American Political Science Review (2019) 113, 1, 248–253
doi:10.1017/S0003055418000722 © American Political Science Association 2018

Letter

Elections Activate Partisanship across Countries

SHANE P. SINGH *University of Georgia*
JUDD R. THORNTON *Georgia State University*

It has long been argued that elections amplify partisan predispositions. We take advantage of the timing of the cross-national post-election surveys included in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems to explore the effects that elections have on individuals' attachments to political parties. Within these surveys, under the assumption that the dates on which respondents are interviewed are assigned independent of factors known to affect partisanship, we are able to identify the causal effects of election salience on partisan attachments. We find strong evidence that election salience increases the probability of one having a party attachment, increases the strength of attachments, and heightens the relationship between partisanship and evaluations of political actors. Empirical explorations of our identifying assumption bolster its validity. Our results substantiate the causal role that elections play in activating partisanship.

Whereas partisan attachments are quite stable, individuals do respond to the external environment. Further, evidence indicates that the presence of an election is a source of such variation—in particular, it has been argued that elections make underlying partisan predispositions more prominent. Building from these insights, we take advantage of the timing of the post-election surveys included in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES 2003; 2007; 2013) to explore the causal role that election salience has on individuals' attachments to political parties.

As time passes, any effects that elections might have should diminish. And, within each survey of the CSES, the dates on which survey respondents are interviewed are assigned, we assume, independent of factors known to affect partisanship. We exploit this assignment process to identify the effects of election salience on partisan attachments. In doing so, we account for the ways in which survey timing might systematically differ across countries with our statistical models. We also present explorations of our identifying assumption of as if random interview assignment within election surveys, the results of which bolster its validity.

We expect that as the distance between the timing of a survey interview and the election increases, and the election thereby becomes less salient, individuals will be less likely to identify with a party; individuals who identify with a party will do so less strongly; and the relationship between partisanship and evaluations of political actors will weaken. We find support for all three expectations. This reinforces extant findings that elections activate partisanship, and it substantiates their causal role.

BACKGROUND AND EXPECTATIONS

Although partisanship has declined in some advanced democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Dassonneville and Hooghe 2018; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995), it nevertheless remains a powerful force. This is the case even in countries where aggregate partisanship is low (Bankert, Huddy, and Rosema 2017). And, although partisanship is among the most stable of political attitudes, substantial evidence indicates that it does respond to external context. For example, elite polarization (e.g., Adams, Green, and Milazzo 2012; Hetherington 2001; Lupu 2015; Thornton 2013), the number of parties (e.g., Bowler, Lanoue, and Savoie 1994; Holmberg 2007; Huber, Kernell, and Leoni 2005; Karp and Banducci 2008; Katz 1980; Sartori 1976), and institutional features (e.g., Gerring, Thacker, and Moreno 2009; Schmitt 2009; Singh and Thornton 2013) have all been shown to influence partisanship or partisan strength.

Our focus is on the effects of elections on patterns of partisanship. From the earliest studies of voting behavior and campaigns (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944), it has been argued that elections activate existing predispositions, and this argument is consistent with more recent evidence (e.g., Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous 1994; Holbrook 1996; Stimson 2004). As Campbell (2000) argues, election campaigns "restore" partisanship, and evidence from the US indicates that campaigns make partisan attitudes more pronounced (e.g., Grant, Mockabee, and Monson 2010). Further, US panel data indicate that ambivalence, a dimension of attitude strength (Miller and Peterson 2004), declines over the course of the election (Rudolph 2011). Similarly, as election day nears, uncertainty toward parties declines (Peterson 2014), perceptions of the candidates polarize (Miller and Shanks 1982), and the relationship between

Shane P. Singh, Department of International Affairs, University of Georgia, singh@uga.edu.
Judd R. Thornton, Department of Political Science, Georgia State University, jrthornton@gsu.edu.

Previous versions of this paper were presented at the 2017 Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association and at a workshop of the Making Electoral Democracy Work project that took place in conjunction with the 2017 Meeting of the American Political Science Association. We thank Indridi Indridason and Jamie Monogan for especially helpful comments. We also gratefully acknowledge the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems for making the data available. Replication materials can be found on Dataverse at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/03CDTK.

Received: August 4, 2017; revised: June 1, 2018; accepted: October 7, 2018. First published online: November 20, 2018.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000722 Published online by Cambridge University Press

partisanship and vote intentions strengthens (Bartels 2006). Evidence also suggests that partisan intensity responds to the presence of an election (Allsop and Weisberg 1988; Brody and Rothenberg 1988; Huckfeldt, Sprague, and Levine 2000). As per Iyengar and Simon (2000, 159), nearly six decades of evidence shows that "the principal impact of the campaign will be to push partisans into their respective corners."

In line with this literature, as an election—and by extension political parties—becomes less salient, so should party identification. This leads to three testable hypotheses. First, we hypothesize that as an election becomes less salient, one should be less likely to identify with a party. Similarly, as parties become less salient in the minds of the public, partisan strength should decline for many of those who continue to identify with a party. Therefore, our second hypothesis is that the strength of one's attachment decreases as an election becomes less salient.

As a corollary, we expect that, because partisanship becomes less prominent as elections become less salient, it should have a smaller influence on subsequent political evaluations. Consequently, our third hypothesis is that the link between partisanship and political evaluations will weaken as elections become less salient.

DATA AND METHODS

Our data come from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. The CSES questionnaire is embedded in national post-election surveys in dozens of countries, and it asks cross-nationally comparable questions about partisan attachments and evaluations of political actors.

To examine whether elections affect partisanship, researchers benefit from a measure of the degree to which an election is salient in an individual's mind. Many survey projects ask respondents whether or not they witnessed or participated in a variety of activities associated with an election, such as campaigning for a candidate or voting, and it is possible to create an indicator of election salience from responses to such questions. However, correlations between such self-reported indicators and partisanship could be spurious. For example, they may surface solely because individuals who engage with political campaigns and vote are more educated, and education is itself linked to partisanship. Further, such correlations do not provide evidence of the direction of a relationship; perhaps partisans are more likely to campaign for candidates and to vote.

To overcome such limitations, we leverage the fact that the dates on which CSES respondents are interviewed within each post-election survey are likely unrelated to partisanship and its correlates, and we use the number of days between the day of the election and the date on which a respondent was interviewed to capture election salience. To account for the fact that increases in this delay will matter soon after the election than several months after, we take the natural logarithm. We call the resulting variable *time since election*. Under the assumption that respondents in each survey are as if randomly treated (Dunning 2008) with an interview date, we can interpret the effects of *time since election* within a given survey as causal.[1]

Because we pool the CSES data, it is critical that we account for the fact that survey firms operate under varying constraints and schedules across countries. For example, all interviews in one country may occur within a few weeks following the election, whereas in another country, the interviews might take several months to complete. Perhaps citizens in countries that get surveys into the field relatively quickly tend to be more partisan—a possibility because such countries may also have, on average, longer experiences with electoral democracy. Left unaddressed, this would hamper our ability to identify the effects of *time since election*.[2] Thus, we analyze the data in a multilevel framework. In particular, in addition to estimating a random intercept for each CSES election survey in each country, we allow the effect of *time since election* to vary randomly across surveys.[3]

We include in our sample all CSES election surveys for which the data needed to measure our key variables are available. These 86 surveys are listed in Appendix A, along with information on the minimum, average, and maximum time from the election to an interview for each survey. We show the predicted random effects for each survey in Appendix B.

RESULTS

Here, we present all of our results graphically. Model details, information on estimation procedures, and numerical results are provided in Appendix C, where we also demonstrate robustness to various estimation methods.

Our first hypothesis puts forth that, as election salience decreases, one should be less likely to have a partisan identification. The CSES asks respondents whether or not they identify with a political party, and we use answers to this question to create a dichotomous variable that distinguishes identifiers from non-identifiers.[4] As shown in Figure 1, and in support of our first hypothesis, one's

[1] In the 2007 and 2011 election surveys in Finland, Swedish-speaking respondents were, by design, interviewed longer after the election than Finnish speakers. As this hampers our assumption of as if random assignment within election surveys, we restricted the 2007 and 2011 Finnish samples to include only interviews conducted in Finnish.

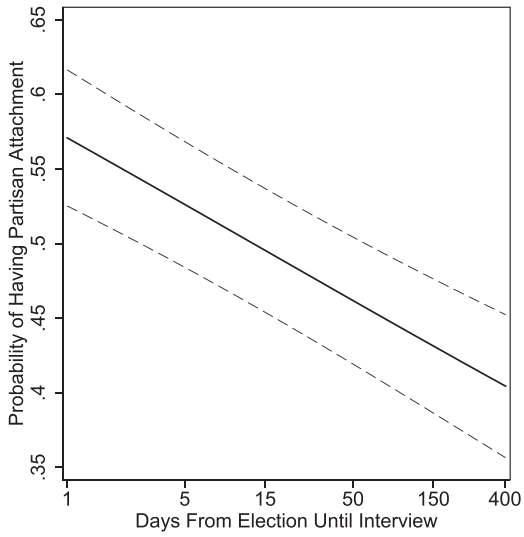
[2] Relatedly, some countries mandate pre-election campaign blackouts. If the blackout lengths systematically relate to partisanship, this would hamper our ability to identify the effects of *time since election*. In addition, in some countries, subsequent elections are more likely to come quickly than in others. If partisanship is shaped by anticipation of elections, our results could be affected. In Appendix G, we explore this possibility further and find no evidence that our findings are influenced by anticipation.

[3] We estimate generalized linear mixed models, which are described further in Appendix C. We constrain covariances between random effects parameters to zero, although, as shown in Appendix H, our results are robust to estimations that freely estimate these covariances. Our results are also robust to fixed effects models, as shown in Appendix I.

[4] The CSES question is "Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party?" We code those who answered "yes" as one and those who answered "no" as zero.

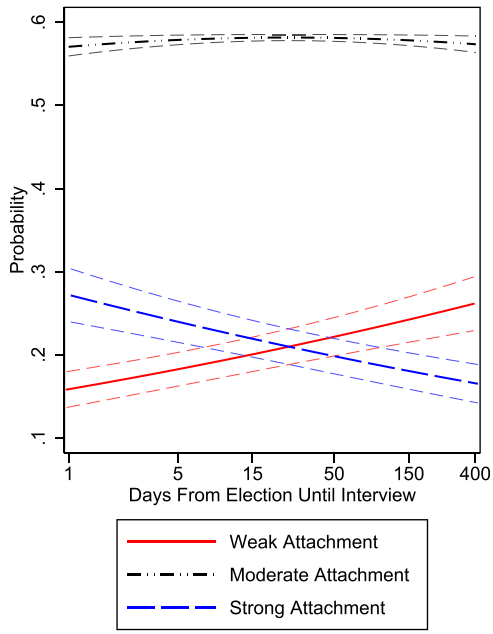
https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000722 Published online by Cambridge University Press

FIGURE 1. Partisan Attachments and Time From the Election to the Interview



Note: The figure is created from the main estimation in Table C.1, which is shown in Appendix C. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence interval.

FIGURE 2. Partisan Attachment Strength and Time From the Election to the Interview



Note: The figure is created from the main estimation in Table C.2, which is shown in Appendix C. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence interval.

probability of having a partisan attachment is higher soon after an election than it is after some time passes. One who is interviewed the day after the election, for example, holds a partisan attachment with a predicted probability of 0.57, whereas for someone who is interviewed 150 days after the election, the predicted probability is 0.43.

Our second hypothesis is that the strength of one's attachment decreases along with election salience. The CSES asks respondents with a partisan attachment to state a degree of closeness to "their" party.[5] We create an ordinal variable that contains the following three categories: weak attachment, moderate attachment, and strong attachment. In Figure 2, we chart how the predicted strength of partisan attachments varies with *time since election*. Whereas the probability of having a moderate attachment is largely constant over the range of *time since election*, the probability of having a strong attachment is markedly higher than the probability of having a weak attachment soon after the election concludes. And, one is significantly more likely to have a weak attachment than a strong attachment once the election is temporally distant. This provides support for our second hypothesis.

To put our findings in context, we note that our substantive effects are in line with other known sources of partisan acquisition and strength, including compulsory voting (Singh and Thornton 2013), socialization (Claggett 1981), and party polarization (Lupu 2015). In a field experiment, Gerber, Huber, and Washington (2010) find that reminding citizens to register to vote increases the likelihood that they identify with their "latent" party by about eight percentage points.

Our third hypothesis states that the relationship between partisanship and political evaluations will weaken as elections become less salient. To test this, we take as our dependent variable CSES respondents' evaluations of the incumbent party in the recent election. This variable ranges from zero to 10, with higher values indicating rosier evaluations of the incumbent party.[6] We predict these evaluations as a function of whether or not one identifies with the incumbent party, which we capture with a dichotomous *copartisanship* variable that takes a value of one for those who identify with the incumbent party and a value of zero for those who do not. Following from the hypothesis, we expect that *copartisanship* will become a weaker predictor of incumbent evaluations as the time between the election and one's interview date increases. We test this by interacting *copartisanship* with *time since election*. As

[5] The CSES question is "Do you feel very close to this party, somewhat close, or not very close?" We code those who feel very close as three, those who feel somewhat close as two, and those who feel not very close as one.

[6] The CSES question used to create this variable is "I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from zero to 10, where zero means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party." In elections in presidential systems, we take the incumbent party to be that of the president. In elections in parliamentary systems, we consider the party of the prime minister. In elections in semi-presidential systems, we take the incumbent to be the party of the prime minister unless there was no parliamentary election, in which case we consider the party of the president.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000722 Published online by Cambridge University Press

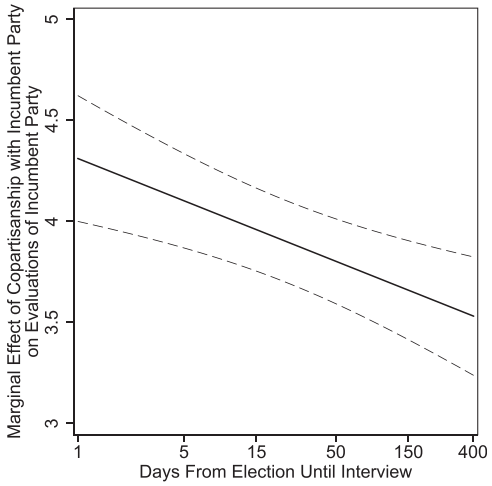
demonstrated in Figure 3, *copartisanship* leads to more positive evaluations of the incumbent party. And, in line with our expectation, this relationship weakens as the election recedes into the past.

PLAUSIBILITY OF THE IDENTIFYING ASSUMPTION

When leveraging naturally occurring treatments—in our case, interview timing—it is important to examine whether the treatment process worked in a manner that precludes the need to control for potential confounders (cf. Sekhon and Titiunik 2012). In particular, we recognize the possibility that survey agencies could roll out their interviews in a way that makes our assumption of as if random interview date assignment implausible. For example, people in cities may tend to be interviewed sooner than people in rural areas. If city dwellers are also more partisan, on average, this could account for our findings. To examine the plausibility of our assumption of as if random assignment of interview dates within surveys, we check whether several potential confounders predict the time between the election and the date of interview.

As shown in Appendix D, within each survey, we find only trivial relationships between individual characteristics and the date on which one was interviewed. There, we also scrutinize the potential links between the degree of democracy and country-level wealth and interview timing across countries, finding null relationships. Thus, we are confident that the relationships shown in Figures 1–3 are truly due to the time from the election to the interview. To further demonstrate this, we show that our results are robust to models that include a slate of control variables in Appendix D.

FIGURE 3. The Impact of Copartisanship on Incumbent Evaluations and Time From the Election to the Interview



Note: The figure is created from the main estimation in Table C.3, which is shown in Appendix C. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence interval.

Additionally, about 84 percent of the respondents in our sample were interviewed solely by telephone or in person. For the other 16 percent, interviews were either done entirely by mail or conducted by mail in conjunction with a telephone or face-to-face interview. Allowing respondents to mail back their questionnaires on their own time potentially harms our assumption of as if random interview timing—perhaps those with partisan ties tend to mail back questionnaires more quickly than those without. To account for this, we re-estimate our models with those who were not surveyed solely by telephone or solely in person removed from the sample. Results, which are shown in Appendix E, are very similar to those of our main models.

TIME SINCE AN ELECTION AS A MEASURE OF ELECTION SALIENCE

Although the time passed since an election is perhaps an uncontroversial gauge of election salience, it is worth probing the validity of our key causal variable. To do so, we rely on the fact that individuals are more likely to provide ideological placements of themselves and political parties when elections are salient—and therefore the information environment is rich (e.g., Aldrich et al. 2018). If the *time since election* is inversely related to election salience, it should also be inversely related to the likelihood that survey respondents will provide self-placements and placements of political parties along an ideological scale. We show that this is indeed the case in Appendix F.

CONCLUSION

It has long been argued that elections heighten partisanship. However, extant observational research on this topic is limited by the lack of an exogenous measure of election salience. Overcoming this limitation, we exploit the timing of surveys conducted by the CSES to identify the causal effect of election salience on individuals' attachments to political parties. We find that, as time passes from an election, the likelihood of identifying with a party decreases, levels of partisan strength decline, and the impact of partisanship on evaluations of governing parties diminishes. Our research design, together with the empirical verification of our identifying assumption of as if random interview timing within election surveys, allows us to be confident that we have not merely uncovered an artifact of survey design and that our results are not plagued by endogeneity.

Our results provide evidence of the potential underlying mechanism for several existing findings. For example, it is known that election polls tend to be fairly volatile, whereas elections themselves are often quite predictable (Gelman et al. 2016; Gelman and King 1993). Similarly, our results are suggestive of a process that reconciles evidence demonstrating that although individuals exhibit intra-election change (e.g., Brody and Rothenberg 1988), partisanship remains stable for many over longer periods of time (Bartels et al. 2011). Our

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000722 Published online by Cambridge University Press

results are also consistent with a growing body of evidence indicating that although partisanship is very stable, it nevertheless responds to the external environment. Finally, beyond our substantive conclusions, we believe we have highlighted an important methodological issue: the timing of election surveys can impact the pattern of responses (see also Banducci and Stevens 2015).

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000722.

Replication materials can be found on Dataverse at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/03CDTK.

REFERENCES

Adams, James, Jane Green, and Caitlin Milazzo. 2012. "Has the British Public Depolarized along with Political Elites? An American Perspective on British Public Opinion." *Comparative Political Studies* 45 (4): 507–30.

Aldrich, John H., Gregory S. Schober, Sandra Ley, and Marco Fernandez. 2018. "Incognizance and Perceptual Deviation: Individual and Institutional Sources of Variation in Citizens' Perceptions of Party Placements on the Left–Right Scale." *Political Behavior* 40 (2): 415–33.

Allsop, Dee, and Herbert Weisberg. 1988. "Measuring Change in Party Identification." *American Journal of Political Science* 32 (4): 996–1017.

Banducci, Susan, and Daniel Stevens. 2015. "Surveys in Context: How Timing in the Electoral Cycle Influences Response Propensity and Satisficing." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 79 (S1): 214–43.

Bankert, Alexa, Leonie Huddy, and Martin Rosema. 2017. "Measuring Partisanship as a Social Identity in Multi-Party Systems." *Political Behavior* 39 (1): 103–32.

Bartels, Brandon L., Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Corwin D. Smidt, and Renée M. Smith. 2011. "The Dynamic Properties of Individual-Level Party Identification in the United States." *Electoral Studies* 30 (1): 210–22.

Bartels, Larry M. 2006. "Priming and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns". In *Capturing Campaign Effects*, eds. Henry E. Brady and Richard Johnston. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 78–112.

Berelson, Bernard R., Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee. 1954. *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bowler, Shaun, David J. Lanoue, and Paul Savoie. 1994. "Electoral Systems, Party Competition, and Strength of Partisan Attachment: Evidence from Three Countries." *The Journal of Politics* 56 (04): 991–1007.

Brody, Richard A., and Lawrence S. Rothenberg. 1988. "The Instability of Partisanship: An Analysis of the 1980 Presidential Election." *British Journal of Political Science* 18 (04): 445–65.

Campbell, James E. 2000. *The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.

Claggett, William. 1981. "Partisan Acquisition versus Partisan Intensity: Life-Cycle, Generation, and Period Effects, 1952–1976." *American Journal of Political Science* 25 (2): 193–214.

The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (www.cses.org). CSES MODULE 1 FULL RELEASE [dataset]. August 4, 2003 version.

The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (www.cses.org). CSES MODULE 2 FULL RELEASE [dataset]. June 27, 2007 version.

The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (www.cses.org). CSES MODULE 3 FULL RELEASE [dataset]. March 27, 2013 version.

Dalton, Russell J., and Martin P. Wattenberg. 2002. *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. New York: Oxford University Press on Demand.

Dassonneville, Ruth, and Marc Hooghe. 2018. "Indifference and Alienation: Diverging Dimensions of Electoral Dealignment in Europe." *Acta Politica* 53 (1): 1–23.

Dunning, Thad. 2008. "Improving Causal Inference: Strengths and Limitations of Natural Experiments." *Political Research Quarterly* 61 (2): 282–93.

Gelman, Andrew, and Gary King. 1993. "Why are American Presidential Elections Campaign Polls So Variable when Votes are So Predictable." *British Journal of Political Science* 23 (4): 409–51.

Gelman, Andrew, Sharad Goel, Douglas Rivers, and David Rothschild. 2016. "The Mythical Swing Voter." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 11 (1): 103–30.

Gerber, Alan S., Gregory A. Huber, and Ebonya Washington. 2010. "Party Affiliation, Partisanship, and Political Beliefs: A Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review* 104 (4): 720–44.

Gerring, John, Strom C. Thacker, and Carola Moreno. 2009. "Are Parliamentary Systems Better?" *Comparative Political Studies* 42 (3): 327–59.

Gopoian, J. David, and Sissie Hadjiharalambous. 1994. "Late-Deciding Voters in Presidential Elections." *Political Behavior* 16 (1): 55–78.

Grant, J. Tobin, Stephen T. Mockabee, and J. Quin Monson. 2010. "Campaign Effects on the Accessibility of Party Identification." *Political Research Quarterly* 63 (4): 811–21.

Hetherington, Marc J. 2001. "Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization." *American Political Science Review* 95 (3): 619–31.

Holbrook, Thomas. 1996. *Do Campaigns Matter?* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Holmberg, Sören. 2007. "Partisanship Reconsidered." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, eds. Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 557–70.

Huber, John, Georgia Kernell, and Eduardo Leoni. 2005. "Institutional Context, Cognitive Resources and Party Attachments across Democracies." *Political Analysis* 13: 365–86.

Huckfeldt, Robert, John Sprague, and Jeffrey Levine. 2000. "The Dynamics of Collective Deliberation in the 1996 Election: Campaign Effects on Accessibility, Certainty, and Accuracy." *American Political Science Review* 95 (3): 641–51.

Iyengar, Shanto, and Adam F. Simon. 2000. "New Perspectives and Evidence on Political Communication and Campaign Effects." *Annual Review of Psychology* 51 (1): 149–69.

Karp, Jeffrey A., and Susan A. Banducci. 2008. "Political Efficacy and Participation in Twenty-Seven Democracies: How Electoral Systems Shape Political Behavior." *British Journal of Political Science* 38 (02): 311–34.

Katz, Richard S. 1980. *A Theory of Parties and Electoral Systems*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lazarsfeld, Paul F., Bernard R. Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. 1944. *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce.

Lupu, Noam. 2015. "Party Polarization and Mass Partisanship: A Comparative Perspective." *Political Behavior* 37 (2): 331–56.

Miller, Joanne M., and David A. M. Peterson. 2004. "Theoretical and Empirical Implications of Attitude Strength." *Journal of Politics* 66 (3): 847–67.

Miller, Warren, and J. Merrill Shanks. 1982. "Policy Directions and Presidential Leadership: Alternative Interpretations of the 1980 Presidential Elections." *British Journal of Political Science* 12 (2): 266–356.

Peterson, David A. M. 2014. "Uncertainty and Campaigns: The Psychological Mechanism Behind Campaign-Induced Priming." *American Politics Research* 43 (1): 109–43.

Rudolph, Thomas J. 2011. "The Dynamics of Ambivalence." *American Journal of Political Science* 55 (3): 561–73.

Sartori, Giovanni. 1976. *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schmitt, Hermann. 2009. Partisanship in Nine Western Democracies: Causes and Consequences. In *Political Parties and Partisanship: Social Identity and Individual Attitudes*, eds. John Bartles and Paolo Bellucci. New York: Routledge, 75–87.

Schmitt, Hermann, and Sören Holmberg. 1995. *Political Parties in Decline?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000722 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sekhon, Jasjeet S., and Roco Titiunik. 2012. "When Natural Experiments are Neither Natural nor Experiments." *American Political Science Review* 106 (1): 35–57.
Singh, Shane P., and Judd Thornton. 2013. "Compulsory Voting and the Dynamics of Partisan Identification." *European Journal of Political Research* 52 (2): 188–211.
Stimson, James A. 2004. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Thornton, Judd R. 2013. "The Impact of Elite Polarization on Partisan Ambivalence and Indifference." *Political Behavior* 35 (2): 409–28.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000722 Published online by Cambridge University Press