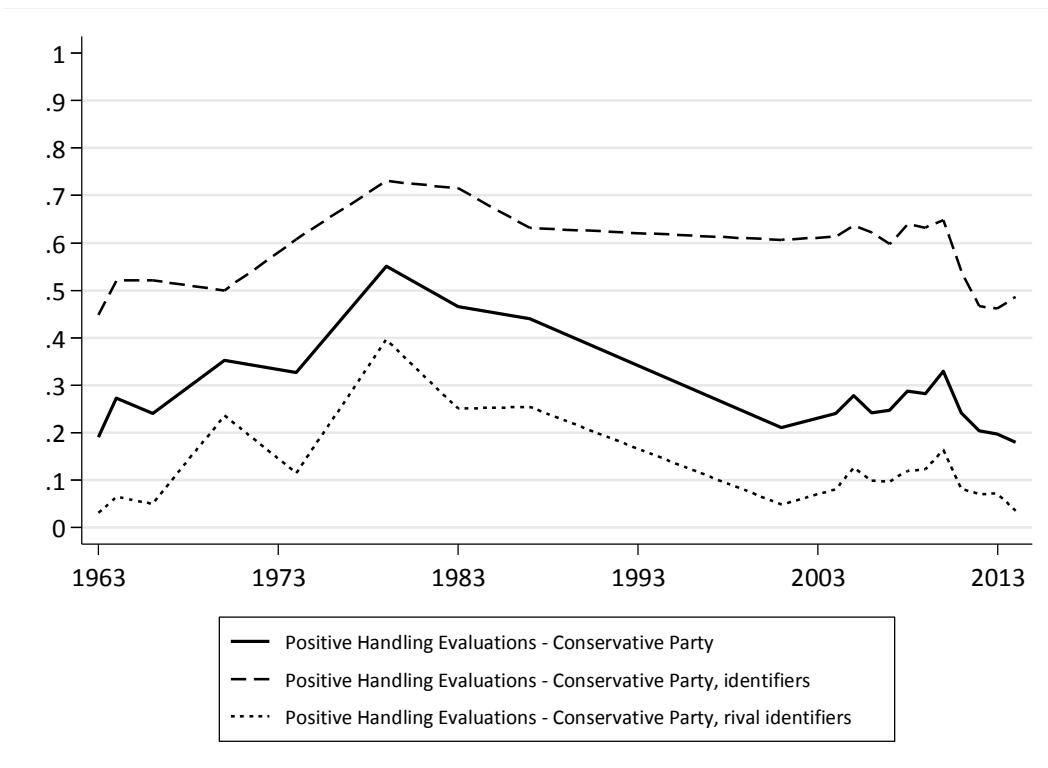


Figure 6: Labour Party Mean Handling Rating, 1963-2014

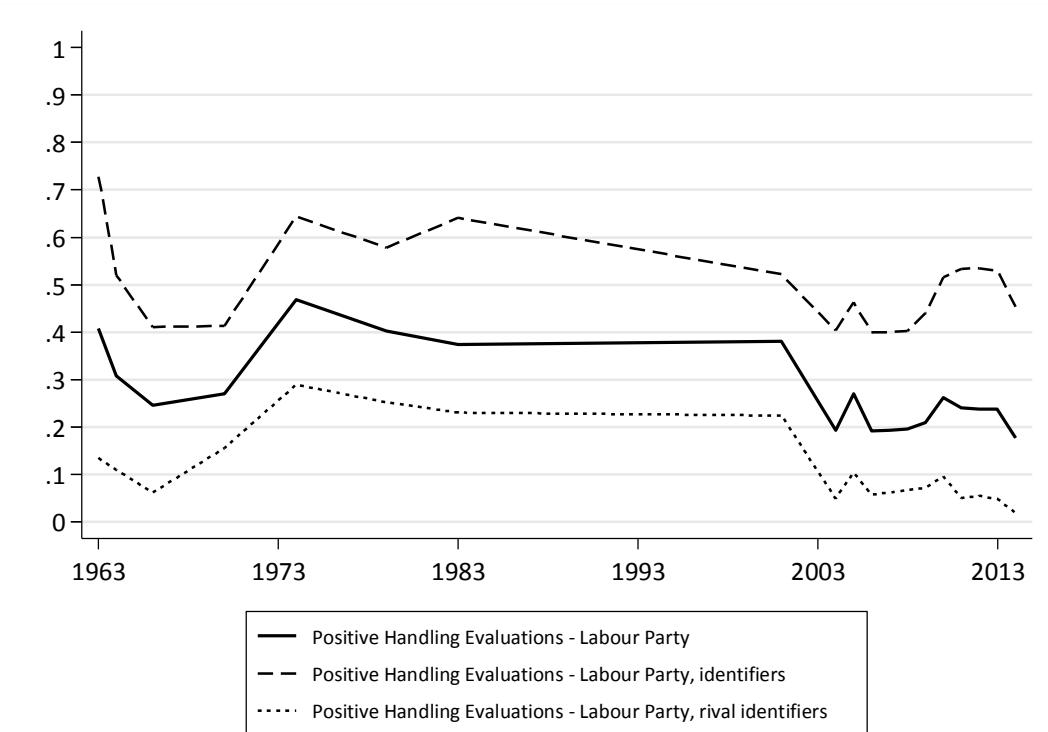


Figure 7: Predictive margins, by party identification, Conservative Party

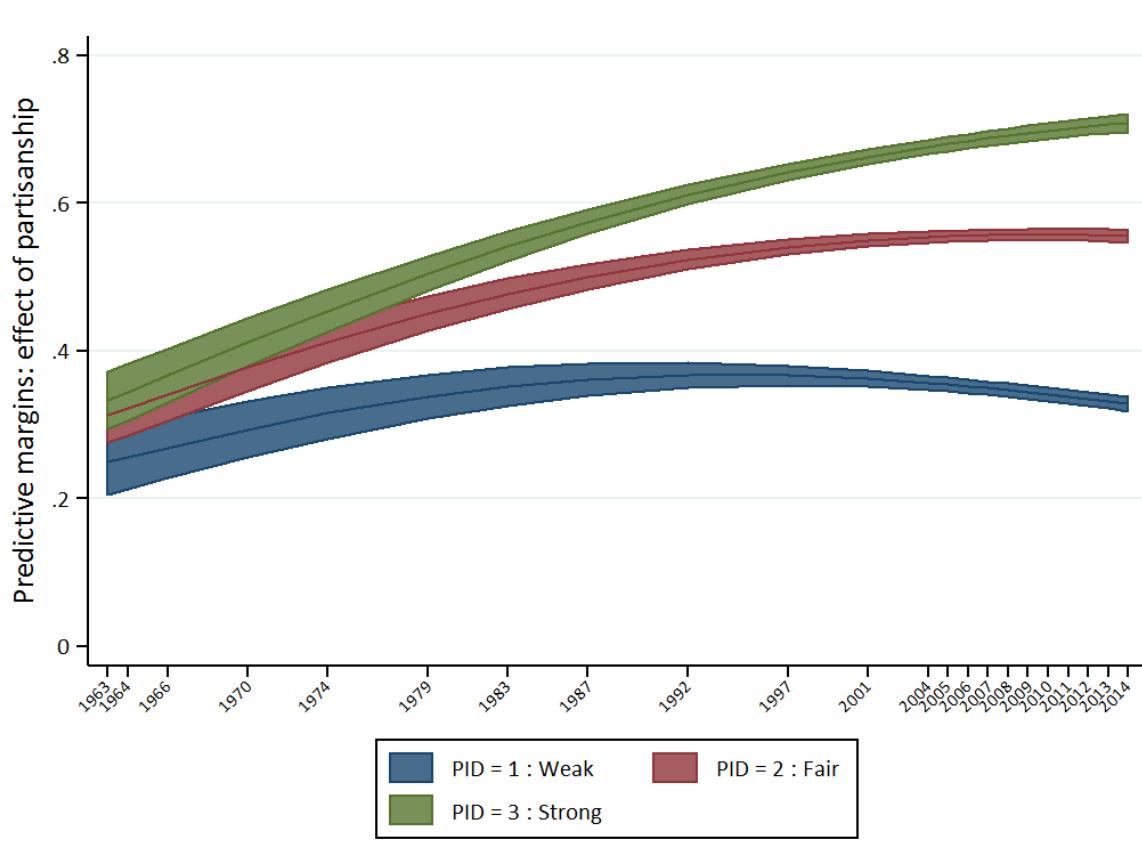
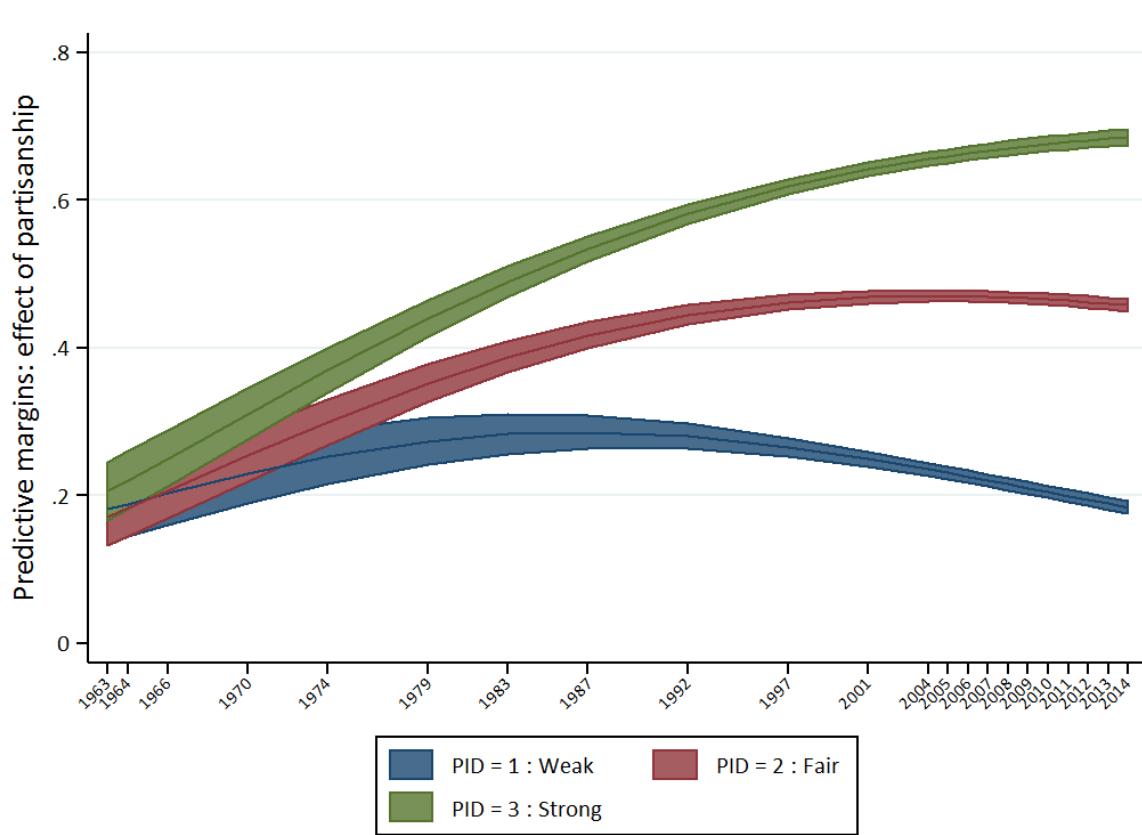


Figure 8: Predictive margins, by party identification, Labour Party



TABLES

Table 1: The Effect of Partisanship on Best Party on the MIP over Time (Republicans), Logistic Regression

Republican Party Best on MIP			
<i>Party ID Base = Independents (0)</i>			
Party ID = Closer-Republican (1)	1.61 (0.09)***	-18.84 (19.65)	-21.78 (19.96)
Party ID = Weak Republican (2)	1.49 (0.09)***	-20.66 (19.82)	-22.14 (20.10)
Party ID = Strong Republican (3)	2.60 (0.09)***	-39.40 (20.02)*	-40.48 (20.25)*
Year		-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Party ID: Closer-Republican (1) * Year		0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Party ID: Weak Republican (2) * Year		0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Party ID: Strong Republican (3) * Year		0.02 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)*
Proximity			-0.17 (0.03)***
Intercept	-1.99 (0.07)***	-1.24 (17.03)	-0.04 (17.31)
<i>N</i>	8,922	8,922	8,922
<i>Pseudo R-squared</i>	0.11	0.11	0.11

+ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2: The Effect of Partisanship on Best Party on the MIP over Time (Democrats), Logistic Regression

Democratic Party Best on MIP			
<i>Party ID Base = Independents (0)</i>			
Party ID = Closer-Democrat (1)	1.43 (0.09)***	-23.69 (16.99)	-24.86 (17.04)
Party ID = Weak Democrat (2)	1.51 (0.08)***	-22.48 (16.52)	-23.23 (16.57)
Party ID = Strong Democrat (3)	2.53 (0.08)***	-33.33 (16.24)*	-34.17 (16.31)*
Year		0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Party ID: Closer- Democrat (1) * Year		0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Party ID: Weak Democrat (2) * Year		0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Party ID: Strong Democrat (3) * Year		0.02 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)*
Proximity			-0.08 (0.02)***
Intercept	-2.11 (0.07)***	-2.16 (14.22)	-1.03 (14.28)
<i>N</i>	11,225	11,225	11,225
<i>Pseudo R-squared</i>	0.10	0.10	0.10

+ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3: The Effect of Partisanship on Issue Handling over Time (Conservatives), Logistic Regression

	Conservative Party	Issue Competence
<i>Party ID Base = Independents/non-identifiers (0)</i>		
Party ID: Weak Conservatives (1)	1.92 (0.03)***	-38.01 (4.60)***
Party ID: Fairly strong Conservatives (2)	2.79 (0.03)***	-58.92 (4.13)***
Party ID: Very strong Conservatives (3)	3.48 (0.03)***	-82.80 (4.76)***
Year		-0.05 (0.00)***
Party ID: Weak Conservatives (1) * Year		0.02 (0.00)***
Party ID: Fairly strong Conservatives (2) * Year		0.03 (0.00)***
Party ID: Very strong Conservatives (3) * Year		0.04 (0.00)***
Intercept	-2.13 (0.02)***	95.62 (3.05)***
<i>N</i>	104,412	104,412
<i>Pseudo R-squared</i>	0.21	0.22

+ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4: The Effect of Partisanship on Issue Handling over Time (Labour), Logistic Regression

	Labour Party	Issue Competence
<i>Party ID Base = Independents/non-identifiers (0)</i>		
Party ID: Weak Labour (1)	1.53 (0.03)***	-33.82 (4.99)***
Party ID: Fairly strong Labour (2)	2.57 (0.03)***	-82.82 (4.27)***
Party ID: Very strong Labour (3)	3.47 (0.03)***	-113.16 (4.56)***
Year		-0.06 (0.00)***
Party ID: Weak Labour (1) * Year		0.02 (0.00)***
Party ID: Fairly strong Labour (2) * Year		0.04 (0.00)***
Party ID: Very strong Labour (3) * Year		0.06 (0.00)***
Intercept	-2.38 (0.03)***	126.21 (3.58)***
<i>N</i>	118,414	118,414
<i>Pseudo R-squared</i>	0.19	0.21

+ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$