

Assessing the relative influence of party unity on vote choice: Evidence from a conjoint experiment

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Observational studies and anecdotal evidence suggest that party unity improves a party's electoral performance. Yet, due to a lack of experimental evidence, the causal standing of these findings remains unclear. Moreover, party unity manifests in various ways, and we do not know how much the different types of party unity affect the vote. Relying on a conjoint experiment implemented in a probability-based survey of the German population, our study is the first to unveil the distinct causal effect of different forms of party unity on vote choice. We further establish that appearing united can compensate for substantive policy distances between parties and voters. These findings have important implications for our understanding of how citizens vote and how intra-party politics affects the political representation of citizens in democracies.

Keywords: party unity, vote choice, conjoint experiment

Ample scholarship on intra-party unity demonstrates its importance for party and elite behavior (e.g., Ceron 2015). Yet, the causal standing of these findings remains obscure as experimental evidence is missing. Further, party unity is a multifaceted concept as dissenting behavior can manifest in various forms (e.g., Ceron 2015; Greene and Haber 2016). This complicates the study of party unity and its effects on voters. Finally, we know surprisingly little about the relative contribution of party unity to vote choice as compared to other important factors such as ideological proximity. How, if at all, do voters respond to internal conflict within parties? And to which kind of intra-party dissent are voters most responsive?

Previous research on voters' reactions to party (dis)unity primarily focuses on individual candidates dissenting from the party line in an attempt to cultivate a personal vote (e.g., Däubler, Bräuninger, and Brunner 2016). By contrast, research at the party level describes mechanisms that make voters less likely to vote for parties they perceive to be disunited (Greene and Haber 2015). These purely observational studies, however, fail to provide causal evidence for the link between party unity and vote choice.¹ Against this background, we investigate the electoral consequences of different forms of intra-party conflict and compare their effect sizes to other determinants of vote choice such as ideological proximity. By building on theoretical and empirical work on intra-party politics and vote choice, and implementing a conjoint experiment in a probability-based survey of the German population, we present experimental evidence for a direct causal effect of party unity on vote choice. The conjoint design further allows us to distinguish between different aspects of party unity and study their distinct consequences for voting behavior.

¹Different arguments have been presented in the literature to explain how broad scale intra-party conflict depresses a party's vote share (e.g., Jung and Somer-Topcu 2020; Lehrer and Lin 2020; Greene and Haber 2015).

We present three major conclusions. First, internal disagreement curtails a party's electoral fortunes. Second, the electoral consequences of intra-party conflict differ depending on the type of conflicting behavior. While critique from actors within the party has a negligible impact, incohesive voting behavior in parliament and especially publicly displayed conflict at party congresses decrease voters' likelihood to vote for a party. Finally, party unity is a relevant factor that can even compensate for some degree of ideological distance. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to provide experimental evidence for the nexus between party unity and vote choice.

These findings are relevant for the literature on spatial models of party competition and mass-level voting behavior as they provide causal evidence that the perceived unity of a party exerts an independent effect on vote choice. This indicates that perceptions of party unity need to take a much more prominent role in studying vote choices (Plescia, Kritzinger, and Eberl 2020; Lehrer and Lin 2020). More generally, this study also holds sobering implications for how parties represent citizens in democracies. Parties assume a key position in modern democratic governance and intra-party deliberations are decisive for closely converting voters' preferences into government action (Wolkenstein 2016; Müller 2000). However, our results suggest that there is a sizeable electoral incentive for vote-seeking parties to hide internal debates. Consequently, electoral pressure deters parties from publicly debating policies which may severely limit their abilities to effectively represent citizens.

DATA & RESEARCH STRATEGY

To causally identify links between different manifestations of party unity and vote choice, and to relate their sizes to one another as well as to other determinants of the vote, we

conduct a choice-based conjoint experiment (Ben-Akiva, McFadden, and Train 2019; Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). This design allows us to simultaneously estimate the causal effects of different types of party unity on vote choice. Furthermore, since the effect sizes are expressed on a common scale, we can directly compare the influence of different aspects of party unity to one another and to other relevant factors such as ideological proximity or different candidate characteristics. The survey experiment was embedded in the November 2019 wave ($N = 4,580$) (Blom et al. 2020) of the German Internet Panel (GIP), which is based on a probability-based sample of the German population (Blom, Gathmann, and Krieger 2015). The combination of high-quality survey data and a conjoint experiment enables us to draw accurate conclusion about real-world voter behavior (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015).

In our experiment, respondents receive randomly varied information about various characteristics of two fictional parties competing against each other in a hypothetical electoral contest. To ease the cognitive burden for respondents, we present the information on the two parties in a table. Respondents are asked to choose one of the parties without an explicit “none”-option (forced-choice design). Yet, they are able to skip the question after an error message asks them to state their choice. Based on recommendations concerning the appropriate number of conjoint tasks with regards to data quality, survey satisficing, and respondent fatigue (e.g., Bansak et al. 2018), each respondent consecutively evaluates ten party pairs. We randomly vary the displayed characteristics along several dimensions.

While we provide information on several features of the hypothetical parties, our primary interest is in the causal effect of different aspects of party unity. Consequently, we specify three unity dimensions and randomly vary the attributes. Specifically, the study separates the following dimensions (with attribute levels in brackets): 1) internal critique (none, rank-and-file members, former party leader, party faction), 2) parliamentary voting

TABLE 1 *Attributes and attribute levels*

<i>Dimension & Attribute</i>	<i>Levels</i>
<i>Ideology</i>	
Ideological distance	0, 1, 2, 3, 4
<i>Unity</i>	
Critique of party leadership	None, Rank-and-file members, Former party leader, Party faction
Parliamentary voting behavior	United, Divided
Behavior at congress	United, Neither united nor divided, Divided
<i>Ambiguity</i>	
Reform clarity	High, Low
<i>Party</i>	
Party role	Junior coalition partner, PM party, Opposition party
<i>Candidate</i>	
Gender	Female, Male
Age	38 years, 56 years, 74 years
Occupation	Employee, Employee (retired), Entrepreneur, Lawyer, Politician , Activist

(united, divided), and 3) behavior at party congress (united, neither united nor divided, divided).

Besides the dimensions that relate to party unity, we also randomly vary several additional party features. Foremost, we acknowledge the predominant role of ideological proximity for voting (e.g., Franchino and Zucchini 2015) and assign each fictional party one of five ideological positions (left, center-left, center, center-right, right). Since Lehrer and Lin (2020) report that vote choice is not only affected by party unity on its own, but also jointly with a party’s policy ambiguity, we include clarity of reform proposals (high, low). To test for incumbency effects that may be particularly relevant in our experiment in which partisanship is muted (Lim and Snyder Jr 2015), we manipulate a party’s current role (junior coalition party, prime minister’s party, opposition party). We also consider

the party's leadership candidate characteristics by varying gender (female, male), age (38 years, 56 years, 74 years), and professional experience (activist, employee, retired employee, lawyer, politician, entrepreneur). Finally, to avoid generating unrealistic profiles, we restrict specific combinations of candidate profiles. This refers to scenarios where a 74 years old leadership candidate still works as an employee, or where a 38 or 56 years old candidate is already retired. Table 1 shows all attributes and the respective levels, and table 2 shows an example screen respondents receive including the respective question wording.²

To discern the effect each attribute, we estimate a conditional logistic regression model (McFadden 1974) and compute average marginal component effects (AMCE) as well as predicted vote probabilities.³ The levels of each attribute are represented by indicator variables. A party's behavior at the party congress, for instance, is modeled as two indicator variables, one for "neither united nor divided" and one for "divided", while "united" serves as the reference category. While the experiment randomizes party ideology, we expect that ideological proximity to the respondent's ideal position and not ideology per se matters. To translate party ideology into ideological proximity, we rely on respondents' self-placements on an ideological left-right scale, which was collected two months prior to the experiment in GIP Wave 43 (Blom et al. 2021). We use these self-placements to compute the ideological distance between every respondent and the hypothetical party.⁴

²In order to avoid a potential bias due to the sequence in which the attributes are displayed, we randomize their order for each respondent (e.g., Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). To lower the cognitive burden and increase response quality, however, we hold the order constant within respondents and across tasks.

³In the appendix, we demonstrate that results are virtually identical when using the linear implementation as in Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014).

⁴Self-placement were measured on an eleven-point scale. We map them to the five categories of the experimental design as follows: Self-placements in categories 1 and 2

TABLE 2 Example of a choice screen presented to respondents.

In the following, we will show you information on each of two made-up parties that are running against each other in an election. Please read the displayed information carefully and then please decide which party you would rather vote for.

There are no wrong or right answers to these questions, it's all about your assessments.

	Party A	Party B
Party Ideology	Right	Left
Critique of Party Leadership	Party faction	None
Parliamentary Voting Behavior	United	United
Party Behavior at Congress	United	Divided
Clarity of Reform Proposals	High	Low
Party Role	Opposition party	PM party
Candidate's gender	Female	Male
Candidate's age	56 years	38 years
Candidate's occupation	Entrepreneur	Lawyer

If you had to choose between party A and B, which party would you choose?

Due to list-wise deletion, the total sample size is reduced from 4,580 to 3,687 respondents. Because respondents perform multiple choice tasks, our analysis includes 53,522 observations from 26,761 choices.⁵ Standard errors are clustered by respondents to account for the fact that respondents make up to ten choices in the experiment.

are considered equivalent to a left party's ideology, 3 and 4 equivalent to the center-left, 5, 6 and 7 equivalent to the center, 8 and 9 equivalent to the center-right, and 10 and 11 equivalent to the right.

⁵As a quality check, we asked respondents twice to give an overall rating of both parties they just saw. If respondents rate the party they chose as better than or equal to the not chosen alternative, we label a choice as consistent. This was the case for 94% of all rated party pairs. The results do not change substantially if we restrict the sample to exclude all respondents who gave an inconsistent rating at least once, as can be seen in Figure 5 in the appendix.

RESULTS

The effect of party (dis)unity on vote choices

Figure 1 shows the attributes' AMCEs. These can be interpreted in a straightforward way as the expected change in the probability to choose a given party when an attribute value is compared to the reference category (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). In Figure 1, the reference levels are indicated by the black dots at zero. To facilitate the results' readability, we define the optimal profile set as the baseline from which deviating attribute levels decrease the probability that a voter chooses the respective party.

Unsurprisingly, by far the strongest predictor for vote choice is ideological proximity. A party that has an ideological distance of one unit to the respondent, e.g., a center-right party's distance to a centrist respondent, is on average 10.3 percentage points less likely to be chosen than a party with a zero distance. The corresponding 95% confidence interval's limits are 8.9 and 11.7 percentage points. Increasing ideological distance to its maximum value of four units, e.g., a rightist party's distance to a left respondent, makes it 47.9 percentage points [46.8; 48.6] less likely that the respective party is chosen, compared to an ideologically congruent party. This result confirms the predominant role of ideological proximity for voting and provides face validity to our experiment.

Regarding the possibility of direct effects of different manifestations of party unity, Figure 1 reveals the existence of heterogeneous causal effects across different dimensions of party unity. Internal critique from party actors has almost no effect on the probability that a respondent chooses the party. There is a small negative effect when critique is voiced by internal party factions (-2.1 percentage points [-0.6; -3.5]) or former party leaders (-1.7 percentage points [-0.3; -3.2]) as compared to the baseline scenario in which

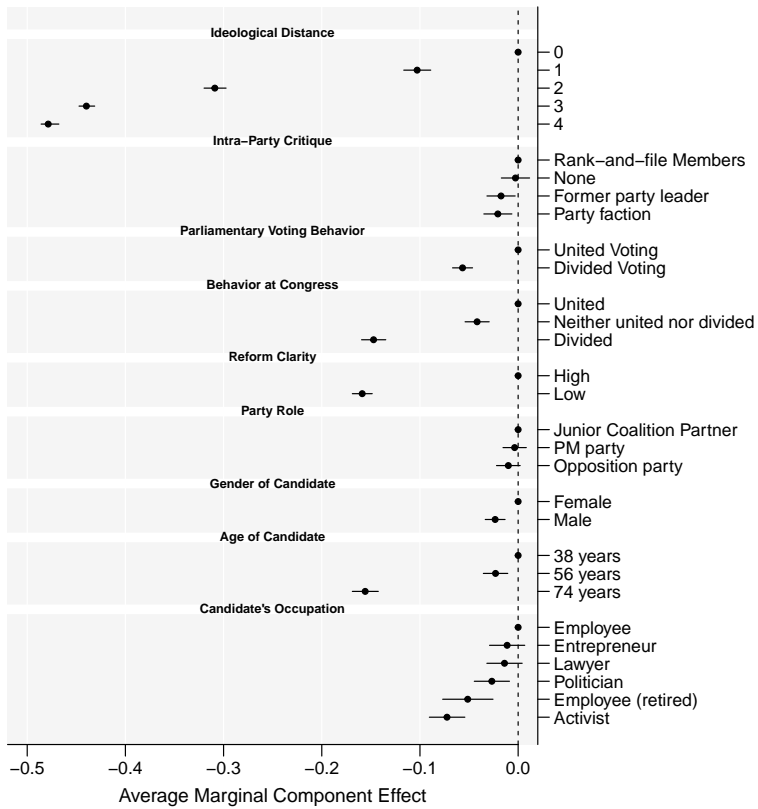


Figure 1. Average marginal effects of different attributes. Estimates are based on a conditional logistic regression model with clustered standard errors; bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The points without horizontal bars represent the reference categories.

critique comes from rank-and-file members. The estimates, however, also suggest that there is no difference between the complete absence of critical comments and critique from rank-and-file members. Overall, voters are hardly affected by publicly stated dissenting opinions from within the party. In contrast, we find that incohesive voting behavior of a party’s parliamentary group harms the party electorally. All else equal, a party failing to ensure united voting patterns by its parliamentary group is on average 5.7 percentage points

[4.6; 6.7] less likely to be chosen by respondents. Finally, our experiment identifies a party's behavior at its congress as the most decisive dimension of party unity with respect to vote choice. A party that successfully manages to convey a cohesive image at the congress to the electorate is able to obtain an electoral advantage whereas parties that engage in internal fights will be punished by voters. Open disagreement at party congresses harms parties with a loss in vote probability of 14.7 percentage points [13.5; 15.9]. Overall, we find clear support for the expectation that intra-party unity boosts a party's electoral performance. The evidence is particularly strong when party unity becomes visible in party congress behavior and to a lesser degree in parliamentary voting.

Besides these main effects of interest, the experiment further reveals the impacts of several additional features. With respect to the leadership candidate, for example, we corroborate previous findings that voters prefer younger and female candidates with a primary occupation as employees (e.g., Carnes and Lupu 2016). Moreover, our experiment clearly supports observational evidence suggesting that voters punish parties for vague policy programs (Lehrer and Lin 2020).

Relative strength of different unity dimensions

So far, we demonstrated that party unity affects the vote, and discussed different party unity aspects' average effects on vote choice. To better understand their substantive importance, we now take a closer look at the relative effect sizes of different manifestations of party unity.

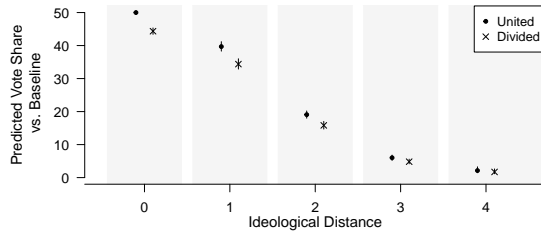
Figure 2 displays predicted vote probabilities conditional on ideological distance and the different dimensions of party unity, compared to the optimal baseline scenario. These predicted vote probabilities are thus limited at a maximum of exactly 50% when both

hypothetical parties present the optimal profile. The top panel shows that at any level of ideological distance a party with united voting behavior in parliament, indicated by the dots, is more likely to be chosen than a party with divided parliamentary voting patterns (crosses). Further, the effect of ideological distance is stronger than the effect of a party's voting behavior in parliament. In fact, it is so much stronger that an ideologically less distant party is always more likely to be chosen irrespective of its voting pattern in parliament. Similar to the findings on parliamentary behavior, the center panel reports that dividedness at party congresses harms parties at any level of ideological distance. Interestingly, however, we find that unified behavior at the congress is so important that it makes a respondent more likely to vote for a united but not ideologically congruent party rather than for a divided party that is ideologically congruent. This suggests that party unity at party congresses can make up for ideological distance, a fact on which we will elaborate below. Finally, the bottom panel in Figure 2 confirms the results that intra-party critique has a negligible effect on vote choice.

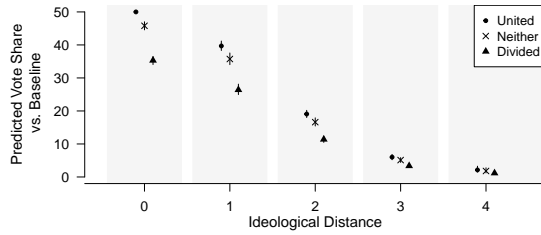
The plots also reveal an interaction effect: when ideological distance is small, unity in parliamentary voting and congress behavior make significant and substantially important differences, but for larger ideological distances, these effects shrink considerably. When a party is located at the other end of the ideological spectrum, party unity makes no difference. For closer races, however, party unity may be the decisive factor. This raises the question under what conditions party unity is able to tip the scales.

How important is party unity for electoral competition?

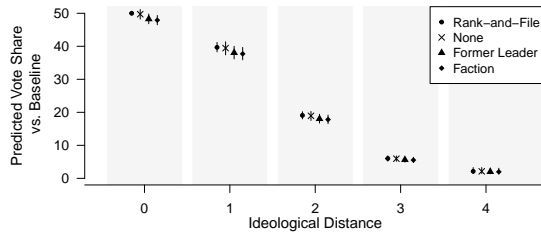
To determine when party unity can decide an election, we use the estimates from our conditional logistic regression model to simulate hypothetical electoral contests. Consider



(a) Voting Behavior in Parliament



(b) Behavior at Party Congress



(c) Intra-Party Critique

Figure 2. Predicted vote probabilities based on different dimensions of party unity and ideological proximity. The optimal baseline scenario serves as reference.

a voter who is faced with a choice between two hypothetical parties, Party 1 and Party 2a. Both of these parties are identical, except that Party 1 is ideologically somewhat closer to the voter than Party 2a. The parties' full characteristics are given at the top of Figure 3. Following the reasoning of spatial voting, the model predicts a probability of 60.3% [59.8; 60.6] that the hypothetical voter chooses Party 1 which is ideologically closer (see the first plot in Figure 3).

Now imagine that Party 2a becomes internally united. For clarity, we refer to this party

as Party 2b. It faces no internal critique of the party leadership anymore, the parliamentary voting pattern is united, and it displays its unity at the party congress. Everything else remains identical. If only ideological proximity mattered to the voter, we would still expect Party 1 to prevail because ideological distances did not change. However, because party unity matters, Party 2b becomes more likely to be chosen. In fact, tables turn and Party 1 is now chosen by the hypothetical voter with only 38.3% [38.1; 38.5] probability, which means that we expect the voter to choose Party 2b over Party 1 (second plot in Figure 3). Effectively, Party 2b’s internal unity compensates for its greater distance to the voter, which may – for example – be the ideological difference between center-left and center.

	Party 1	Party 2a	Party 2b
Ideological Distance	0	1	1
Critique of Party Leadership	Former party leader	Former party leader	None
Parliamentary Voting	Divided	Divided	United
Party Behavior at Congress	Divided	Divided	United
Clarity of Reform Proposals	Low	Low	Low
Party Role	Opposition	Opposition	Opposition
Candidate’s gender	Female	Female	Female
Candidate’s age	38 years	38 years	38 years
Candidate’s occupation	Employee	Employee	Employee

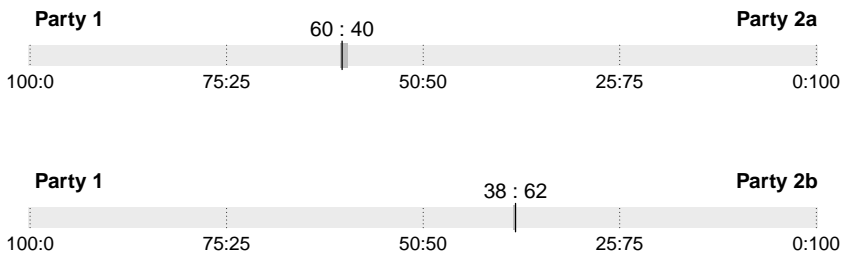


Figure 3. Hypothetical competition scenarios.

Along the lines demonstrated here, it is straightforward to specify hypothetical parties with specific attribute configurations and simulate an electoral contest between them. For

instance, we find that in the most extreme scenario, an all united party (no internal critique, united in parliamentary voting and at the party congress) is roughly 2.5 times as likely to be chosen than an all divided party (internal critique from a party faction, divided in parliamentary voting and at the party congress).⁶

Overall, our experimental design gives rise to 21,600 distinct party profiles, leading to 466,560,000 possible party pairings for each of which the outcome can be predicted from our model. To take full advantage of this vast number of possibilities, we built a simulation tool that allows researchers to freely vary all dimensions, and investigate how the predicted outcome changes when amending one or several distinct attributes. The simulation tool is available online.⁷

CONCLUSION

Using a conjoint experiment, we first establish a causal relationship between party unity and vote choice. Internal dissent decreases a party's electoral performance. Second, the electoral consequences of intra-party conflict differ across distinct dimensions of party unity. While publicly stated critique from party actors has a negligible impact, incohesive voting behavior in parliament and especially publicly displayed conflict at party congresses decrease voters' likelihood to vote for a party. Finally, the extent to which party unity can compensate for ideological distance is limited as spatial considerations clearly dominate vote choice.

The experimental evidence presented here has important implications for political

⁶The other candidate and party characteristics are specified as follows: The candidate is female, 38 years old, and an employee. The party is a Junior coalition partner, its reform proposals have high clarity, and it is ideologically congruent to the voter.

⁷<https://party-unity-conjoint.shinyapps.io/simulation/>

representation in democracies. We find that parties face strong electoral incentives to act in unison and appear united (Greene and Haber 2015). Viewed from a normative perspective, this is a highly problematic result since parties are supposed to be deliberative institutions in which critical voices are raised and leaders are held accountable (Wolkenstein 2016).

While our experimental design allows us to uncover the causal effect of party unity on the vote, it abstracts from at least three important aspects which future research should scrutinize: First, the experiment is not able to reveal what the causal mechanisms are that make citizens condition their vote choice (at least partially) on party unity. Second, by prompting respondents with specific levels of party unity as part of the experimental design, we are unable to uncover any effect perceptions of party unity may have (Plescia, Kritzinger, and Eberl 2020). Finally, the experiment assumes an electoral contest between only two parties. Yet, multiparty contests are paramount and future studies may investigate the effects of party unity in these contexts.

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ONLINE APPENDIX

*Regression output*TABLE 3 *Estimated coefficients from the conditional logistic model*

	coefficient	robust s.e.
Ideological distance (reference: 0)		
1	-0.417***	0.029
2	-1.443***	0.037
3	-2.747***	0.072
4	-3.823***	0.215
Critique (reference: Rank-and-file members)		
Former party leader	-0.070*	0.029
Party faction	-0.083**	0.029
None	-0.011	0.029
Parliamentary voting (reference: United)		
Divided	-0.228***	0.021
Behavior at congress (reference: United)		
Neither united nor divided	-0.168***	0.025
Divided	-0.607***	0.028
Reform clarity (reference: High)		
Low	-0.658***	0.023
Party role (reference: Junior coalition partner)		
Opposition party	-0.040	0.025
PM party	-0.014	0.024
Candidate's gender (reference: Female)		
Male	-0.094***	0.021
Candidate's age (reference: 38 years)		
56 years	-0.092***	0.025
74 years	-0.645***	0.03
Candidate's occupation (reference: Employee)		
Activist	-0.292***	0.038
Lawyer	-0.056	0.037
Politician	-0.107**	0.037
Entrepreneur	-0.045	0.037
Employee (retired)	-0.206***	0.053
Log Likelihood	-14418.627	
N (observations)	53522	
N (choices)	26761	
N (respondents)	3687	

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05

Robustness checks

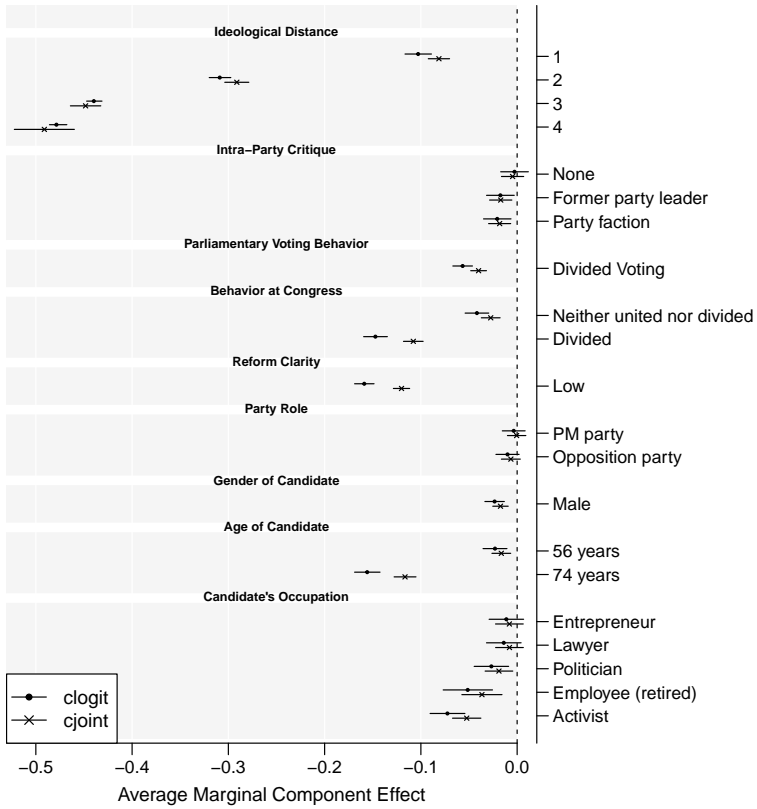


Figure 4. Comparison of AMCE's from our approach using conditional logistic regression (clogit) to the approach using linear regression as implemented in Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014) (cjoint).

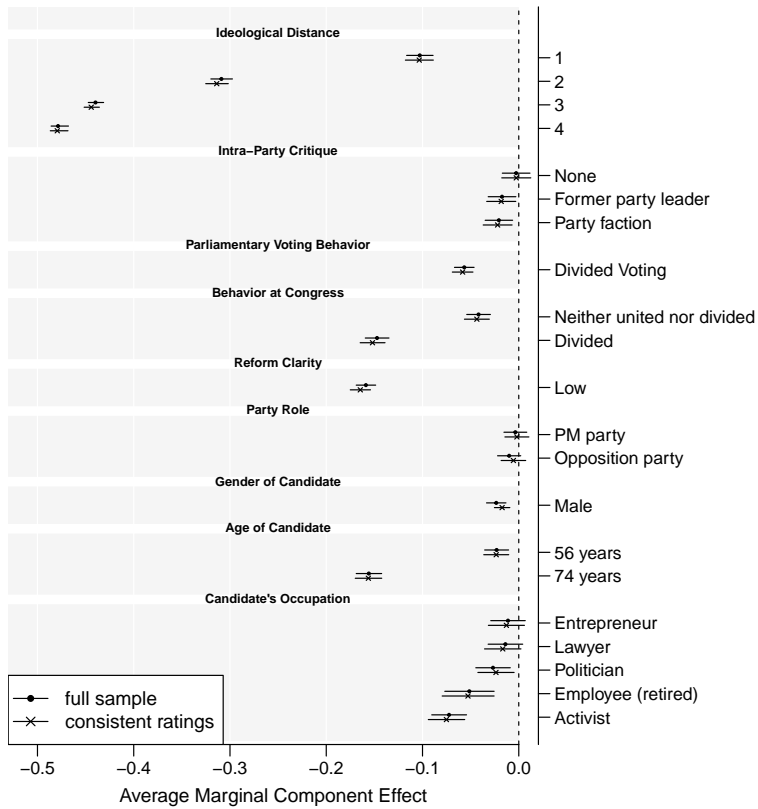


Figure 5. Comparison of AMCE's when using answers from all respondents (full sample) to results when excluding respondents who gave at least one inconsistent party rating, i.e. who rated the not chosen party better than the chosen party (consistent ratings).

Question wording

Left-right self-placement. In politics, people often talk about “left” and “right.” Using this scale here, where would you classify yourself if 1 is “left” and 11 is “right”? Please indicate the value that applies to you personally.

Party rating. Now let’s look at Party A/B. How do you rate Party A/B overall? (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive)