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ARTICLE

How Out-Party Cues Cause Citizens to Shift Their Policy Preferences

Julie Sevenans¹ and Patrick van Erkel²

Abstract

Do out-party cues polarise? More precisely, do citizens turn away from policy viewpoints when they are confronted with information indicating that these viewpoints are supported by a political party they dislike? The answer to this question is contested in the literature. This paper contributes to the ongoing debate by examining the mechanisms that lead people to respond negatively to out-party cues in the absence of in-party cues. Using data from a survey experiment in Belgium, the study suggests that two distinct mechanisms are at play. The effect is partly indirect: being exposed to out-party cues makes citizens (sometimes incorrectly) update their assumptions of the policy position of their own party, and this explains their subsequent opinion change. There is also a direct effect, however: citizens dissociate themselves from the out-party and, consequently, move to an opposing policy position. Additionally, the paper examines the significance of the degree of dislike. The results show that not much aversion is needed for partisan electorates to polarise.

Keywords: Party cues, Opinion change, Polarisation, Survey-experiment

Introduction

It is a well-established finding that *in-party* cues influence citizens' opinions. When citizens are confronted with information about the political viewpoints of their preferred parties, they update their own views to be in line with those of the party

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(Bartels, 2002; Bolsen et al., 2014; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021). The finding is rooted in social identity theory: people are inclined to conform to their (in this case: partisan) in-groups (Tajfel, 1982).

An ongoing debate in political science revolves around the effects of *out-party* cues. On the one hand, a growing body of studies suggests that out-party cues “polarise” or have a “backlash effect”, meaning that citizens who learn about the viewpoints of disliked parties turn away from these viewpoints (e.g. Aaroe, 2012; Feddersen & Adams, 2022; Goren et al., 2009; Nicholson, 2012; Satherley et al., 2018; Walder & Strijbis, 2022). These studies argue that the negative affect citizens feel towards an opposing party causes them to change their political viewpoints, away from those of the opposite party, even if they originally agreed. The findings are interpreted as concerning in light of ideological polarisation (see e.g. Nicholson, 2012). One of the most powerful signals in politics is when citizens across party lines share viewpoints on an issue, yet such consensus is hindered when the dislike of other parties disperses the public. This role of out-party cues in opinion formation is especially worrisome in the current context of affective polarisation, where the dislike towards opposite parties is growing stronger (Iyengar et al., 2019) and thus out-party cues may exert ever greater effects. Research by Merkley and Stecula (2018, 2021), for instance, found tentative evidence that Republicans have increasingly become more sceptical towards climate change and science, purely as a reaction against elites from the Democratic party taking a clear pro-climate position.

On the other hand, a rigorous study by Fowler and Howell (2023) questions these conclusions. Most notably, the authors propose that the negative effects of out-party cues are, in fact, (masked) in-party cue effects. Presented with information stating that the out-party supports (opposes) a policy, respondents would assume that the in-party opposes (supports) the policy. In other words, effects would be driven by people’s updated perceptions of the policy stances of their in-party. Most existing studies on the topic do not allow for identification of such a mechanism because an in-party cue is either absent or systematically opposes the out-party cue. Fowler and Howell (2023) therefore randomised the in-party *and* the out-party cue provided in their experiments. When doing so, and hence when respondents’ perception of the in-party position is held constant, they find that out-party cues function just like any other elite (information) cue: their effects go in the same direction as those of in-party cues.

We build on the intriguing findings of Fowler and Howell (2023) and try to tackle two disadvantages of their design, which both relate to the issue of external validity. The first is that citizens often receive information about the policy positions of only one party, as a consequence of parties “talking past each other” (Seeberg, 2022; M. Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Rather than competing on issue positions, parties have an incentive to compete by selectively emphasising some issues over others

(Dolezal et al., 2014; Green-Pedersen, 2007)—especially in multi-party systems such as the one we study here (Belgium). If citizens, in reality, *do* infer in-party positions from out-party cues, it makes sense to try to measure these effects rather than eliminating them by design. Second, in reality, political parties' issue positions are ideological and, thus, seldom interchangeable. Experimental cues in which parties' positions are randomised likely deal with policy issues that are either not very ideological or non-salient (else the presented cues would be incredible and surprising).

Our design enables us to test Fowler and Howell's (2023) theory through a survey-experiment that circumvents these limitations. In our experiment, citizens received *out-party cues only* about the *actual* issue positions of parties. We directly measured how these out-party cues influence the perceived in-party positions on the issues and how these perceptions, in turn, *mediate* the negative effect of out-party cues on people's opinions. Our results suggest that seeing the out-party cue indeed leads people to make assumptions about the position of their own party, and that this partly explains citizens' opinion change (in line with Fowler and Howell's theory). Even when we control for these perceptions, however—and unlike Fowler and Howell's findings—we still find a negative and significant out-party cue effect. We ascribe the diverging results to issue (ideological issues) and context (multi-party system) factors. Additionally, we explore how much dislike for the out-party is needed for a citizen to be negatively affected by out-party cues. The findings suggest that polarising effects occur already at relatively low levels of dislike.

The Polarising Effect of Out-Party Cues

An extensive body of literature has demonstrated that citizens are influenced by elite and partisan cues when forming opinions about political issues (Cohen, 2003; Harteveld et al., 2017; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021), and that they tend to form or shift their opinions to align with their preferred party. Explanations are found in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982). Feelings of group identity—in this context: identification with a political party—make people change their minds because they prefer not to be out of touch with the relevant in-group. The disagreement causes cognitive dissonance, which is unpleasant and therefore (subconsciously) avoided (Festinger, 1957; Zaller, 1992). So, when confronted with information saying that they disagree with the political party they identify with, citizens are inclined to adjust their preferences to be more in line with those of the party (Lenz, 2009).

More recently, a number of (mostly experimental) studies investigate whether this effect also works the other way around, proposing that "*voters do not only react to the parties they like but also to parties they dislike*" (Harteveld et al., 2017: 1181). Voters who learn that they *agree* with a political party they *dislike* may change their policy preferences in order to oppose those of the disliked party. A growing number of

experimental studies focus explicitly on this polarising effect of out-party cues (e.g. Aaroe, 2012; Feddersen & Adams, 2022; Fowler & Howell, 2023; Goren et al., 2009; Nicholson, 2012; Satherley et al., 2018; Walder & Strijbis, 2022). There seems to be consensus that out-party cues, in the absence of in-party cues, exert negative effects on people's opinions—that is, people shift their opinions away from those of the disliked party. Beyond these specific studies, a variety of articles, although not explicitly theorising upon the matter, confirm that party positions affect in-group and out-group voters in opposite directions (see e.g. Bolsen et al., 2014; Cohen, 2003; Hartevelde et al., 2017; Slothuus, 2016). Additionally, a study in New Zealand (Satherley et al., 2018) shows that these findings hold true outside the experimental setting as well. The effect of out-party cues thus seems well-established. Still, the first goal of our study is to replicate this pattern, which is a prerequisite for taking the next steps in unravelling the effect. We formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: *When presented with information that a disliked party agrees with a policy proposal (out-party cue) respondents will move away from the position of the party they dislike.*

The Degree of Dislike as a Moderator of the Effect

A relevant question in this regard, that remains unanswered by previous studies, is whether citizens are equally affected by out-party cues. One important moderator in this regard may be the extent to which citizens dislike the out-party. Just as people vary in the extent to which they identify with their in-party (Bakker et al., 2015), they also differ in how much they dislike the out-party. Not every Democrat has equally strong negative feelings towards the Republican party, just as in a multi-party system, not every right-wing voter feels the same dislike towards left-wing parties. Moreover, in multi-party systems, there are actually several out-parties and thus we can expect variation in the extent to which citizens feel antipathy towards them. From social identity theory, we know that the extent to which an out-group influences the behaviour of the in-group is dependent on the strength of intergroup competition and the degree of antipathy towards the out-group (Lalonde, 2002; U. Wagner & Ward, 1993). Concretely, we can therefore expect that out-party cues will have a particularly strong influence on political opinion change when the opposing party is intensely disliked.

H2: *The effect of out-party cues on citizens' policy preferences is moderated by the degree to which citizens dislike the out-party.*

The Perceived Position of the Own Party as a *Mediator* of the Effect

While the studies mentioned above all demonstrate that out-party cues affect opinion formation, most of them have not examined the mechanisms underlying this effect in greater detail. In general, the idea proposed is that citizens will take an opposing position to the out-party to accentuate their differences with this out-group (Nicholson, 2012). Just as being out of line with the party you support causes cognitive dissonance, so does taking the same position as the party you oppose. It is no wonder then that people shift away from the opinion of the disliked party to dissociate themselves from the out-group.

However, we argue that another mechanism may also be at play, and therefore introduce a possible mediator of the effect: the perceived position of one's own party on the issue. In the complex political reality, citizens can't know the exact position of political parties on each policy proposal. Because political parties emphasise issues selectively, information that directly confronts parties' viewpoints on a single issue is scarce (Seeberg, 2022). In practice, citizens therefore often rely on information shortcuts, so-called heuristics, to make an estimation of a party's position (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Lupia et al., 2000). We argue that the position of the out-party can serve as such a heuristic. While citizens may not directly know the position of their in-party on an issue, they are mostly aware that the in- and out-party, in general, oppose each other. Therefore, when being confronted with the position of the out-party on a policy proposal, they may automatically infer that their in-party will take the opposite position—even though this inference may be incorrect.

This idea is supported by a recently published study of Fowler & Howell (2023). In a series of experiments, these authors show that the existing research likely found strong polarising effects of out-party cues because they *only* provided information about the out-party. They demonstrate that, when people also receive information about the policy positions of the in-party (which are sometimes similar to those of the out-party), the polarising effect mostly disappears. They conclude that the polarising effect is driven by people incorrectly updating their perceptions of the positions of their own party. In our second hypothesis, we test this assumption directly:

H3: *When confronted with information that a disliked party agrees with a policy proposal (out-party cue) respondents will be more likely to think that their own party disagrees with that proposal.*

Since people tend to adjust their opinion to be in line with their in-group (e.g. Cohen, 2003; Lenz, 2009), we expect that the updated perception of the own party position contributes to an opinion change congruent with the assumed position of the in-party and away from the out-party. In other words, we expect that the effect of

out-party cues on citizens' policy preferences is partially mediated by the perceived position of the own party.

H4: *The effect of out-party cues on citizens' policy preferences is partially mediated by the perceived position of the own party.*

The findings of Fowler and Howell (2023) furthermore suggest that, once controlling for the perceived position of the in-party, the out-party cue functions just as any other elite cue and will, as such, have a *positive* effect on people's opinions (yet weaker than an in-party cue effect). We do not know, however, whether their findings are generalizable across issues and contexts. Their experiments relied on relatively uncontentious issues, which could matter (for a similar argument, see Aaroe, 2012). For one more strongly charged issue, refugee admissions, the authors reported some negative out-party effects—although these effects should be treated with caution, as they did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Their study was conducted in a two-party system (the United States); it is possible that the dislike of out-parties works differently in multi-party systems, where the presence of more extreme parties leads some parties to be ideologically further apart from each other than parties in two-party systems, resulting in stronger responses. For these reasons, we do not formulate a hypothesis, but explore how out-party cues influence people's opinions after controlling for perceptions of in-party positions.

Note that all the hypotheses were formulated before running the analysis, but our study was not formally preregistered, and we did not draft a strict pre-analysis plan. In this sense, the findings of our study should be viewed more as exploratory than confirmatory analyses.

Data and Methods

To test our expectations, we conducted a survey experiment with citizens in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. Belgium is characterised by a strong political centre and a history of consensus politics (Deschouwer, 2009). The country has a highly fragmented multi-party system, where parties are divided along both ideological and linguistic lines. Concretely, Belgium is split up into two separate language groups: the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders and the Francophone region of Wallonia. Each language group can be considered to have its own party system, as citizens cannot vote for parties from the other language group. For this experiment, we focused only on Flanders. While ideological differences between Flemish parties are significant—there are parties at both extremes of the ideological spectrum— affective polarisation is not as pronounced yet as in certain other countries, such as the U.S. (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). In this sense, it forms an

interesting, conservative case for our test, and we could expect effects to be even more pronounced in more affectively polarised societies.

Respondents were recruited via Dynata. Like most online panels, their recruitment methods are non-probabilistic, but they do provide broad general population coverage. Quotas were used to obtain a sample of citizens (N = 2,389) that does relatively well in terms of representativeness in terms of gender, age, and educational level. Respondents were contacted twice. The first survey was conducted in February 2018. The results from the first wave were used to measure respondents' party preference and their propensity to vote (PTV) for the main political parties in Flanders, as well as their support for various policy proposals such as "*All convicts should serve their full sentence*". The exact question gauging their opinion on the proposals was: "*Do you personally agree or disagree with the following proposals?*" with answers on a five-point scale ranging from "totally disagree" to "totally agree." These proposals are used for the experiment: in a second wave, respondents are asked for their opinion on the exact same proposals, after seeing a party cue (the exact formulation of all proposals is included in Table 1; more information is below). Party preference was measured by asking citizens for which party they would vote if there were federal elections that same day. The propensity to vote was measured by asking the respondent for each party how likely they were to vote for that party on a scale from 0 (very unlikely) to 10 (very likely).

The data about party preference were used to assign respondents to a follow-up survey. More specifically, the follow-up survey was reserved for respondents who indicated that they would vote for one of Flanders' main six parties (the Green Party, Socialists, Christian Democrats, Liberals, Flemish Nationalists, and extreme-right party) (N = 1,638), and a different follow-up survey was conducted for each partisan electorate. The propensity-to-vote question was used to pick, for each partisan electorate, a strongly disliked party.³ This is the "disliked" or out-party about which they get information in one of the experimental conditions (see below).

The follow-up survey was conducted in July 2018, with a response rate of 52% (N = 851). The sample lost a small quantity of its representativeness, as the response was somewhat higher among older and politically-interested citizens (but unaffected by gender, educational level and ideological left-right position, see appendix C for the details). We speculate about the implications thereof below. The survey experiment

3 For each electorate we picked the party that received the lowest propensity to vote score by that electorate, after extreme-right party Vlaams Belang (which is disliked most by nearly all other parties, but we wanted some variation in terms of parties and issues). Only for the centre, Christian-democrat electorate, we retained Vlaams Belang as the most disliked party because the electorate does not strongly dislike any other party. The average PTV score of the disliked party is always below 3 (on a scale from 0 to 10).

was the first question module of this follow-up survey. In other words, we did not prime respondents' partisan identity (see also Druckman et al., 2013), but instead began the experiment immediately.

The survey-experiment essentially consisted of (re-)measuring citizens' support for a concrete policy proposal (e.g. "*All convicts should serve their full sentence*") after exposing them to either (1) information about their *own* party's viewpoint on the issue (*in-party cue group*), (2) information about the other, disliked party (*out-party cue group*), or (3) no information at all (*control group*). In other words, the experiment employed a between-subjects design, with respondents randomly divided into three groups. As we are specifically interested in the effects of out-party cues in this paper, we set aside the respondents from the in-party cue group in the main part of the paper, focusing only on comparing the out-party cue group with the control group. Hence, the final N of our main analyses is 473.⁴ However, for the sake of completeness, in Appendix A (Table A1), we present the stimulus and results for the in-party cue group, confirming the well-established finding that citizens also change their opinion in response to in-party cues, moving towards the position of the in-party.

Note that since we measured their opinion about the policy proposal also in the first wave, we can control for it and actually tap opinion *change*. We should acknowledge that there is a small quantity of noise on the measurement, as opinion in wave two was measured on an 11-point scale running from 0 (fully disagree) to 10 (fully agree), allowing slightly more nuance. In contrast, the original opinion in wave one was measured on a scale from 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree). Note, however, that most experiments do not even measure pre-treatment opinions—so despite the change in the answer scale, it is a true asset here that the original opinion is largely controlled for. To ease the interpretation of the results, we rescaled the original opinion variable (from wave 1) by multiplying it by two.

To measure the extent to which they individually dislike the out-party (needed to test H2 about the moderating effect of this variable), we do not have direct access to like-dislike scores, but use a common proxy and inverse the scores on the propensity-to-vote question that was included in the first survey, as studies have shown that these measures strongly correlate (e.g. Siczek, 2016). This results in a proxy dislike score ranging from 0 to 10, with 10 indicating the highest dislike. We are aware that in recent years, a discussion has started on whether rather than dislike towards opposing parties, it is a deeper form of negative partisanship—where one's

4 With an N of 473, we have 95% power to detect medium effect sizes (Cohen's $d = .50$) and 77% to detect small effect sizes (Cohen's $d = .25$) if we base ourselves on the opinion distribution in survey wave 1 (mean opinion on a 5-point scale: 3.88; standard deviation of 1.20). Power is lower for interaction effects, however, which means that we should interpret null-effects on the interaction terms with caution.

political identity is fully formed in opposition to an opposing party rather than in support of a party—that drives polarizing effects such as the effects of out-parties cues (Bankert, 2020). While several batteries have been developed to measure such negative partisanship (see Bankert, 2021), these items were not yet available when we developed our experiment, which is why we resort to the more crude inversed PTV-scores. However, we argue that this forms a more conservative test and that if we find an effect with this measure, we would probably find an even stronger effect had we used negative partisanship measures. We also asked respondents to estimate the position of their own party on the policy proposal (to test H3 and H4 regarding the mediating effect of this perception, see below).

It is important to elaborate on how the specific policy proposals were chosen. First, to increase the realism and ecological validity of the experiment, we decided to work with real issues and party positions, rather than fictitious issues, as many other experiments on this topic have done so far. Second, our goal was to find, for each partisan electorate, a policy proposal that a majority of the partisan voters supported, and that their most disliked party supported as well. In other words, we aimed for situations where the majority of the voters from a party were *in agreement* with the party they *dislike* most (on average), because such situations allow for citizens to change their minds in response to the out-party cue. To that end, we measured citizens' support for a variety of policy proposals in the first survey. We selected one proposal per party electorate that was supported by 70-75% of the electorate⁵ and that was, as far as we knew, supported by the "disliked" party too (based on statements made in the media, on the websites of the parties,...). In the next step, we exploited a series of interviews with Belgian party leaders (conducted in the framework of another project) to verify whether these parties effectively supported the policy proposals that we had chosen. We did so to avoid deception: we did not want to present citizens with incorrect political information. Unfortunately, we learnt that one case did not fulfil the requirements: the extreme-right party, which was the most disliked party of Christian-democrat voters, did *not* support the policy proposal that we expected them to support. Consequently, the experiment for the Christian-democratic electorate was different, and we continue our analysis with the five other electorates.

5 More specifically, as opinions were measured on a five-point scale, we opted for issues where between 70 and 75% of the electorate indicated to 'rather agree' or 'totally agree' with the proposal (after omitting those who were neutral).

Table 1 Methodological information

Party	# respondents that would vote for this party (Feb 2018)	# respondents that participated in follow-up survey (July 2018) (response rate between brackets)	Final N (after excluding the in-party cue group and respondents with missings on key variables)	Policy proposal	% of voters initially supporting the policy proposal (Feb 2018)	Most disliked party	Disliked party's position on policy proposal	Own party's position on policy proposal
Green party	260	130 (50%)	83	All convicts should serve their full sentence.	73%	Flemish-Nationalists	support	oppose
Socialist party	184	97 (53%)	60	If the NMBS is on strike, a minimum number of trains should still run.	74%	Flemish-Nationalists	support	oppose
Liberal party	145	74 (51%)	47	Schools should oblige children to speak Dutch on the playground as well.	73%	Extreme-right	support	support
Flemish-Nationalist party	588	313 (53%)	200	Bus and tram lines with few passengers should remain operational.	74%	Socialists	support	oppose
Extreme-right party	266	135 (51%)	83	Bus and tram lines with few passengers should remain operational.	75%	Greens	support	support
Total	1,638	851 (52%)	473					

A summary of the methodological information is presented in Table 1. For each follow-up survey, the table reports the number of respondents asked to participate, the response rate, and the final N used here (after excluding the in-party cue group and some respondents with missing values on key variables used in the analyses). It furthermore contains the specific policy proposal, the support for this policy proposal among the partisan electorate, and the position of the most disliked party. The last column also shows the official party position of the electorate's *own* party. As can be seen, two out of five parties support the policy proposal (like their own electorate and the disliked party), whereas three out of five parties oppose it (and are hence out of touch with their own electorate and the disliked party). This variation in the *real* positions of the own parties is interesting, given our interest in citizens' *perceptions* of these positions as a mediator of the effect of out-party cues. English translations of the treatments for all the parties separately are in Appendix D. Here is, as an example, what Green party supporters got to see in the follow-up survey (party-specific information in square brackets):

Intro: *[Sentence enforcement] is an issue that sometimes gets attention in Belgium. People have different opinions on the following policy proposal: "[All convicts should serve their full sentence]"*.

Experimental manipulation (respondent is presented with one stimulus):

Out-party cue: *Interested in what people think about this matter, our research group X (University Y) recently conducted a survey with the party leaders of different political parties that are active in Flanders. We found, for instance, that [the Flemish-Nationalist party] is in favour of [forcing convicts to serve their full sentence]. More specifically, the party leader indicated **that the [Flemish-nationalist party] agrees with the abovementioned policy proposal.***

OR

Control: —

Dependent variable:

Opinion: *We are interested in your opinion about this policy matter. To what extent do you personally agree with the above policy proposal?*

Scale: 0 (Totally disagree) to 10 (Totally agree)

We also asked respondents to estimate the position of their own party on this proposal and to estimate (for those in the control group) or recall (for those in the out-party cue group) the disliked party's position on the issue. Both were measured dichotomously (agree=1/disagree=0). The specific formulation was:

Own party estimation: Can you [estimate] whether [your party] rather agrees or disagrees with the above policy proposal? Please give us your best guess.

(Rather) agrees (1) / (Rather) disagrees (0)

Disliked party estimation/recall: Can you [estimate / recall] whether [the disliked party] rather agrees or disagrees with the above policy proposal? Please give us your best guess.

(Rather) agrees (1) / (Rather) disagrees (0)

The estimation of the own party is used as the main dependent variable to test H3 and is the key mediator for H4. The disliked party estimation/recall question has a dual goal. It serves as a manipulation check, allowing us to test the extent to which respondents in the out-party cue group actually noticed and recalled the disliked party's position. It also allows us to grasp the extent to which they differ from the control group in this respect. Suppose the control group would be aware of the disliked party's position too. In that case, there is no actual *learning* (for an in-depth discussion, see Slothuus, 2016), which has implications for the interpretation of the effects (which are then not driven by learning, but for instance by the heightened salience of the disliked party's position as a consideration in citizens' minds, i.e. priming). We discuss this further in the results section.

Results

Our findings foremost confirm the effect of out-party cues on citizens' opinions (H1). The linear regression analysis reported in model 1 (Table 2)—where we regress support for the policy proposal on the experimental conditions, controlling for the original opinion in the first wave—shows that respondents who were exposed to the stimulus saying that the party they dislike supports a policy proposal lowered their support for this policy proposal more compared to the control group. This effect is substantial as well. On average, their support lowered by 1.16 points more than the control group (on a scale from 0 to 10). To gain a better understanding of this effect— and to demonstrate that it is indeed lowering support—we can directly compare the average support for the proposal between the first and second waves

in the control and experimental groups. While we do see that the control group also significantly showed lower support for the proposal in wave 2 ($M=7.25$, $SD=2.38$) than wave 1 ($M=7.85$, $SD=2.40$) ($t(240)=3.88$, $p<.000$)—perhaps due to real-life events, small variations due to the transformation of the original opinion scale in wave 1 (see methods section), or because by asking their opinion in wave 1, we motivated respondents to think more on their position—we see that it is mainly the experimental group that changed their opinion and lowered their support between wave 1 ($M=7.59$, $SD=2.41$) and wave 2 (5.99 , $SD=2.94$) ($t(231)=8.85$, $p<.000$).

Note that additional tests (reported in Appendix B) show that both citizens who initially agreed with the issue in wave 1 (the bulk of the respondents, who move towards *switching* their opinion) and those who already disagreed (a minority of the respondents, who *reinforce* their opinion) are susceptible to out-party cue effects. Effects are slightly stronger for the latter group (the interaction is not statistically significant, but this could be a lack of power). This holds both when we model initial agreement in wave one as a continuous factor (appendix Table B1) and when we dichotomise it (appendix Table B2).

Table 2 Linear regression explaining citizens’ support for the policy proposal

	Model 1 b(S.E.)	Model 2 b (S.E.)
Out-party cue	-1.16(.21)***	-1.01(.21)***
Perception of the position of the in-party	—	.90(.22)***
Original opinion (first survey)	.53(.04)***	.50(.04)***
Party electorate dummies	(included)	(included)
Constant	3.75(.44)***	3.60(.44)***
N	473	473
R² (adjusted)	0.308	0.330

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Are the effects of out-party cues stronger for citizens who dislike the out-party more strongly (H2)? The answer is positive, and the hypothesis is supported. Specifically, we tested this by interacting the effect of the out-party cue with the extent to which respondents dislike the out-party, on a scale from 0 to 10. The complete model can be found in the Appendix (table B3). The coefficient of the interaction term is on the border of statistical significance ($b=-.15$; $S.E.=.09$; $p=.099$)—which may suggest at first sight that there is no moderation—but this is misleading. For one, our sample is

relatively small to detect interaction effects; second, our moderator (the degree of dislike) is a continuous variable, and it could be that there is a meaningful moderation for certain values of this variable only. A similar argument is made by Brambor et al. (2006), who argue that the best option in the case of a continuous moderator is to plot the interaction, to visualise how the effect of the condition (here: the out-party cue) varies over the values of the moderator. So in Figure 1, we plot the conditional marginal effects of the out-party cue for different values of dislike towards the out-party.

Due to the design of our experiment, many respondents in our sample dislike the other party quite strongly, making the distribution quite skewed towards the highest score, and explaining the larger confidence intervals for lower dislike values. Still, we can see that the out-party cue has no effect on respondents who actually do not dislike the out-party at all (marginal effect is 0), but the effect increases as dislike increases. Interestingly, we observe that from a moderate dislike of approximately 5 (on a scale of 0 to 10) onwards, the out-party cue already has a significant and negative effect. In sum, the effect of out-party cues becomes stronger as the dislike towards the out-party increases. However, the results indicate that their polarising effects actually already occur at relatively low levels of dislike.

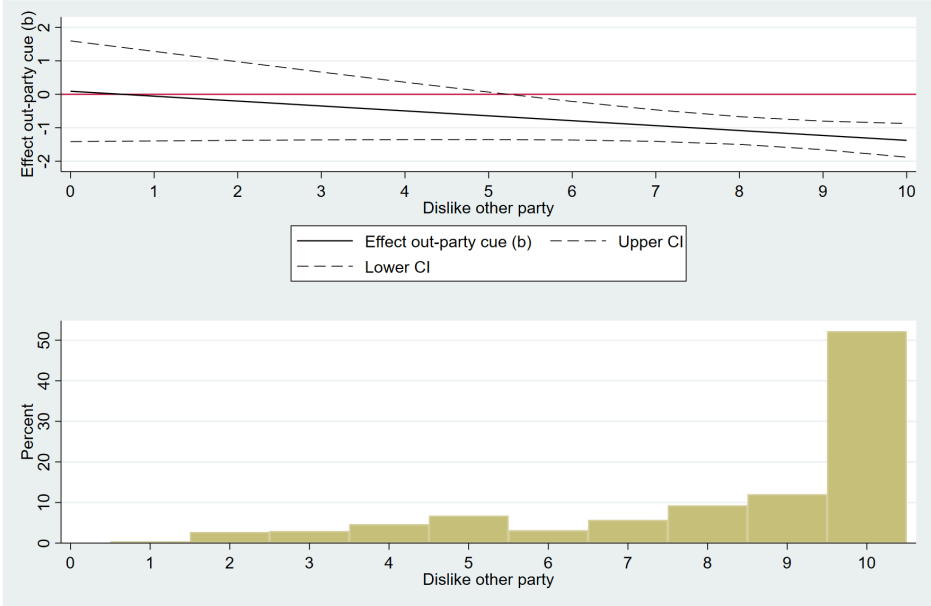


Figure 1 Conditional marginal effects of the out-party cue for different values of dislike towards the out-party

Is the effect of the out-party cue effect mediated by citizens' perception of the position of their in-party? The answer to this question is positive. As a first step, we run a logistic regression and analyse the effect of exposure to the out-party cue on the perception of the in-party position, i.e. whether they believe their party disagrees or agrees with the policy proposal (model 3, Table 3). In line with H3, this effect is significant. Predicted probabilities from the model reveal that the likelihood that a respondent believes their party supports the policy proposal reduces from 61% (control group) to 42% (out-party cue group) after being exposed to the out-party cue. Interestingly, in reality, this sometimes increases the accuracy of citizens' perceptions (when the in-party actually disagrees with the proposal), but it also sometimes lowers it, as was the case for the liberal and extreme-right party electorates in our experiment; their in-party agreed with the respective policy proposal.

As a second step of the mediation, we add this perception of the respondent of the own party to our original model 1. Model 2 (Table 2) shows that the perceived position of the in-party influences respondents' (dis)agreement with the policy proposal and that it takes over part of the effect of the out-party cue. All in all, this confirms the mediation (H4). When confronted with information on the position of the out-party, citizens infer that their in-party takes an opposite position and then agree less with the policy proposal, aligning themselves with the newly assumed position of the in-party.⁶ Exploring the mediation more in-depth, following Hicks and Tingley (2011), we find that the mediation is significant, with an average mediation effect (ACME) of $-.17$ [95% CI $-.29$; $-.06$]. The perceived position of the in-party thus mediates about 14% of the effect of out-party cues. This, however, indicates that the mediation is only partial. Moreover, we should also note that this mediation is somewhat sensitive to potential confounding, as a sensitivity analysis shows that the ACME would become zero if the correlation (ρ) between the error terms in the mediator model and the outcome model were 0.2.

So, although the effect of the out-party cue decreases in Model 3 due to mediation, a significant and substantial negative effect remains, a direct effect of -1.02 [95% CI -1.41 ; $-.61$], indicating that citizens also differentiate themselves directly from the out-party. This answers our open research question about the direct effect of out-party cues. Contrary to Fowler and Howell's (2023) findings, which suggested that out-party cues function as any other elite cue and therefore exert positive effects when controlling for perceptions of the in-party position, our results suggest that people do actively turn away from the disliked party's viewpoint.

6 As extra robustness test we used a jackknife procedure and ran the models again, each time omitting one party from the analysis. Our results hold in all jack-knifed models, demonstrating that they are not driven by one party.

Table 3 Logistic regression explaining citizens' perception of the position of the in-party

	Model 3 b(S.E.)
Out-party cue	-.76(.20)***
Party electorate dummies	(included)
Constant	-.37(.25)
N	473
R² (pseudo)	.095

*** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05

A few additional remarks deserve attention. First, we mentioned above that our sample (especially of the second survey wave) is not fully representative: there is an overrepresentation of older and politically interested (higher educated) citizens. Does this threaten the generalizability of our results? We think it does not. Additional analyses show that the relationships outlined above are not conditional upon political interest or age. Note that this also makes sense theoretically. We have no indications why age would matter, and political interest produces an ambivalence: interested people have better developed opinions and are less open to change; yet, on the other hand, they are more likely to receive and adequately process new information (Zaller, 1990), most likely resulting in a null effect.

Second, we still need to examine the results from our manipulation check variable. Admittedly, these are somewhat surprising. In general, our manipulation succeeded, as within the out-party cue group (N = 232) 78% of the respondents appear to have recalled the out-party position correctly. Nevertheless, the stimulus was *not* correctly recalled by 22%. This means that some respondents were not very attentive to the stimulus, and that effects might have been even larger if everyone had been attentive to the survey. Even more remarkable is that in the control group (N = 241), 72% of the respondents were able to estimate this position by themselves correctly. So, the difference between the out-party cue group and the control group in knowledge about the out-party position is relatively small. This has implications for the interpretation of the effects. As little *learning* took place (only six percentage points more correct estimations in the out-party cue group), it means that our effects are probably rather driven by *priming*; when confronted with information about it, the out-party position forms a more salient consideration in citizens' minds when forming an opinion.

Conclusion and Discussion

Recently, several studies have demonstrated that citizens not only follow cues from their own political party when forming or changing their opinion, but that they also turn away from policy viewpoints when confronted with information indicating that these viewpoints are supported by a political party they dislike (e.g. Aaroe, 2012; Feddersen & Adams, 2022; Fowler & Howell, 2023; Goren et al., 2009; Nicholson, 2012; Satherley et al., 2018; Walder & Strijbis, 2022). In this study, using a survey experiment in Belgium, we replicate this basic pattern and show that out-party cues, in the absence of in-party cues, indeed influence citizens' opinion on a policy proposal; both for citizens who initially agreed with a proposal, but disagree after learning that their out-party also agreed (*opinion change*), as well as for citizens who initially already disagreed with the proposal, but become even more opposed after being exposed to the out-party cue (*opinion reinforcement*). These findings are interesting in light of our case selection. While Belgium also sees a decent level of out-party hostility, affective polarisation is not yet as pronounced as in certain other countries, such as the U.S. (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). Nevertheless, significant out-party cue effects occur.

We also contributed to the ongoing scientific debate about the mechanisms underlying the effect. Our findings suggest that two different mechanisms are at play. On the one hand, in line with the theory of Fowler and Howell (2023), we find that being exposed to out-party cues makes citizens update their assumptions of the policy position of their *own* party, and that these citizens subsequently shift their opinion to be in line with the newly assumed position of the in-party and thus away from the out-party. In other words, the out-party cue effect is, partially, a (masked) in-party cue effect. However, and contrary to Fowler and Howell's findings, a strong *negative* direct effect remains after controlling for the perceived in-party position, suggesting that citizens actively want to accentuate their differences and dissociate themselves from this out-group.

For one, we ascribe these differences to issue characteristics. Fowler and Howell randomised party leaders' positions on issues, "*restricting the various treatments to positions that each politician could plausibly take*" (Fowler & Howell, 2023, p. 30). As the positions were interchangeable, they were not very ideological. Out-party cue effects are likely stronger for more contentious issues (for a similar argument, see Aaroe, 2012; see also, for example, Nicholson's (2012) experiment on immigration and housing foreclosures, which are more polarising issues). Indeed, for one more contentious issue—refugee admissions—Fowler and Howell *did* find negative (though insignificant) out-party cue effects. Our issues were also ideological. Moreover, they were not a matter of degree (e.g. how much government spending to devote to an issue) but a matter of positions (e.g. being in favour of or against

convicts serving their complete sentence). It is plausible that the ideological nature of these debates fosters actual out-party cue effects.

An alternative explanation for the diverging findings is the country context. The presence of more extreme parties in multi-party systems (as opposed to two-party systems) can foster a higher dislike of the parties that are ideologically furthest away—driving more outspoken direct out-party cue effects. Indeed, our design leveraged the out-party that was disliked *most* by each party's electorate in a multi-party context. This may be important, as we have shown that the degree of dislike matters and demonstrated that the stronger the dislike for the out-party, the stronger the effect of out-party cues.

Our findings have several implications. Especially in times of affective polarisation, the polarising effect of out-party cues is troublesome. It suggests that ideological differences not only result in negative perceptions of the political opponent (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022), but also, vice versa, foster ideological differentiation between voters as well. Ultimately, this could result in a negative spiral where affective and ideological polarisation fuel each other and where, as a consequence, consensus between political opponents can no longer be reached (Iyengar et al., 2019).

However, our findings about the *mechanisms* driving these effects make clear that a nuanced interpretation is warranted. Citizens update their own opinions partly because they make assumptions about the position of their in-party. Out-party cues appear to form an important heuristic for citizens to make an estimated guess or update their perception of what their party stands for. In contexts where citizens only have information about the out-party position, the updated perceptions can be incorrect, and citizens may falsely assume that their own party disagrees with the disliked party. This is concerning as it means that agreement between parties may go unnoticed, and citizens may (unnecessarily) polarise more than needed. On a positive note, however, in contexts where information about multiple parties is available, the out-party polarising effect is likely attenuated or even absent. As was recently demonstrated (see Fowler & Howell, 2023), exposing citizens to *both* in- and out-party cues reveals that out-party cue effects are weaker than previously thought. Our study unfortunately did not include an experimental treatment where both in- and out-party cues were provided—this is admittedly a limitation of our design—but nevertheless our research interests and results align well with these recent findings by showing that the polarising effect indeed partly works *via* the perceptions of the in-party position. Perhaps the remedy against polarisation lies in providing information contexts where comparable information about different parties is available, and in stressing similarities between opposing parties.

Even beyond that, it would be interesting to provide “competing information” that is not tied to party cues. In the real world, often, there is more information available (e.g. actual arguments for the various viewpoints, public opinion information,

expert advice,...), and this generally weakens the effect of party cues (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014; Bullock, 2011)—especially for politically aware citizens (Kam, 2005). In this paper, we isolated a process that in the real world is often more complex. This being said, people have limited time to follow politics and often partisan cues *are* the only heuristics they use.

Other opportunities for further work lie in the expansion of the issue selection. We believe a strength of our approach is that we used real issues and party positions, as it made the experiment more realistic. However, at the same time, we only investigated a few different issues that are, in many respects, comparable; they are, for instance, all moderately salient. What if we did the experiment with highly salient and divisive issues? On the one hand, it is possible that people's opinions on salient issues are more outspoken and less susceptible to change. On the other hand, Druckman et al. (2013) suggest that the effect of partisan cues is actually reinforced by polarised contexts, because the role of information is weakened. This would suggest that out-party cues may matter mostly for highly salient and polarised issues, and that we rather underestimate the effects. Given that we only selected one issue for each electorate, our design does not allow us to tease out to what extent the effect of out-party cues is issue dependent. We therefore encourage future studies to delve deeper into this issue-dependency of out-party cues and further explore their role in opinion formation and change.

Data availability

Data is available upon request.

Declaration of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Appendices

Appendix A

In the main paper, we do not report results of the third experimental group (the in-party cue), because this is merely replication of older studies. However, for the sake of completeness, here is the information on the stimulus and the results.

Respondents in the in-party cue group were confronted with information about the position of their own party. As can be seen in Table 1 of the main paper, three out of five parties (green party, socialist party and Flemish-nationalist party) opposed the policy proposal, while two other parties (liberal and extreme-right party) supported it. Recall that a large majority of the voters, in the first survey wave and previous to the stimulus, were in favor of the policy proposal. This means that we expect voters of the former three parties to become more against the proposal in response to the in-party cue, whereas we expect voters of the latter two parties not to change their opinion or, if anything, to become more supportive of it.

In-party cue stimulus: *Interested in what people think about this matter, our research group X (University Y) recently conducted a survey with the party leaders of different political parties that are active in Flanders. We found, for instance, that [the Green party] is against [forcing convicts to serve their full sentence]. More specifically, the party leader indicated that the [Green party] disagrees with the abovementioned policy proposal.*

Full models with all experimental groups included:

Table A1 Full model with in-group treatment saying that party disagrees with proposal (green, socialist and Flemish-nationalist party)

	Model a b(S.E.)
<i>Ref = Control group</i>	
In-party cue	-1.37(.26)***
Out-party cue	-1.24(.26)***
Original opinion (first survey)	.52(.04)***
Party electorate dummies	(included)
Constant	3.71(.43)***
N	515
R ² (adjusted)	.278

*** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05

Table A2 Full model with in-group treatment saying that party agrees with proposal (liberal and extreme-right party)

	Model a b(S.E.)
<i>Ref = Control group</i>	
In-party cue	-.02(.37)
Out-party cue	-.91*(.37)
Original opinion (first survey)	.47(.07)***
Party electorate dummies	(included)
Constant	4.37(.63)***
N	197
R ² (adjusted)	.236

*** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05

Appendix B

a) *Interaction between original opinion and effect of out-party cues:*

Table B1 Linear regression explaining citizens' support for the policy proposal – with interaction between out-party cue and original opinion, i.e. the support for the proposal in wave 1, as an additional IV

	b(S.E.)
Out-party cue	-1.79(.71)*
Original opinion (first survey)	.49(.06)***
Out-party cue * Original opinion (first survey)	.08 (.09)
Party electorate dummies	(included)
Constant	4.07(.56)***
N	473
R ² (adjusted)	0.308

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

Table B2 Linear regression explaining citizens' support for the policy proposal – with interaction between out-party cue and original opinion as an additional IV, where original opinion is dichotomized between those that disagreed with the policy proposal in wave 1, and those that agreed. Respondents with a neutral position in wave 1 were omitted.

	b(S.E.)
Out-party cue	-1.63(.49)***
Original opinion (first survey) (dummy)	2.70(.40)***
Out-party cue * Original opinion (first survey) (dummy)	.41(.56)
Party electorate dummies	(included)
Constant	5.93(.43)***
N	440
R ² (adjusted)	0.282

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

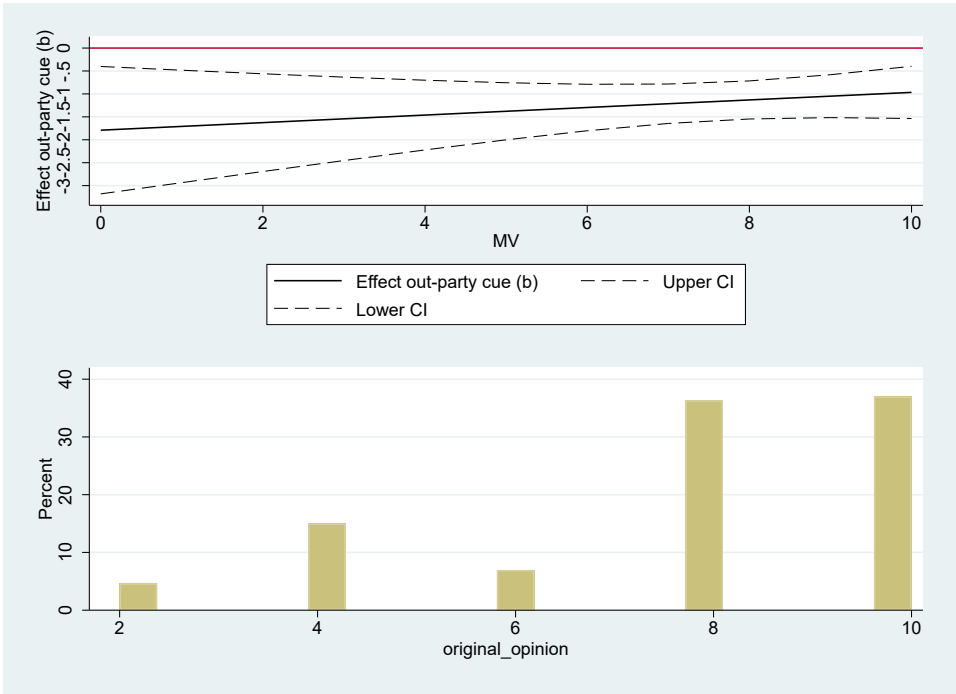


Figure B1 Interaction between out-party cues and original opinion

Conclusion: We find a positive, but insignificant interaction. The out-party cue effect is significantly negative even for those agreeing the most strongly with the issue in wave 1 (see figure B1).

b) *Interaction between out-party dislike and effect of out-party cues:*

Table B3 Full model with interaction between the out-party cue and out-party dislike

	b(S.E.)
Out-party cue	.09(.77)
Dislike of the out-party	-.02(.06)
Out-party cue * Dislike of the out-party	-.15(.09)
Original opinion (first survey)	.52(.04)***
Party electorate dummies	(included)
Constant	3.94(.67)***
N	473
R ² (adjusted)	0.315

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

Appendix C

Information about the representativeness of the Dynata citizen sample:

Gender	Population	Sample
Male	.4946	.4991
Female	.5054	.5009
Education	Population	Sample
None or primary school	.2317	.0636
Secondary school	.4008	.5210
Higher education	.3675	.4154
Age category	Population	Sample
18-24	.1317	.0921
25-34	.1472	.1286
35-44	.1520	.1408
45-54	.1704	.1735
55-64	.1616	.2460
65-74	.1238	.1871
75-84	.0797	.0295
85-94	.0336	.0023
Electorate	Population	Sample
Groen	.0742	.0795
Spa	.1211	.1197
CD&V	.1602	.1034
Open VLD	.1336	.0833
N-VA	.2798	.3391
Vlaams Belang	.0502	.0879
PvdA	.0245	.0327
Other	.0190	.0187
Didn't vote	.0938	.1356

Appendix D

English translations of the experimental treatments for all parties:

A) Green party

Intro: *Sentence enforcement is an issue that sometimes gets attention in Belgium. People have different opinions on the following policy proposal: "All convicts should serve their full sentence".*

Out-party cue: *Interested in what people think about this matter, our research group X (University Y) recently conducted a survey with the party leaders of different political parties that are active in Flanders. We found, for instance, that N-VA is in favour of forcing convicts to serve their full sentence. More specifically, the party leader indicated that N-VA agrees with the abovementioned policy proposal.*

B) Socialist party

Intro: *The minimum level of public transport is an issue that sometimes gets attention in Belgium. People have different opinions on the following policy proposal: "If the NMBS is on strike, a minimum number of trains should still run."*

Out-party cue: *Interested in what people think about this matter, our research group X (University Y) recently conducted a survey with the party leaders of different political parties that are active in Flanders. We found, for instance, that the N-VA is in favour of letting a minimum number of trains run in case of a strike. More specifically, the party leader indicated that N-VA agrees with the abovementioned policy proposal.*

C) Liberal party

Intro: *The use of the mother tongue at schools is an issue that sometimes gets attention in Belgium. People have different opinions on the following policy proposal: "Schools should oblige children to speak Dutch on the playground as well."*

Out-party cue: *Interested in what people think about this matter, our research group X (University Y) recently conducted a survey with the party leaders of different political parties that are active in Flanders. We found, for instance, that Vlaams Belang is in favour of mandatorily speaking Dutch on the playground. More specifically, the party leader indicated that Vlaams Belang agrees with the abovementioned policy proposal.*

D) Flemish-Nationalist party

Intro: *The bus and tram network is an issue that sometimes gets attention in Belgium. People have different opinions on the following policy proposal: "Bus and tram lines with few passengers should remain operational."*

Out-party cue: *Interested in what people think about this matter, our research group X (University Y) recently conducted a survey with the party leaders of different political parties that are active in Flanders. We found, for instance, that sp.a is in favour of keeping little-used bus and tram lines operational. More specifically, the party leader indicated that sp.a agrees with the abovementioned policy proposal.*

E) Extreme-right party

Intro: *The bus and tram network is an issue that sometimes gets attention in Belgium. People have different opinions on the following policy proposal: "Bus and tram lines with few passengers should remain operational."*

Out-party cue: *Interested in what people think about this matter, our research group X (University Y) recently conducted a survey with the party leaders of different political parties that are active in Flanders. We found, for instance, that Groen is in favour of keeping little-used bus and tram lines operational. More specifically, the party leader indicated that Groen agrees with the abovementioned policy proposal.*