

CONTEXTUAL POLITICAL INFORMATION AND TIMING OF VOTE DECISION

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Abstract

The importance of vote decision timing to democratic processes is well recognized in the literature. The fewer the voters who decide early, the more late-deciding voters are susceptible to campaign effects and manipulation, the more unpredictable are election forecasts and outcomes, and the higher the financial barriers to effective campaigns. Compared to past decades, however, fewer people know well in advance how they would vote on Election Day. Timing of vote decision has become increasingly long; National elections in the United States, Germany, and Britain attest to a larger proportion of voters who decide late. Researchers previously established the contribution of individual level predictors (political interest; partisanship; news consumption) to late decision. Despite these contributions, however, we know very little about the predictors of late-decision in comparative perspective. This paper develops a rationale and tests whether two important political system cues—(a) party polarization and (b) press-party parallelism—affect decision-time in predictable ways. Analyses of the European Election Study 2014 data ($N = 28$ countries) mostly support the hypothesized relationship. Polarization and parallelism influence aggregate decisiveness, and attenuate the effect of individual-level predictors on decision-time. In conclusion, I discuss the implications of these findings.

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CONTEXTUAL POLITICAL INFORMATION AND TIMING OF VOTE DECISION

The importance of decision-time to democratic processes is well recognized in the literature. The fewer voters who know how they would vote, the more late-deciding voters are susceptible to campaign effects and manipulation, the more unpredictable are election forecasts and outcomes, and the higher the participation barriers to increasingly expensive campaigns.

Compared to past decades, fewer people know well in advance how they would vote on Election Day. Timing of vote decision has become increasingly long; National elections in the United States, Germany, Israel and Britain attest to a larger proportion of voters who decide very late. For example, a mere week before the recent May 2016 election in the UK, the press reported that fully 40% of voters were unsure how they would vote. The undecided voters, in other words, are crucial for close and contested elections.

Most studies of undecided voters locate the explanation in individual-level differences: the late deciders are relatively uneducated, less interested in politics, do not have a strong ideological preferences, are younger and so forth, compared to the early deciders. These differences however do not account for between-country systematic differences. This paper argues that, beyond individual differences, two important political system cues—(a) party polarization and (b) press-party parallelism—affect decision-time in predictable ways. Analyses of the EU Election Study 2014 will demonstrate that polarization and parallelism influence aggregate decisiveness, and attenuate the effect of individual-level predictors on decision-time.

Context, Information Flow, and Decisiveness

Previous studies of timing of vote-decision paint a fairly consistent portrait of the undecided as less engaged, occasional rather than habitual followers of political affairs, less

educated, less ideologically committed, and less knowledgeable. Younger voters tend to be less decisive than older ones, and women tend to be less decisive than men (Chaffee & Rimal, 1996; Fournier, Nadeau, Blais, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2004; Gopoian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Nir, 2005; Nir & Druckman, 2008; Zaller, 2004). Although these documented differences help understand within-country differences, they are not very helpful in explaining systematic differences in decisiveness between countries. Consider for example Figure 1 (below) charts the proportion of late deciders, from about 15% in Hungary and Malta to over 40% in the Netherlands and Sweden, on the eve of the last EU Parliament Elections. Neither individual differences, nor geography, nor length of membership seem to offer a systematic explanation.

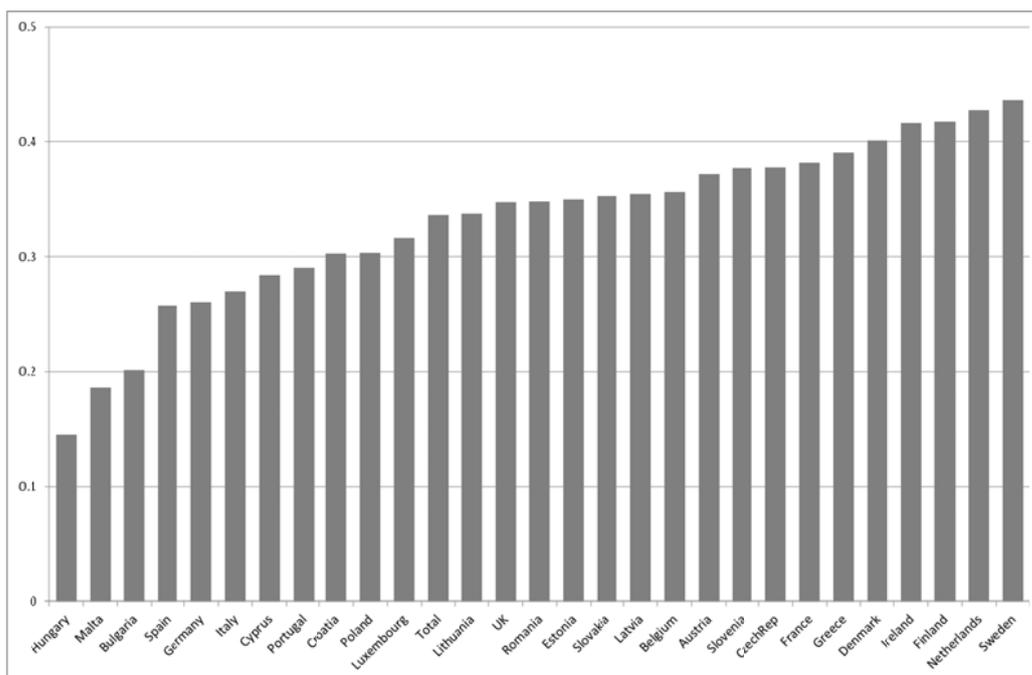


Figure 1. Proportion of voters who decided late: “a few weeks ago” to “on Election Day.” Data: EES 2014

Moreover, examining a central predictor of decisiveness—political interest—reveals dramatic differences between countries in the magnitude of the regression coefficient. Figure 2 below charts these differences in coefficient sizes, from about 0 (in Portugal), .10 (Austria), .20

(Spain), to around .30 (Cyprus, Czech Republic).

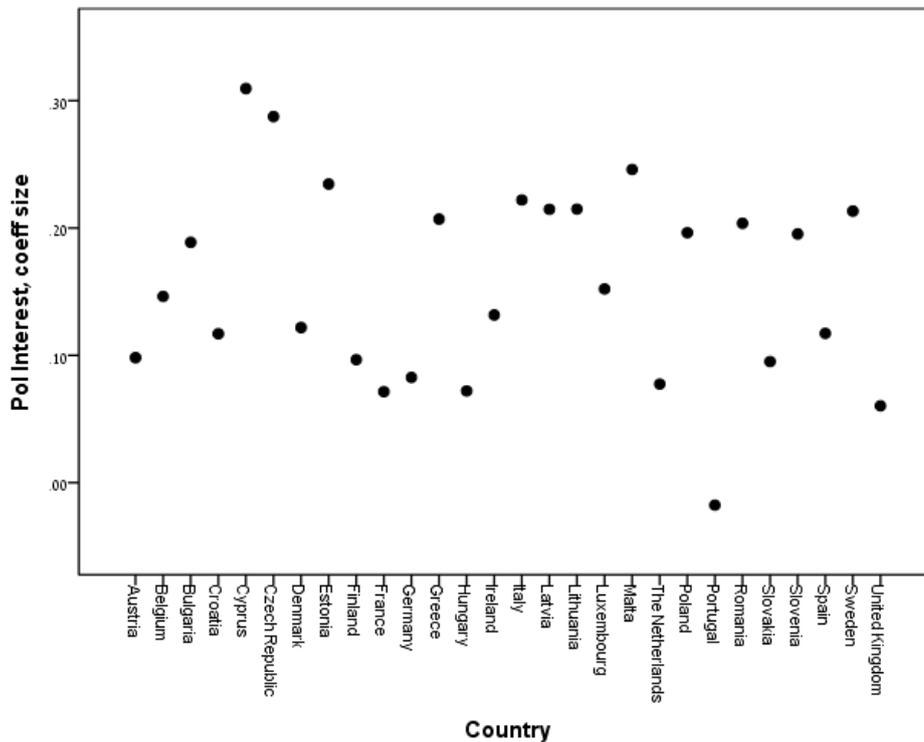


Figure 2. The effect of political interest on decisiveness. Points note coefficient size in a multiple regression equation; 28 separate equations. Data: EES 2014

Again, neither differences between East- and Western Europe, nor length of membership in the EU, explain variations in decision-time. How can we account for these differences? The purpose of this paper is to offer two theoretical, country-level explanations and test their contribution to voter decisiveness: polarization and press-party parallelism. The clarity of choices and their consistency with voters' news environment help voters arrive at a decision.

Party Polarization

Party system polarization reflects the degree of ideological differentiation among political parties in a system; rather than merely counting the number of parties, however, polarization focuses on the competition between them (Dalton, 2008, p. 900). The Polarization Index Dalton developed correlated strongly with Left-Right leaning as predictor of of vote choice ($r = .63$): the

more polarized the country, the stronger the correlation between ideology and vote choice (p. 911, Figure 2). Similarly, others have found that elite polarization in the United States helps the partisan sorting process and influences the extent of mass partisanship (Hetherington, 2001). Moreover, when cued to elite competition on an issue, citizens exhibit stronger preferences and greater attitudinal confidence in their position (Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013).

Party polarization aids voters' decisiveness by signaling clear differences between parties in ideological space. The clearer the choices, the better the differentiation, the stronger the mobilization efforts on the national level (see Gordon & Segura, 1997, in discussing electoral district magnitude), and therefore my expectation is that more polarization in the system leads to greater decisiveness.

H1: The greater the polarization in a country, the earlier decision time

Press-Party Parallelism

Press-party parallelism refers to “the degree and nature of links between media and political parties, or, more broadly, the extent to which the media system reflects major political divisions in society” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 21). For example, an indicator of political parallelism is “the degree to which media content reflects distinct political orientations or allegiances, and the orientation and professional practice of journalists, whether towards providing more neutral reporting, or serving a ‘publicist’ role in political communication” (Hardy, 2008, p. 100). Another dimension of parallelism defined in the literature is the partisanship of the audiences: in systems with greater parallelism, vote choice can be predicted from news outlet choice (Van Kempen, 1999). Other indicators that signal parallelism are organizational connections between media and political parties; involvement of media personnel

as formal political actors; and whether career advancement of media practitioners depends on political affiliations (Hardy, 2008, p. 100).

Parallelism affects journalists' coverage of elections, favoring one side over the other over the course of the campaign (Carkoglu, Baruh, & Yildirim, 2014). The greater the parallelism, the stronger the partisanship attachment (Horwitz & Nir, 2015), and the higher the turnout (Van Kempen, 1999). Perhaps a plausible explanation to that effect is that in countries with greater party-press parallelism, news audiences are likely to consume "friendly," or pro-attitudinal news outlets (Goldman & Mutz, 2011). Exposure to pro-attitudinal messages, in turn, helps crystallize vote preference and intention (Dilliplane, 2011). My expectation, therefore, is that stronger parallelism correlates with more decisiveness.

H2: The greater the party-press parallelism in a country, the earlier decision time

Moderation effects

Contextual conditions not only affect aggregate outcomes, but also attenuate the relationship between individual antecedents and consequences (Gordon & Segura, 1997; Breggren, 2001). For example, information environments affect aggregate levels of political knowledge (Iyengar et al., 2010; Jerit, Barabas & Bolsen, 2006), and also alter the relationship between political resources, such as education, and outcomes as political knowledge (DeVries et al. 2011; Nir, 2012). An information rich environment, for example, was found to privilege the more interested and engaged—those more interested in politics gained more political knowledge from news exposure (Elenbaas, De Vreese, Schuck, & Boomgaarden, 2014).

Applying these insights from past scholarship on contextual information and political knowledge, the expectation is that context affects decision-time in predictable ways. Contexts

that highlight party competition (polarized environments) should cue better the more politically resourceful, and shorten their decision time. Similarly, contexts that highlight consistency or congruence between media messages and party choice should cue the more politically advantaged and shorten decision time. Put formally,

H3: The stronger the polarization, the stronger the effect of resources on decision time

H4: The stronger the parallelism, the stronger the effect of resources on decision time

Methods

Data analyses in this article employ the 2014 European Election Study Voters Survey (Schmitt et al., 2015). Sample size is roughly 1,000 interviews with respondents, selected by a multistage random sampling and conducted during May-June 2014 in each of the 28 EU member states. The exceptions were Malta and Luxembourg where the sample size was 500 and the United Kingdom where the sample was approximately 1300, of which approximately 300 interviews are to be conducted in Northern Ireland. Data collection is done via CAPI. The total sample size is about $N = 28,000$.

The dependent variable, *decisiveness*, was constructed from an item that probed “When did you decide to vote for the political party or candidate you voted for in the recent European Parliament elections?” Nearly 57% of respondents voted in the elections. Of those who voted, 45.6% “always voted like this”, 20.8% “Decided a few months ago”, 14.3% “decided a few weeks ago”, 11.5% “a few days before the elections”, and 8% “decided on the day of the election.” The final variable, *decisiveness*, recoded these values to range from 0= on Election Day, to 1 =always voted like this.

Political *interest* was measured by asking whether “You are very interested in politics”

(1= very interested, to 4= Not at all). Responses were recoded to a 0-1 index, with higher scores reflecting high political interest. *Ideological strength* was constructed from an item that measured the respondents' self-reported ideological leaning: "In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right". What is your position? Please use a scale from 0 to 10, where '0' means "left" and '10' means "right". Which number best describes your position?" The index was folded at the midpoint and recoded to range 0-1, higher scores reflecting stronger ideological leaning. Political *engagement* was an index comprised of five items, asking, "How often did you do any of the following during the four weeks before the recent European elections? How often did you...? Each of the five items asked whether the person watched a program about the elections on television, read about the elections in the newspaper, talk to friends or family about the elections, read about the election on the Internet websites/social media, and attended a public meeting or rally about the elections (1=often, 2=sometimes, 3=never). Responses were combined to an index, ranging from 0 to 1, with higher values noting greater engagement.

Political knowledge index was constructed by summing the correct responses to four factual questions (QPP23_1 to QPP23_4): Switzerland is a member of the EU; Each Member State elects the same number of representatives to the European Parliament; There are 975 members in the House of Commons; David Cameron belongs to the Conservative Party. The combined index scores ranged between 0 and 1.

Habitual *news exposure* was constructed as an index by averaging three items, self-reported regular exposure to news on television, the Internet, and newspapers; responses were 1=every day, 2=several times a week, 3=once a week, 4=once a month, 5=less often, 6=never. Responses were recoded to a 0-1 index, with higher scores reflecting frequent exposure to news. In addition to political awareness, several background *demographics* were taken into account:

the respondent's gender, education, and self-reported social class. As with the attitudinal measures, all were scaled to range between 0 and 1.

Two country-level measures were constructed for the analyses as well. Party *polarization*, a measure that reflects the perceived ideological distances between parties in a country, was computed as a Dalton Index (Dalton, 2008). Each respondent was asked to place the respective parties in a country on a 0-10 Left/Right ideological scale. Party scores were averaged across respondents and within country to obtain the middle point. The final polarization index sums the weighted distances of each party from the middle point. Values ranged from 3 to 19 (Malta to France, respectively).

Media-Party Parallelism scores were computed from an international survey of 838 experts, the European Media Systems Survey (Popescu et al., 2011). The European Media Systems Survey (EMSS) provides an assessment of national media landscapes in 34 European media systems on dimensions that are particularly relevant for political democracy. It does so via averaging the opinion of scores of specialist experts of each national media system in the sample. The survey specifically focused on media attributes for which no other cross-nationally comparable indicators exist and the data are made publicly available. Parallelism was measured as the average of experts' estimates of the politicization or partisan control of major television and newspaper channels in a country, on a 0-10 scale, low to high partisanship. Inter-expert agreement rates were high, 0.93 (for details see Popescu et al., 2011 technical report).

Results

Polarization and Decisiveness

In the first hypothesis, I tested whether party polarization promotes greater decisiveness. Do citizens in countries where the party system is polarized are likely, on average, to form a

decision earlier compared to citizens in non-polarized systems? Does a sharper definition of ideological choices cues citizens to preferences? Values of decisiveness (0-1) were averaged within each country and correlated with country-level values of party polarization (Dalton Index). The measures were indeed correlated (Pearson's $r = -.28$), but negatively rather than positively. As seen in Figure 3 (below), in contrast to the expectation, the greater the party polarization, the *longer*, not shorter, time to vote decision. In other words, H1 was not supported as expected but rather in the opposite direction.

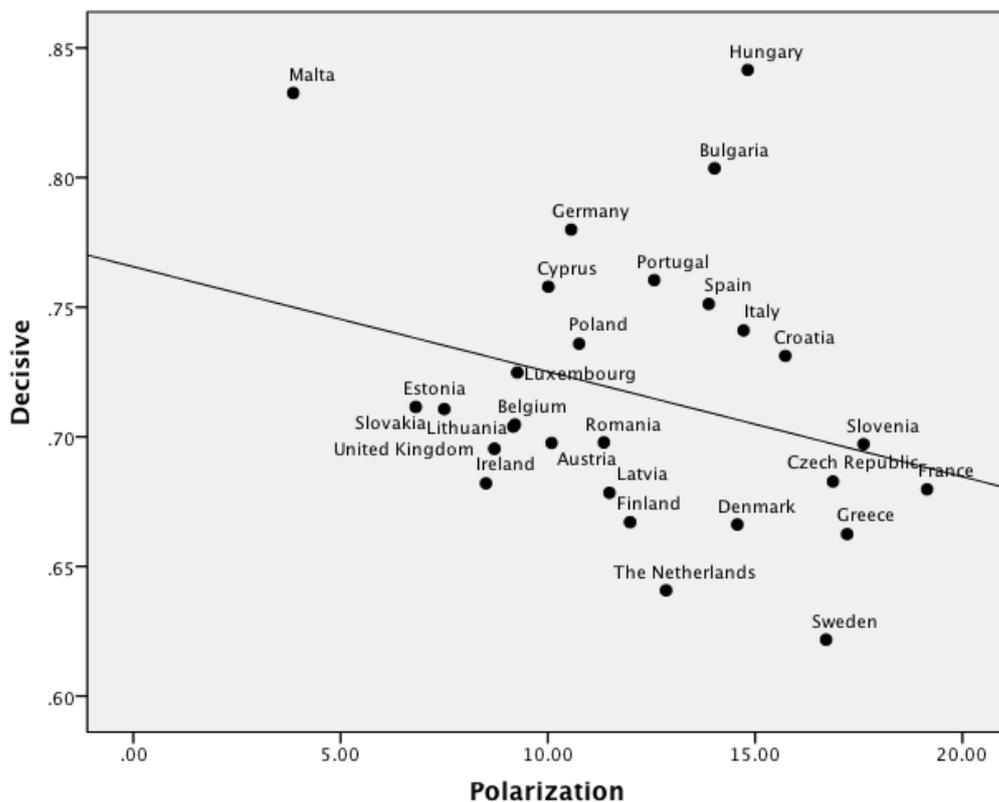


Figure 3. Party Polarization and Decisiveness

Parallelism and Decisiveness

The second hypothesis tested whether media-party parallelism—the congruence between news channels and parties in a given country—promotes greater decisiveness. Do citizens in countries where there is a greater overlap between media and political channels of influence decide earlier? Does a partisan base for news channels cue decisions? Values of decisiveness (0-1) were averaged within each country and correlated with country-level values of parallelism (expert survey, Popescu et al., 2011). Parallelism and decisiveness were strongly and positively correlated (Pearson's $r = +0.57$; $R^2 = 34\%$). As seen in Figure 4 (below), the greater the parallelism, the shorter time to decision, in support of H2.

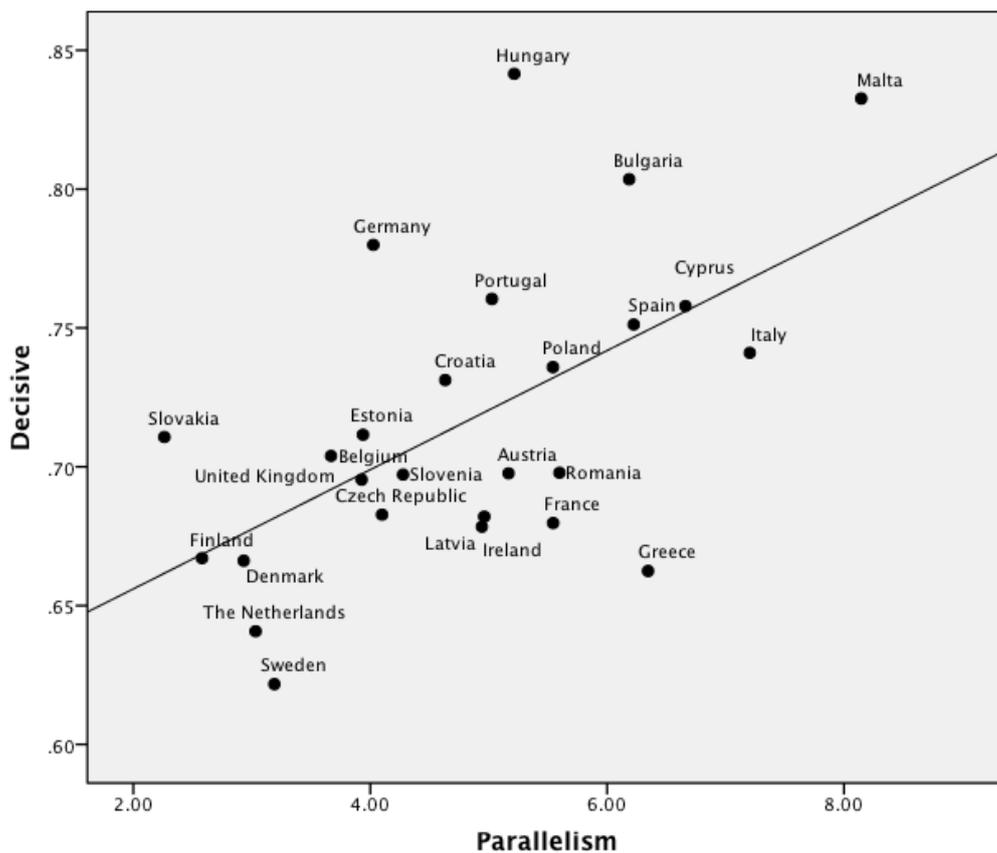


Figure 4. Media Parallelism and Decisiveness

To test the relative strength of each country-level predictor, both were entered in an Ordinary Least Squares regression, predicting aggregate decisiveness. As seen in Table 1 below, the two factors, polarization and parallelism, explained together 40% of the variance in decisiveness. However, it is also evident that parallelism, rather than polarization, is the stronger predictor of decisiveness ($beta = 0.56, p < .001$). The greater the overlap between channels and politics, the shorter decision time, in support of H2.

Table 1. Decisiveness, by contextual information factors

	B	SE	Beta	t
Constant	0.664	0.043	--	15.36
Polarization	-0.004	0.002	-0.27+	-1.68
Parallelism	0.021	0.006	0.56***	3.45
$R^2=40\%$				

+ $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Polarization and Parallelism as Moderators

The third hypothesis tests whether polarization affects the relationship between individual-level predictors, such as resources, and decisiveness. Recall, the argument in some of the literature is that party polarization exacerbates the differences between political “haves” and “have nots”: the clearer the political choices on the map, the easier it is for the most interested and most informed to form a vote preference.

To test H3, I ran separate individual-level regressions predicting decisiveness for each country, and saved the regression coefficients of individual-level predictors in an aggregate country-level file. A series of aggregate regressions attempted to predict the size of the

polarization, the larger (and more negative) the coefficient of education. Put differently, in countries where party polarization is high, the less-educated form a vote preference *earlier* on average than the better educated. Thus, H3 is only partially supported by the analyses.

The final hypothesis (H4) tests whether media-party parallelism moderates the effect of individual resources on decision-time. To test the fourth hypothesis, I ran separate individual-level regressions predicting decisiveness for each country, and saved the regression coefficients of individual-level predictors in an aggregate country-level file. Four different aggregate regressions attempted to predict the size of the coefficient (the dependent variable in these analyses) from country-level properties, in this case media-party parallelism. Results, again, were mixed: there was no evidence of an attenuation of the effect for ideological strength, education, and news exposure, suggesting that parallelism does not alter the predictive power of these factors on vote decision-time.

Hypothesis 4 was partially supported by the following analysis. As seen in Figure 6 below, parallelism did alter the relationship between interest in politics and decisiveness. The higher the parallelism, the larger the coefficient of political interest in predicting (faster) decision time, supporting the final hypothesis.

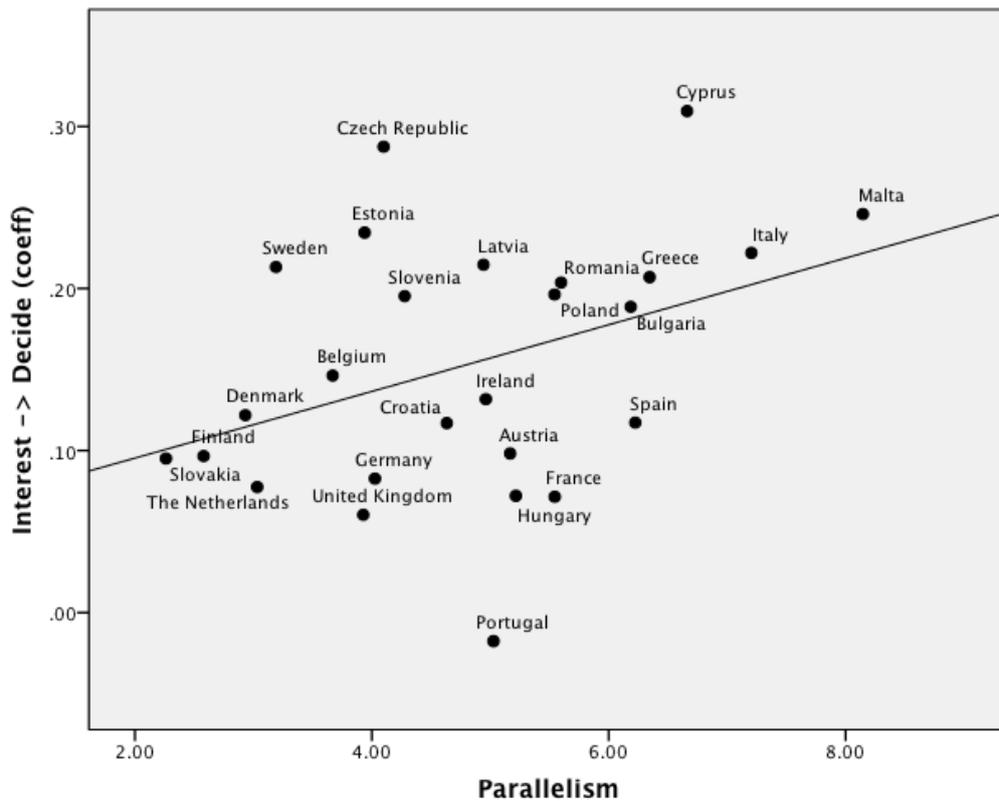


Figure 6. Media-Party Parallelism and the attenuation of resource bias.
The greater the parallelism, the stronger the effect of interest on decisiveness

Parallelism, as I have shown, is the stronger predictor of the two contextual factors.

Greater parallelism in a country correlates with earlier decision (H2 supported). The findings are consistent with past literature on the effects of parallelism as fostering electoral participation (Van Kempen, 1999) and partisanship strength (Horwitz & Nir, 2015). Moreover, the fact the results converge with past studies that used other indicators of parallelism strengthens confidence that they are measuring the same parallelism.

Polarization, on the other hand, indeed correlated with decisiveness (H1), but surprisingly, in the opposite direction. Greater polarization in a country correlated with *later*, not earlier, vote decision. The findings are contrary to the expectations in much of the literature,

which suggests that elite polarization fosters greater mass polarization and attitudinal confidence (e.g., Druckman et al., 2013; Hetherington, 2001). Why, then, are the findings inconsistent? One possibility is that the former studies focused on an exceptional United States, in which the dichotomous choice clarifies the alternatives better. Another possibility is that the issues under scrutiny varied from context to context (oil and gas drilling; immigration DREAM Act; or European parliament elections).

Another contribution of the study was to elaborate and test the rationale for polarization and parallelism as *moderators* of the effect of individual resources on decisiveness. Recall the most supportive findings were that greater polarization enhanced the effect of education on decision time (H3). In addition, higher parallelism enhanced the effect of political interest on decision time (H4). However, whereas parallelism amplified the effect (the interested became even more decisive), polarization attenuated the effect of education such that the more educated became less, not more, decisive. Perhaps this is a reflection of strategic voting on part of educated, informed voters. Indeed, the separate country-level regressions indicate that knowledge and education correlated negatively with decisiveness. Polarization heightens the perception that much is at stake, gives rise to *strategic* considerations, and signals to voters that more information is needed in order to reach the decision. These informed voters tend to be the more educated, in contrast to those whose mind is made up.

While these study conclusions are limited by the ability to generalize from a cross-section bound by particular elections, it offers two contextual explanations for decisiveness, which should be considered in future research. Perhaps future content-analytic approaches would complement and validate the expert assessments of parallelism. On a final note, future studies of information environments and their electoral consequences would benefit from taking into

account the media institutional features that give rise to both clarity and consistency, and help voters make up their mind before elections.

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