

Knowing your sources: Partisan media and voters' perceptions of the economy

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ABSTRACT

This paper explains how media systems influence the extent to which partisanship colors voters' perceptions of the economy (i.e., the strength of the partisan screen). It builds upon research on individual-level biases in economic perceptions, seeking to extend existing work by considering how the availability of partisan media for a given party affect such biases. The implication of this is that the greater the availability of media sources favorable to a party, the stronger the partisan screen for its partisans. This follows from several mechanisms including selective acceptance of messages, selective exposure to partisan sources, and incidental exposure to partisan sources. Each of these suggests that differences in the availability of partisan media across parties leads to corresponding differences in the extent of partisan bias for partisans of these parties. I test this Hypothesis in 14 European countries over four time-periods using data built from expert surveys on media characteristics.

1. Introduction

In the 2014 Swedish National Election Study, 47% of the respondents who identified with the incumbent Moderate Party thought that the economy was improving, while only 15% of identifiers of the opposition Social Democratic Party had the same view. Such partisan differences in beliefs about ostensibly objective facts are easy to find and are often highlighted in both research on the effects of party identification and political commentary decrying its influence on voters. Building on Campbell et al.'s (1960) definition of partisan identification (PID) as a "perceptual screen," many scholars have documented the influence of partisanship on individuals' beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors (Green et al., 2002; Huddy et al., 2015). Indeed, the literature has demonstrated a strong relationship between economic opinion and PID (Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 1999) and has shown that the predominant causal flow is from partisanship to economic perceptions (Bartels, 2002; Bisgaard and Slothuus, 2018).

Despite the apparent consensus that this kind of partisan rationalization (or "partisan screen") is ubiquitous, a more systematic exploration of the evidence reveals that, in fact, it is not even close to universal (Hobolt et al., 2013; Parker-Stephen 2013; Stanig 2013). For example, in Norway in 2013, Labour and Conservative party identifiers had quite similar views of the economy (20% of Labour identifiers and 16% of Conservatives thought the economy had improved), despite the

former controlling the prime ministry and the latter leading the opposition.¹

In this paper, I show, for the first time, that the strength of the partisan screen for typical party identifiers varies considerably across 81 parties in 14 countries from 2008 to 2014. I argue that this variation can be explained by the availability of partisan media outlets in the specific media environments in which these parties compete. Further, I argue that the impact of the partisan media in shaping perceptions among partisans is determined by the different roles parties play in and out of government. While some extant research has shown that the strength of the partisan screen (i.e., the size of the gap in economic perceptions between partisans of different parties) in different countries varies with the economic climate and institutional setting (Bisgaard et al., 2016; Hobolt et al., 2013), only one, quite recent study examines the role that media systems play in conditioning the strength of the partisan screen across different national contexts. This study, by Van Dalen (2020), shows that more partisan media systems (i.e., media-party parallelism) are associated with larger gaps in the economic perceptions of partisans (i.e., a stronger partisan screen).

That study, however, is cast at the national level and so cannot examine the impact of partisan media on the strength of the partisan screen at the party-level. However, moving to a party-level analysis, while building on the earlier country-level work, is essential since there are large differences in the availability of partisan media across

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¹ These results are from CSES Module 4.

parties within the same country. The supporters of some parties, like the Conservative Party in the UK, have easy access to partisan media sources (i.e., well-resourced sources with large circulation or reach that have a clearly identifiable partisan slant), while others, like supporters of UK's Green Party, would be hard pressed to confine their news to reliably partisan sources.

In addition, a focus on the party level allows an empirical exploration of several potential (and theoretically indicated) party-level characteristics that could condition the relationship between the availability of partisan media and the strength of the partisan screen. This includes the role the party plays in government/opposition and the saliency of the economy to the party's policy profile.

Given this agenda, I begin by defining the strength of the partisan screen as the extent of partisan differences in perceptions of the economy and measure it, for each party, as the difference between the economic perceptions of the typical party identifier and the average economic perceptions of all citizens (including non-partisans). This allows me to produce a map of variation in the strength of the partisan screen in economic perceptions across parties in different countries and time periods, which I can then use to test the Hypothesis that differences in the availability of partisan media across parties should produce corresponding differences in the strengths of the partisan screen for partisans of different parties.

In the following sections, I first formulate an individual-level theory of partisan economic perceptions and a discussion of how the availability of the partisan media influence the degree to which partisanship conditions those perceptions (i.e., the strength of the partisan screen). Next, I discuss how the historical role the party plays in government/opposition and the saliency of the economy to the party's policy profile could provide alternative explanations in accounting for partisan differences in economic perceptions and interact with the availability for the partisan media in explaining the strength of the partisan screen. After laying out these theoretical expectations, the next section describes the data, measurement, and the empirical design I use to test them. Finally, I present the results, which both support my main Hypothesis and also reveal some of the expected interactive effects while ruling out others. Along the way, I present a unique map of the variation in the strength of the partisan screen in economic perceptions across 81 parties in 14 European countries over four time periods – a map that I hope will spur future research in this important area.

2. Partisan economic perceptions and availability of the partisan media

My individual-level theory of how people form their beliefs about the economy is built from Zaller's (1992) "Receive, Accept, Sample" (RAS) model of opinion formation and change. This model suggests that people's stated beliefs about the economy are simple aggregations of recently accepted, topic-relevant messages to which they have been exposed. For example, a person's beliefs about recent economic performance reflect the relative balance of all the economic news she has recently heard and not rejected as incompatible with her relevant pre-dispositions.²

Importantly, however, the rejection component of Zaller's theory comes in two different versions. The original mechanism is the one described above in which individuals selectively accept or reject individual messages to which they are exposed. In this version, politically sophisticated strong partisans will have the strongest partisan screens because they are able to recognize and reject incongruent messages. The

² The S in the RAS model stands for sampling. In Zaller's original model, he suggested that survey respondents answer a question such as how the economy is doing by randomly sampling from the sample of recently accepted messages. However, this sampling is not essential to the theory, which works the same way if accepted messages are averaged or aggregated in some other way.

second mechanism, which Zaller describes in a 1996 article follow up to his 1992 book (Zaller, 1996), points out that for many people the task of evaluating each media message they encounter, comparing it to their political pre-dispositions, and accepting or rejecting it, is likely to be too cognitively demanding – since it requires understanding how different policies and events (the topics of media messages) map to their partisan preferences.³ Consequently, many partisans – especially less politically sophisticated ones – will opt for a simpler strategy of identifying a set of "reliable sources" in the media that are a close match to their partisan pre-dispositions and simply accept all the messages these sources produce. Of course, this *selective exposure* strategy will not be viable if there are no reliably partisan sources of news. So, this brings us to the main theoretical point: changes in the availability of partisan media should impact the strength of the partisan screen across media systems and across parties within systems.

In sum, the mechanism that creates a partisan screen in economic perceptions must be one in which partisans of different parties either systematically (1) receiving (or exposed to) different economic messages, (2) accept different messages, or both. The first mechanism can be described as selective exposure, and the second as selective acceptance.

In Appendix 1, I provide a detailed stylized example that illustrates these implications in four different media systems that differ both in the availability of partisan media and the way that non-partisan sources react to the presence of partisan media. The key idea is that there are three groups of individuals whose behavior may change as media systems change: Sophisticated partisans (who may engage in both selective exposure and selective acceptance of individual messages), unsophisticated partisans (who rely on selective exposure to reliable sources), and non-partisans. For sophisticated partisans, partisan bias will manifest even when no congruent partisan media are available, because these individuals are capable of selectively accepting or rejecting individual messages. However, in such systems the, ostensibly larger, groups of unsophisticated partisans will have less bias because they are sampling messages out of the same distribution as the average voter and find it difficult to consistently identify and reject incongruent messages.⁴ This results in the prediction that partisans with no partisan media available will exhibit, on average, a modest level of partisan bias (compared to non-partisans or the average voter). In contrast, as partisan sources become available, the large group of unsophisticated partisans will begin to select their news sources and, along with sophisticated partisans, interpret the messages they receive and accept in ways that strengthen their partisan screens (Darr and Dunaway, 2018; Goldman and Mutz 2011; Knobloch-Westerwick and Kleinman, 2012; Lelkes et al.,

³ One might object that while this may be true for many policy messages, messages about the state of the economy are simple enough for unsophisticated partisan to recognize them as compatible or incompatible with their partisan preferences. However, whether or not economic messages are simpler than policy messages, it is the overall complexity of mapping all media messages that matters for whether individuals choose to adopt a selective exposure strategy to informing themselves. Once they have decided to simply accept all messages from a reliable source, they get the economic messages as part of the package.

⁴ The word "consistently" is important here. Obviously, anyone can reject or accept a given message for whatever reason. However, this will only manifest as *partisan* bias if the pattern of acceptance and rejection reflects the positions and interpretations of events that other partisans and party leaders would make (i.e., an incumbent partisan will only produce partisan bias if they consistently reject poor economic messages and accept good ones).

2017).⁵

Finally, the emergence of partisan media does more than simply segregate different messages into easily accessible sources. It may also change the content of the overall distribution of messages available in the system. This can happen in two ways (illustrated in the last two media systems described in [Figure A1 of Appendix 1](#)). First, partisan media sources may present more extreme messages than were presented in non-partisan sources. Second, non-partisan sources may react to the presence of partisan sources by altering the mix of messages they present. For example, scholars have pointed out that non-partisan media commonly respond to competition from partisan sources by trying to give voice to all sides equally – even if the messages presented by each side are increasingly extreme ([Padgett et al., 2019](#); [Wagner and Gruszczynski, 2018](#)). As I explain in [Appendix 1](#), however, both of these situations lead to increasing levels of partisan bias and provide a path through which selective acceptance contributes independently (from selective exposure) to the strength of the relationship between the availability of partisan media and the strength of the partisan screen of the average partisan.

In addition, I show in [Appendix 1](#) how the theory suggests a testable difference in the expected strength of the partisan screen between sophisticated and unsophisticated partisans in contexts with no or limited availability of partisan media – a difference that should disappear in contexts in which partisan media is more available.

A final theoretical consideration is how differences in the availability of partisan media impact the strength of the partisan screen for partisans who neither engage in selective acceptance of messages (because they are not sufficiently politically interested or sophisticated) nor identify a set of reliable sources on which to rely. As [Lelkes et al. \(2017\)](#) have pointed out, the expansion of partisan information sources in recent years means that even the “politically disinterested are exposed to nontrivial doses of partisan news.” We can think of such partisans as those who are *incidentally exposed* to partisan messages as they continue to sample broadly from all available media messages.⁶ To save space, I relegate a full account of this case to [Appendix 2](#), but the bottom line is that if there is any tendency for this kind of incidental exposure to partisan messages to reach partisans at higher rates than the average citizen (as we might expect, for example, if the availability of partisan sources in particular geographies is correlated with the density of partisans in those geographies), then this kind of incidental exposure leads to the same main Hypothesis as the selective exposure argument.

In sum, applying Zaller’s theory of opinion formation and change to understand how increasing availability of partisan media impacts the

⁵ In [Appendix 1](#), I argue that if non-partisan sources do not change the content of the messages they produce in response to the emergence of partisan media, this dynamic should also result in more sophisticated partisans having less biased beliefs than less sophisticated partisans. This difference goes away, however, if non-partisan media responds to the emergence of partisan media by increasing the volume of more extreme messages they present (even if these more extreme messages are presented in balance – i.e., an equal volume on the left and right or for different parties).

⁶ This incidental exposure mechanism – in which partisans are differentially exposed to congruent partisan news without active selection (because of correlations between partisanship and demographic or other variables that drive news availability in a given place, see [Appendix 2](#)) – jibes well with a number of recent studies that have found that there are significant number of partisans who regularly consume an ideologically mixed diet of news ([Bakshy et al., 2015](#); [Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011](#); [Guess 2020](#)).

strength of the partisan screen suggest three different mechanisms (selective acceptance, selective exposure, or incidental exposure) that lead to the same Hypothesis⁷:

Hypothesis 1. The greater the availability of media sources that are favorable to a particular party, the stronger the partisan screen in economic perceptions for the typical identifier of that party.

Hypothesis 1a. In contexts in which the availability of partisan media for a given party is limited, sophisticated partisans of that party will tend to have stronger partisan screens than unsophisticated partisans.

Hypothesis 1b. As the availability of partisan media for a given party increases in a given context, the strength of the partisan screen for both sophisticated and unsophisticated partisans will increase and converge.

3. Parties’ roles and saliency of the economy

While the central Hypothesis of this paper focuses on how the availability of partisan media sources impacts the strength of the partisan screen, there are several reasons why this relationship should be conditioned on characteristics of the party in question. Specifically, both the historical role that the party plays in/outside of the government and the saliency of the economy to the party could not only capture useful theoretical extensions of the argument above, test plausible alternative explanations for party-level variation in the strength of the partisan screen, but also provide interactive effects with the availability of the partisan media.⁸

3.1. Party’s historical role in government and opposition

The critical factor that links a party’s historical role in and out of government with its partisans’ perceptual biases is the party’s responsibility for policymaking outcomes. Exactly how this works, however, is different for sophisticated voters (who may engage in both selective exposure and selective acceptance/rejection) and unsophisticated voters (who are more likely to engage only in selective exposure), so I will examine these two cases separately.

First, if a sophisticated partisan does not think that her party has a role in producing current (or future) economic outcomes, then she will have no reason to connect economic outcomes to her partisan self-image (i.e., my party is “winning” when the economy is good) and so no reason to selectively accept/reject particular economic messages.⁹ Further, a great deal of work on economic voting has demonstrated that the electoral fortunes of prime ministerial and leading opposition parties (i.e., parties in contention to provide the prime minister) rise and fall with the economy to a much greater extent than cabinet partners or non-leading

⁷ Of course, one could argue that the availability of partisan media outlets are by themselves determined by the demand for such media, which may be an indicator of strong partisan bias among the partisans. It is beyond the scope of this paper to properly examine this endogeneity, but the empirical evidence perform in the analysis section clearly establishes a relationship that the strength of the partisan screen is closely related to the availability of partisan media outlets in the media system.

⁸ To help readers keep track of the argument and its implications for the specification of the empirical models, I diagram the argument formally in [Appendix 3](#).

⁹ For example, no one thinks that partisans color their beliefs about the state of the weather to accord with their partisan pre-dispositions – because partisans do not generally attribute responsibility for the current (or likely future) weather to parties (i.e., they do not think “my party is winning when the weather is good”).

opposition parties (Duch and Stevenson 2008).¹⁰ Consequently, the state of the economy is likely to be more closely tied to the partisan self-image of partisans of prime-ministerial and leading opposition parties than partisans of junior partner's and non-leading opposition parties. Thus, these partisans, via a selective acceptance mechanism, are likely to have bigger biases in their economic perceptions than partisans of parties playing other roles.

Second, I have argued that the perceptual biases of unsophisticated voters arise from selective exposure to reliable sources rather than selective acceptance of individual messages and so the argument in the last paragraph would not apply to these voters.¹¹ Thus, the only way that there could be a difference in the size of the perceptual bias for partisans of PM and leading opposition parties relative to other parties would be if the partisan media for these different parties produce different economic messages. This is exactly what I argue.

If most voters attribute responsibility for economic outcomes to prime ministers rather than partners, the frequency and tone of messages about the economy in different partisan media are likely to directly reflect this difference. Sources that support the prime-ministerial party, understanding that this party will be held accountable by voters for the economy, will have strong incentives to both focus on the economy in their news and include the best possible picture of it. In contrast, media sources that support a partner party, again understanding that the electoral fate of their party is less tied to economic outcomes, face a much decreased incentive to focus on the economy and so are likely to make different editorial choices.

Similarly, media sources that support a leading opposition party understand that this party is in competition to replace the prime ministerial party and that the state of the economy will be an important determinant of the outcome of this competition. Thus, compared to sources supporting other opposition parties (whose electoral support depends less on economic performance), these sources will have relatively stronger incentives to focus coverage on the economy and shade it heavily in their direction. Thus, I hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2a. The strength of the partisan screen (in a given direction) is stronger for Prime Ministers and leading opposition parties than partisans of junior coalition partners and non-leading opposition parties.

Further, given my arguments for [Hypothesis 2a](#), the theory also implies an interactive relationship between a party's role in government/opposition and the availability of the partisan media on the strength of the partisan screen. Specifically, for both junior cabinet partners and non-leading opposition parties, my argument predicts little incentive for voters to connect economic performance to their partisan self-images or for partisan media sources to think that economic performance is closely linked to their parties' electoral fates. Thus, there is no reason to expect [Hypothesis 1](#) to hold for these parties.

Hypothesis 2b. The relationship between the availability of the partisan media and the strength of the partisan screen is stronger for partisans of prime-ministerial and leading opposition parties compared

¹⁰ When partisan attachment is understood as a type of social identity (Huddy et al., 2015), it not only links an individual's self-image to the success of her party, but also to the success or failure of relevant "out groups" (i.e., other parties in direct competition with the current prime ministerial party). In this case, an opposition partisan will feel like she is "winning" when the economy is performing poorly because that means the parties with which her party competes (i.e., those in government) are losing. Likewise, because leading opposition parties most directly compete with prime ministers, this effect should be bigger for partisans of leading opposition parties than others.

¹¹ Note that sophisticated partisans may choose selective exposure as well as selective acceptance and so my arguments about unsophisticated partisans can apply to these as well. Since all my hypotheses about both groups go in the same direction, these are reinforcing and so result in no ambiguity about the expected empirical relationships.

to partisans of junior coalition partners and other opposition parties.

3.2. Saliency of the economy

Another characteristic of parties that may matter to the relationship between the availability of the partisan media and the strength of the partisan screen is the saliency of the economy to the party's policy profile. This variable is expected to condition the strength of the partisan screen (and the relationship between the availability of the partisan media and the strength of the partisan screen) for the same reasons government role should matter. Specifically, this variable distinguishes parties that emphasize economic policymaking in their appeal to voters from those who do not (e.g., classical liberal parties like the FDP vs. green parties). Just as in the argument above, parties who emphasizing the economy should encourage their voters to connect economic outcomes to their partisan self-images and so be more selective in their economic news than partisans of parties who do not make this connection. Similarly, media outlets that are favorable to parties who appeal to voters based on economic policy will have relatively greater incentives to emphasize the economy in its reporting (and to shade those stories in a pro-partisan direction) than media who support parties that place less emphasis on the economy.¹² Thus, less sophisticated partisans (and sophisticated partisans) who are exposed (selectively or incidentally) to these sources are less likely to develop strong partisan screen in economic perceptions. This leads to the Hypothesis that:

Hypothesis 3a. The more salient economic policy is to a party's electoral appeal, the stronger the partisan screen for economic perceptions will be among the supporters of that party.

Finally, the theory above also implies that the saliency of the economy should interact with the availability of the partisan media on the strength of the partisan screen. Specifically, holding constant the parties role in government, I have no reason to expect that changes in the availability of partisan media should matter to the strength of the partisan screen for parties that do not appeal to voters on the basis of the economy. Thus, I expect [Hypothesis 1](#) to be less likely to hold for these parties.

Hypothesis 3b. The relationship between the availability of the partisan media and the strength of the partisan screen will be stronger, the more salient economic policy is to a party's electoral appeal.

4. Measurement, data, and empirical design

To test various hypotheses above, I specify a number of statistical models in which the dependent variable is the strength of the partisan screen in economic perceptions and the main independent variable is a measure of the availability of the partisan media for specific parties. In this section, I describe the measurement of the variables used in the analyses.

4.1. Dependent variable

To measure the strength of the partisan screen in economic perceptions, I use survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2008,

¹² Saliency theories of electoral competition (Dolezal et al., 2014) argue that parties often define themselves by the subset of issues on which they best compete and do not so much offer competing visions across issues, but selective emphasis on a subset of issues. Clearly the economy (or competent economic management) is one such issue that parties might emphasize and so generate (or their affiliate media should generate) greater volume of partisan economic messages for such parties.

2010, 2012, and 2014 to measure each respondent's partisanship and perceptions of the economy.^{13,14} In total, I estimate the strength of the partisan screens in economic perceptions for typical partisans of 81 parties in 14 European countries at four different time periods, where the unit of analysis is party-country-year and the total number of observations is 325.

The strength of the partisan screen for the typical adherent of a party at a given point in time is defined as the difference between the belief of that typical adherent and the belief of the average person in that country. I estimate this quantity, separately for each election survey (country-year), by estimating a linear regression in which the dependent variable is economic perceptions and party identification enters the model, essentially, as a set of dichotomous variables indicating identification with each party. I also control for the respondent's left-right self-placement in these models. To improve the quality of the estimates on these dummy variables for small parties (that may have only a small number of identifiers in the sample), I do not actually estimate these party identification effects with dummy variables (i.e., party fixed effects), but instead as party-level random effects – that is, as a party-level random intercepts. These estimated intercepts are thus empirical Bayes estimates that optimally (in a mean squared error sense) shrink estimates with fewer observations (e.g., small parties) toward the global mean. For each party, they can then be directly interpreted as the average deviation in economic perceptions of partisans of that party from the mean of the whole sample.¹⁵

Since the availability of the partisan media is expected to increase the strength of the partisan screen at any direction (i.e. more positive or negative views about the economy), I operationalize the dependent variable stated in [hypotheses 1, 1a, and 1b](#) as the absolute strength of the partisan screen. This simply refers to the absolute distance between economic perceptions of partisans of a party from the average of the whole sample. This measurement is also used as the dependent variable to test the hypotheses on the saliency of the economy (i.e. [hypotheses 3a and 3b](#)). However, I include a directional component to the strength of the partisan screen, where positive values indicate more favorable economic views and negative values indicate less favorable views than the average, as the dependent variable to test the hypotheses on party roles (i.e. [hypotheses 2a and 2b](#)) given that certain party roles are

¹³ To measure individuals' party identification, I used a question that asks respondents if they feel closer to any political party than they feel to other parties. I also included "leaners" in the partisans' category since they behave similar to partisans compared to independents ([Theodoridis, 2013](#)). Furthermore, individuals who indicate that they are not close to any party are categorized as independent and are included in the analyses.

¹⁴ In order to secure the many advantages of using ESS data (i.e., uniformity of question wording, carefully tested translations, etc.) I have had to compromise somewhat on the measurement of economic perceptions. Specifically, the question used in the ESS to tap economic sentiment is "On the whole, how satisfied are you (on a 1–10 scale) with the present state of the economy in [country]?" Obviously, I would rather have a question asking directly about the state or change in the economy. This measure, however, is a good proxy under the quite reasonable assumption that satisfaction with the economy tracks respondents' perceptions of economic performance. Indeed, there is little reason to think that differences in the answers to this question between typical partisans and the average voter would systematically differ from corresponding differences in economic perceptions measured directly. Further, the theory described above is built on Zaller's general theory of opinion formation and change which applies to satisfaction with the economy as perceptions of the economy. Thus, readers skeptical of the measurement assumptions that allow me to use the former as a proxy for the latter can simply substitute "satisfaction" for "perceptions" in the argument and nothing else material would change. Specifically, the theoretical hypotheses about the drivers of the partisan screen, as well as the empirical results, apply regardless of whether we measure the strength of the screen as partisan differences in economic perceptions or partisan difference in economic satisfaction.

¹⁵ The technical details of how this is done are in [Appendix 4](#).

expected to strengthen the partisan screen of its supporters in a given direction relative to other roles.

4.2. Main independent variables

In constructing the *availability of partisan media* index, I utilize data from the 2010 and 2013 European Media System Survey (EMSS), where a total of 838 experts in 14 countries assessed how favorable each of the newspaper and television outlets are towards the political parties in a given country. These experts were asked to select, for each media outlet (i.e., printing press and television channels), which political parties the outlet's reporting agrees with most often. They were then asked to assess the intensity of the partisan commitments of each media outlet by answering the following question: "How much is the political coverage of each of the following media outlets influenced by a party or parties to which it is close?" The response to the question is expected to provide a measure of the level of partisan affinity among the various media outlets.¹⁶

To produce an indicator of the availability of partisan media for each parties, I adopt the same formula ([Castro-Herrero et al. \(2016\)](#), pp 578)'s used in calculating their "Media-Party Political Agreement" index. They are constructed as follow:

$$\text{Availability of Partisan Media}_p = \sum_l (Y_l * Z_{p,l})$$

where Y_l is the audience share (circulation) of outlet l , and $Z_{p,l}$ is the percentage of experts who think that outlet l favors party p . Clearly, $Z_{p,l}$, which captures the affinity between a party and the media outlets with the most users in a given country, is an important component in determining the intensity of the media bias towards a specific party. However Y_l , which represents the audience share or the level of circulation, is also an equally important component in capturing how pervasive are the partisan media outlets in the media system. Specifically, the level of circulation of a news outlet would suggest how well-resourced and accessible it is to consumers. A highly circulated newspaper or television channel is likely to be more accessible to its audience given its ability to generate higher revenue sources to maintain operations and reach wider segments of the population. Furthermore, a higher circulation outlet is better resourced to conduct original reporting and commentary on a greater share of newsworthy events. As such, parties with high availability of partisan media scores have many highly circulated outlets that are favorable to them, which subsequently enables their supporters to be easily exposed to these outlets.¹⁷

It has to be acknowledged that the measure of partisan media is based on expert evaluations, not on the content of the news ([Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2011](#)), partisan affiliation of the media audiences ([Van Kempen 2007](#)), or the topics the journalists of the media outlets choose to cover ([Hassell et al., 2020](#)).¹⁸ Nevertheless, it can serve as a proxy for the partisan slant of the outlets, given that several studies have shown that it is highly correlated ($r = 0.53$) with the partisanship of the outlets' audiences ([Lelkes 2016](#)) and also scale with (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.86$) the

¹⁶ Ideally, the analysis would include measures of the partisan bias in various outlets that operate in the online domain. Unfortunately, EMSS contains limited information about the political affiliations of the online news outlets. Although some online media outlets are included in the 2013 wave, they are for websites of Television channels, so do not really capture the partisan slant of outlets that purely operate in the online domain. Another challenge is that EMSS does not provide any information about the circulation levels of online media outlets. Given that this essential information is not available, I only include the press and television outlets whose circulation levels are provided.

¹⁷ [Appendix 5](#) shows a visual representation of the availability of partisan media across 14 countries over two time periods.

¹⁸ The reason why I rely on expert evaluations is because it is available for all the 81 parties in 14 European countries included in the sample.

partisan composition of the audience, the partisan nature of the content, and public broadcasting independence (Bruggemann et al., 2014). Although these are encouraging, expert evaluations should only be treated as proxies for the partisan slants of the media outlets and the results interpreted with appropriate caution.

Roles of Party: My measure of each party’s role in the government begins with whether it is in the government or in the opposition at the time of the survey. If a party is in the government, I also code whether it controls the Prime Ministry or is a junior coalition partner. I also make the uncontroversial assumption that all prime ministerial parties are “in competition” for the prime ministry more generally. If a party is in the opposition at the time of the survey, I categorize it as either a leading opposition party or non-leading opposition party (labelled simply “opposition” hereafter). As mentioned in Section 3.1, a party is considered to be the leading opposition if it is generally in contention to control the prime ministry, as indicated by having done so in the recent past.

Saliency of the Economy: To measure how salient the economy is to the electoral appeals of parties in my dataset, I utilize the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP). This source is particularly good for this purpose since it explicitly tries to measure differences in the salience of policies. Specifically, the CMP measures the salience different issues to different parties by coding every “quasi-sentence” in a party’s manifesto into 56 different substantive categories, grouped in 7 policy areas. Since there is no general “economy” category in the CMP, I created one by aggregating scores from a number of relevant categories within the economic policy domain. Thus, I use the percentage of sentences coded into these economic categories to measure the saliency of the economy to different parties across time.¹⁹

4.3. Control variables

To explore the robustness of my main relationship to plausible model specifications, I include (in some models) a number of other party-level variables that might plausibly impact both the strength of the partisan screen in economic perceptions and the availability of the partisan media. Specifically, I examine the robustness of my results to the inclusion a measure of the party’s ideological extremity and measures of its party family. While neither of these variables is clearly indicated by my theoretical argument, both are prominent in the literature on voting and party identification and it is easy to see how each might have an empirical association with the development of partisan media. For example, it is likely that many European socialist parties, with their traditional connections to labor unions and the print media that have long served them, would have a leg up in establishing pro-partisan media sources. More generally, party family designations may capture similarities across parties that could lead to corresponding similarity in the availability of partisan media and the strength of the typical partisan screen – i.e., long-term policy compatibility between parties, shared historical origins of different parties, similarity of the sociological bases of their support, and the history of formal and informal alliances and cooperation between parties. Likewise, one can imagine that ideological extremity could heighten the incentives for selective exposure or acceptance among partisans and incentivize the establishment of pro-partisan media sources – because of a lack of coverage in traditional media.

¹⁹ I construct the “economy” category by aggregating 15 policy categories (coded per 401 to per 415 in the CMP).

To measure the ideological extremity variable, I utilize the Chapel Hill expert surveys to estimate parties’ positions on economic issues. I then calculate the difference between the position of each party on this scale and the average position on the same scale for all parties. Further, I include parties’ absolute positions (not just its distance from the average position) on the left-right economic dimension in the model to account for the differences between parties located across the ideological spectrum. To measure party families I use the classification from the CMP. As I discuss in Appendix 6, none of my conclusions depend on whether these variables (extremity, position, family) are included or not.

Table 1A provides descriptive statistics for the variables I use, while Table 1B reports the means and standard deviations of the availability of partisan media scores subdivided by the roles of the parties. Note from Table 1B that prime ministerial parties (37.2) and leading opposition parties (27.3) have greater average availability scores compared to parties that are coalition partners (13.5) or non-leading members of the opposition (4). However, it is not always the case that all the prime ministerial parties have high availability scores since it has the highest variability (as measured by the standard deviation) compared to other roles.

4.4. Statistical model

Equation (1) below describes the main model that I estimated to explore the relationship between the availability of the partisan media and the absolute strength of the partisan screen in economic perceptions. The specific empirical specification is justified in the causal diagram provided in Appendix 3. Note also that the variable capturing party role party family enters the model as a set of dummies and that the various measures were sometimes measured at slightly different points in time and so had to be matched sensibly.²⁰ Table 2 provides these details for all variables.²¹

Table 1
A: Descriptive Statistics. B: Availability of partisan media scores for different roles.

Variable	Mean	Modal Category	Std. Dev	Min	Max	No. of Categories
Strength of the Partisan Screen	0.023		0.38	-1.35	1.3	
Availability of Partisan Media	14.6		17.8	0	80	
Saliency of the Economy	20.9		7.81	0	53.5	
Ideological Distance	1.98		1.13	0.01	4.3	
Party Role		Opposition				4
Party Family		Socialist				10
Variable: Availability of Partisan Media		N	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Scores for PM		54	37.2	20.0	5.12	80
Scores for Coalition Partner		76	13.5	14.4	0	45
Scores for Leading Opposition		39	27.3	13.8	7	50.3
Scores for Opposition		156	4	6.47	0	28.9

²⁰ Since my main independent variable comes from expert surveys conducted in specific years and my dependent variable is estimated from other surveys conducted in other years, I had to choose a sensible strategy for which measures to use together. In general, I match cases across years when they are measured within 2 years of each other (otherwise I leave the measure as missing). This seems a reasonable compromise given these party level variables are unlikely to change frequently from year to year.

²¹ In Equation (1), J refers to the number of roles that a party could take, and P refers to the number of “families” in which a party could be classified.

Table 2
Years in which Variables are measured^b.

DV		IV						
Strength of the Partisan Screen	Availability of Partisan Media	Party Roles	Saliency of the Economy and Party Family (CMP)				Ideological Distance (Chapel Hill)	
2008	2010	2008	2006 (NL, SE)	2007 (BE, DK, FI, FR, GR, IR, PL)	2008 (AT, ES)	2009 (DE, PT)	2010 (UK)	2010
2010	2010	2010	2008 (AT)	2009 (DE, GR)	2010 (BE, NL, SE, UK)	2011 (DK, FI, IR, PL, PT, ES)	2012 (FR)	2010
2012	2013	2012	2010 (BE, SE, UK)	2011 (DK, FI, IR, PL, PT, ES)	2012 (FR, GR, NL)	2013 (AT, DE)		2014
2014	2013	2014	2012 (FR, NL)	2013 (AT, DE)	2014 (BE ^a , DK ^a , FI ^a , PL ^a , PT ^a , SE)	2015 (GR, ES, UK)	2016 (IR)	2014

^a In these countries, the CMP does not provide the data to calculate the economic saliency of the parties for the year 2014. To get a measurement or more specifically, prediction of economic saliency for these parties, I regress the latest measure that the manifesto provide for that particular party with the measure of economic saliency measured by the Chapel Hill survey in 2014 (variable: LRECON_Salience).

^b With regards to the measures using the CMP, CMP does not provide its measures of economic saliency and party families for all countries in the same year. These measures are taken at different years for different countries. Nonetheless, I try to match them with other variables that are measured within 2 years of each other.

$$\begin{aligned}
 [\text{Absolute Strength of the Partisan Screen } (t)] &= \alpha \\
 &+ \beta_1[\text{Availability of Partisan Media } (t)] + \sum_{j=1}^{J-1} \beta_j[\text{Roles } (t)] \\
 &+ \beta_3[\text{Saliency of the Economy } (t)] + \beta_4[\text{Ideological Distance } (t)] \\
 &+ \beta_5[\text{Ideological Position } (t)] + \sum_{p=1}^{P-1} \beta_p[\text{Party Family } (t)]
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{1}$$

I also estimate this model adding fixed effects for each country-period. This controls for unmeasured factors that might impact the strength of the partisan screen that might impact all parties in a specific country at a given time (e.g., economic conditions).

Finally, I empirically investigate whether the relationship between the availability of partisan media and the strength and direction of the partisan screen varies across different characteristics of parties. To do so, I interact the availability score with dummy variables indicating different party roles, and saliency of the economy scores, to Equation (1).²² This enables me to determine whether the relationship between partisan media and partisan perceptions is heterogeneous across different party characteristics.

5. Results

5.1. A map of the strength of the partisan screen

Fig. 1 visualizes the strength (and direction) of the partisan screen in economic perceptions for 81 parties in 14 European countries at four different time periods. For each panel within the figure, the vertical line

²² As explained in Section 3.1, party roles are expected to influence both the strength and direction of the partisan screen. Thus, in this model, I include the directional component to the strength the partisan screen, where positive values indicate more favorable economic views, while negative values indicate less favorable economic views.

at zero along the x-axis indicates the average economic perceptions in the whole sample. Deviations from this line in a positive direction identify partisans who (on average) have a more favorable view of the economy (i.e., a positive partisan screen), while deviations in a negative direction indicate partisans who (on average) have a less favorable view of the economy (i.e. a negative partisan screen). Partisan groups who are near the line are those with a weak (or no) partisan screen. The dot for each party is the point estimate for the average strength of the partisan screen among its supporters, while the horizontal bars indicate the 95% confidence interval around these estimates. The further the estimates and the horizontal bars are from the vertical line, the stronger the partisan screen is for that party.²³

Overall, there are several important findings from this figure. First, in regard to cross-national differences in the strength of the partisan screen in economic perceptions, there are certain countries that consistently exhibit stronger partisan screens than other countries. For example, parties in Germany, Spain, and the UK seem to exhibit stronger partisan screens than do parties in Belgium, Finland, and Sweden. Second, the sizes and directions of the partisan screen vary rather significantly depending on the role the party plays in government. In particular, parties that hold the Prime Ministry tend to have stronger (and more positive partisan screens) than parties that serve as coalition partners, while parties that act as the leading opposition party tend to have stronger and more negative partisan screens than other opposition parties.

Third, the effects of the party’s role on the strength of the partisan screen can vary rather dramatically across different governing arrangements. While Prime Ministerial parties generally have larger and more positive partisan screens than other parties, the size of this difference decreases rather significantly in contexts in which cabinets include multiple parties. We can see this clearly when we compare the strength of the partisan screen for the Prime Minister’s party in countries such as Belgium and Finland, where multiparty governments are common, compared to countries such as Spain and Greece, where the

²³ While my theory is clearly about economic perceptions, it is difficult to use survey responses to questions about the economy to distinguish between this explanation and a very similar one in which partisans are motivated to answer survey questions that are consistent with their partisanship. Nevertheless, if we assume the latter mechanism to be the case, we might find less of an impact of party on perceptions. This is not definitive because we can imagine that a cheerleader will only cheerlead about topics that they think are relevant to their parties’ electoral fortunes. However, the more one cheerleads a party, the more political sophistication required. So this argument would need to explain how unsophisticated voters know enough to connect their partisan self-image to the economy. In my theory, these less sophisticated voters can rely on the media to do that for them (accepting all messages from reliable sources) while the cheerleading argument provides no such explanation.

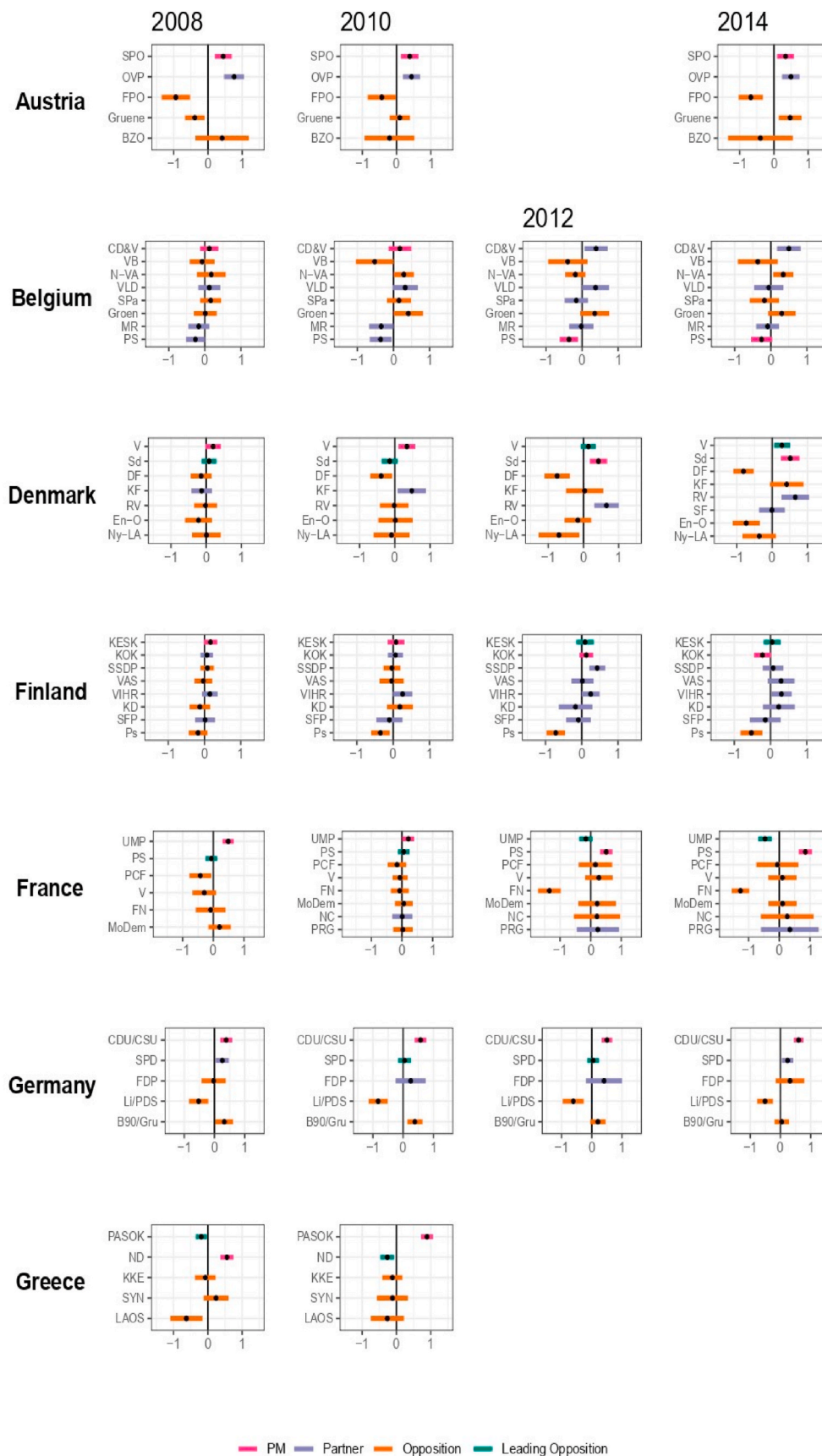


Fig. 1. Map of the strength of the partisan screen.

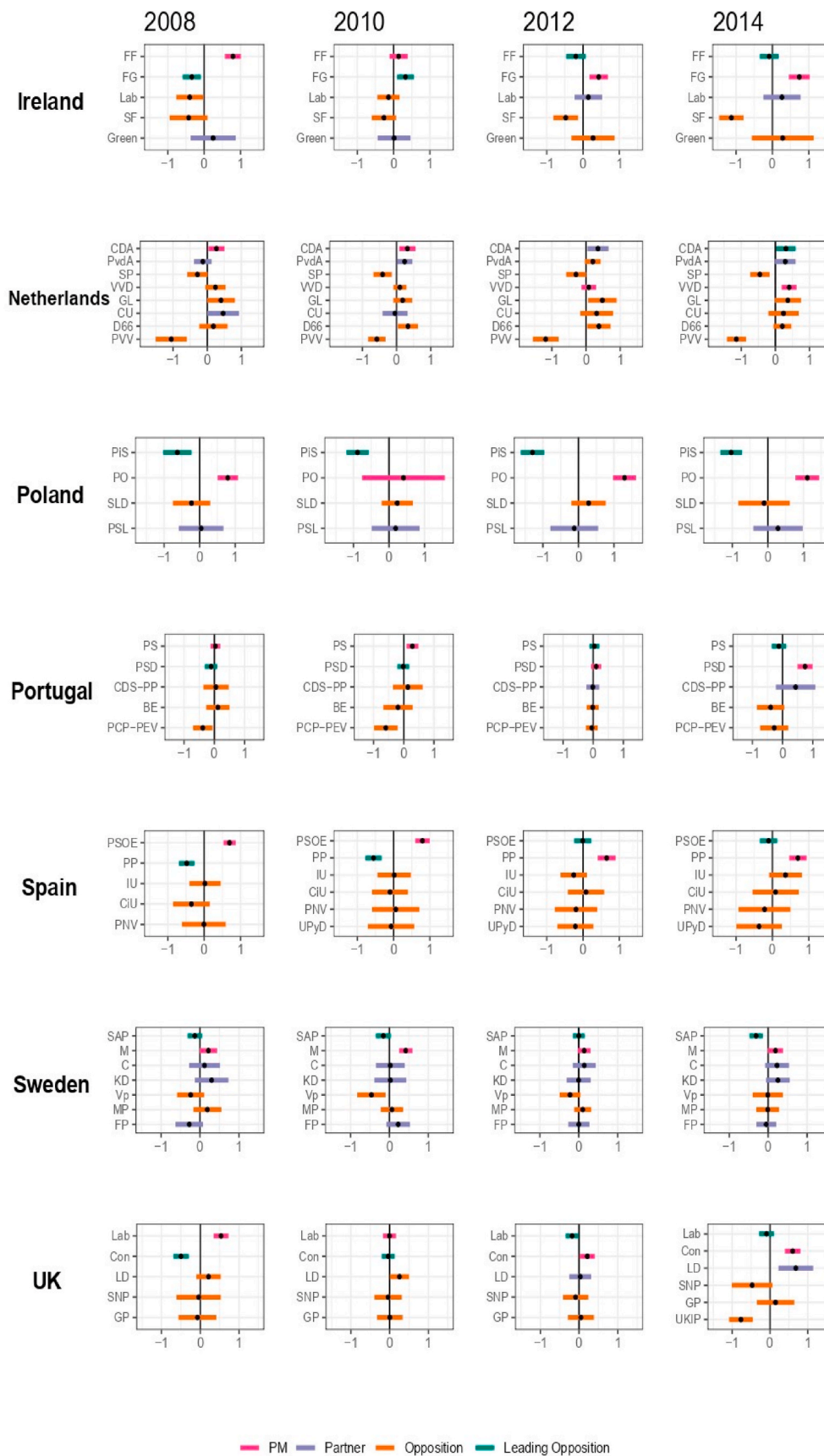


Fig. 1. (continued).

government is usually formed by a single party. Specifically, we see that partisans of the CD&V in Belgium or KESK in Finland have weaker partisan screens than partisans of PSOE in Spain or PASOK in Greece, even though all of these parties controlled the Prime Ministry at the time of the survey. Other examples of this pattern are easy to find in Fig. 1 and suggest interesting connection between the process that may be driving the strength of the partisan screen (which I argue is driven, in part, by differences in the availability of partisan media across counties and parties) and the larger literature on clarity of responsibility, which has shown that voters are less likely to cast economic votes in situation with more power sharing (see Duch and Stevenson 2008). Indeed, this result jibes rather well with the theoretical discussion about pointing out the important role that attributions of responsibility for economic outcomes plays in conditioning the strength and direction of partisan screen. More generally, Fig. 1 makes plain that there is substantial heterogeneity in the size of the effect of parties' roles in influencing the strength and direction of the partisan screen.

Next, the estimates in Fig. 1 also reveal that parties whose policies are more niche/extreme are inclined to have partisans with stronger negative partisan screens relative to the partisans of mainstream parties. For example, partisans of the FPO in Austria, the National Front in France, the Finns Party in Finland, and the PVV in the Netherlands have, on average, a stronger (and more negative) partisan screen than to other partisans in their respective contexts.

Finally, while there is clearly some temporal variation in the strength of the partisan screen for parties over time, most of this variation is accounted for by changes in the parties' roles in government. Once that is controlled for, over time variation is somewhat muted (e.g., all estimates in Austria tend to be bigger than all those in Finland in all years). This suggests that the strength of the partisan screen across parties (again controlling for government role) and (on average) across countries is much more likely to be a function of stable (at least in the medium term) institutional features rather than variables that fluctuate a lot within countries (or within parties) over time.

5.2. Effects of availability of the partisan media on the strength of the partisan screen

Do differences in the availability of partisan media across parties correspond to differences in the strength of the partisan screen for typical partisans of those parties? Table 3 provides the parameter estimates that capture the effect of availability of partisan media (and other party-level variables) on the absolute value of the strength of the partisan screen in economic perceptions.²⁴

Overall, the findings show that the relationship between availability of the partisan media and the absolute strength of the partisan screen in perceiving the economy is consistent with Hypothesis 1. The positive and significant coefficients on the availability of the partisan media variable across both Models 1 and 2 in Table 3 imply that as there is greater availability in partisan media outlet in the media system, the greater the differences between partisans' perceptions of the economy and the perceptions of the average respondent (i.e., a stronger partisan screen in economic perceptions). Specifically, after controlling for various characteristics of the party, a one-standard-deviation increase in the availability of the partisan media for a party (an increase of 17.8) strengthens the partisan screen in economic perceptions by either 0.0728 (Model 1) or 0.0573 (Model 2) points, respectively, depending on whether country-year fixed effects are taken into account.

²⁴ This dependent variable is constructed as an effect of partisanship on economic perceptions, as shown in Fig. 1. As such, the variations in the sampling variance of its observations is likely to induce heteroscedasticity. To account for the uncertainty surrounding these estimates, I use standard errors robust to unspecified forms of heteroscedasticity, which have been shown to produce reliable estimates of parameter uncertainty (Lewis and Linzer, 2005).

Table 3

Analyses of the strength of the partisan screen.

DV = Absolute Strength of the Partisan Screen	Model 1	Model 2
Availability of Partisan Media	0.0762** (0.0237)	0.0644** (0.0212)
Saliency of the Economy	-0.0158 (0.0137)	-0.0134 (0.0149)
Distance on an Economic Scale	-0.000308 (0.0166)	-0.00383 (0.0160)
Position on an Economic Scale	-0.115*** (0.0333)	-0.0792** (0.0285)
Prime Minister		Base Category
Leading Opposition	-0.139** (0.0477)	-0.152** (0.0458)
Opposition	-0.110* (0.0490)	-0.125* (0.0484)
Coalition Partner	-0.130** (0.0441)	-0.122** (0.0433)
Constant	0.246*** (0.0524)	0.411*** (0.109)
Observations	325	325
R-squared	0.304	0.505
Party Family Dummies	Included	Included
Country-Year FE		Yes
Number of Country-Year		54

Note: The top numbers reported for Available of Partisan Media, Saliency of the Economy, Distance on an Economic Scale, and Position on an Economic Scale are standardized coefficient estimates (i.e. increase of one standard deviation in the relevant variables). The variable capturing the roles of party enters the model as a set of dummies, with "Prime Minister" chosen as the base category. Robust standard errors for all the estimates are in parentheses, ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

Substantively, using the estimates in Model 2, a typical identifier of a party with an availability of partisan media score of 42.1 (i.e., the score given by experts to VVD in the Netherlands in 2012) would have a partisan screen that is approximately 0.11 points stronger than a typical identifier of a party with an availability score of 11.5 (i.e., the score given to the Socialist party in Belgium in 2012).²⁵ This is moderately sized effect, as it is about 43% of the standard deviation of the dependent variable.

I conduct several additional analyses to explore the robustness of the findings. First, I run the models without the distance and position on the economic scale, as well as the party family variables. Next, I run a model where only the country fixed effects are included and a model where country and year fixed effects are included separately. The results from these models are reported in Table A1 in Appendix 6, and they are consistent with the substantive conclusions reported above. Second, I also specify a model in which I replace fixed effects with random effects. I nest parties within countries and estimate separate error components for each party as well as for years (distributed normally with a zero mean and a variance to be estimated). Again, as shown from Table A1, using this alternative modeling approach continues to support the substantive results.

With respect to other party characteristics, estimates for the saliency of the economy is not statistically different from zero (and are in the "wrong" direction). There is no evidence that the strength of the partisan screen in economic perception (for a typical supporter of a given party) is determined by the importance of the economy to the party. Thus, Hypothesis 3a is not supported.

In contrast, as expected, I find that the strength and direction of the

²⁵ The difference in the strength of the partisan screen is calculated based on the two availability of partisan media scores (42.1–11.5) divided by 1 standard deviation of this variable (17.8) and multiply by its standardized coefficient in Model 2 of Table 3 (0.0644).

partisan screen in perceiving the economy do respond to the role each party plays in (or out of) government. Given that party roles influence not only the strength but also the direction of the partisan screen, I rerun the model specified in Equation (1) using the values of the partisan screen estimated in Fig. 1 as the dependent variable. In the coding of this variable, 0 refers to the average view of the economy, with a higher number indicating a more positive view. Fig. 2 plots the relationship based on the regression results reported in model 1 in Table A5 of Appendix 9. This figure reveals that the supporters of Prime Ministerial parties have the most positive view of the economy, followed by the supporters of the coalition partners, supporters of the opposition, and finally supporters of the leading opposition. These findings reaffirm hypotheses 2a that the strength of the partisan screen in a given direction can be attributed, in part, to the specific role a party has either within the government (PM or Coalition Partners) or outside of the government (Leading Opposition or Opposition). However, as we have seen (and will see in a different way below), the availability of the partisan media for a given party plays a role in the strength of the partisan screen even after accounting for the parties role in government.²⁶

5.3. Interactions between party characteristics and the availability of partisan media

In this section, I examine the possibility that the relationship between the availability of partisan media and the strength of the partisan screen are heterogeneous across different party characteristics. First, I interact a set of indicator variables capturing four different party roles (PM, Junior Partner, Leading Opposition, and regular Opposition) with the available of partisan media measure for each party and include them in Equation (1).²⁷ The regression results are reported in model 2 in Table A5 of Appendix 9, and the substantive effects of availability of the partisan media on the strength of the partisan screen in economic perceptions by party roles is shown in Fig. 3.

The message from this figure is clear. Availability of the partisan media is a much more important factor in strengthening the partisan screen for supporters of Prime Ministers, followed by supporters of the leading opposition party. Conversely, the effects for supporters of regular opposition parties and junior coalition partners are less discernible. This is in line with the expectation in Hypothesis 2b. When the media structure allows partisans to be exposed to pro-partisan sources, it is those who are the supporters of Prime Ministers and the leading opposition that are more likely to develop substantially different views of the economy than the average view, either by having much more positive views or much more negative views of the economy. In contrast, the economic perceptions of supporters of regular opposition parties and junior cabinet partners do not become more biased as the partisan media becomes more available. This finding reinforces both the “distribution of policy-making responsibility” hypotheses presented above. Specifically, this finding likely results from the very different extent to which economic stories (from pro-partisan, anti-partisan, and neutral sources) tend to attribute responsibility for economic outcomes to these leading parties, and certainly coheres with the large literature that has found economic voting to be essentially limited to such parties (e.g., Duch and Stevenson 2008).

Next, I interact the saliency of the economy score and availability of the partisan media and report the regression results reported in Table A6 of Appendix 9. I found no evidence that the relationship between

availability of partisan media and the strength of the partisan screen is conditioned on this characteristic. Thus Hypothesis 3b is not supported.

5.4. Effects of the partisan media by levels of sophistication

Finally, I examine the relationship between the strength of the partisan screen for economic perceptions and the availability of the partisan media for sophisticated and unsophisticated partisans (hypotheses 1a and 1b discussed above). To do so, I first run two separate models in which the dependent variables are the absolute value of the strength of the partisan screen for sophisticated and unsophisticated partisans respectively. The main independent variable in both models is the availability of the partisan media variable (dichotomized in a way that maximizes the data relevant to the predicted theoretical difference between very low availability of partisan media and all other environments – see Appendix 7 for details). Similar to equation (1), these models also control for the other potential confounders. Table A3 in Appendix 7 shows the regression results and Table 4 shows the predicted strength of the partisan screen (in absolute value) for partisans with low and high sophistication as the partisan media becomes more available.

The results in Table 4 lend some supports to both hypotheses 1a and 1b. I found that when there are no or limited partisan sources available, the strength of the partisan screen in economic perceptions for low sophisticated partisans is lower than for highly sophisticated ones. However, as the partisan media becomes more available, the difference in the strength of the partisan screen between them becomes smaller.²⁸ Further, as the theory predicts, as partisan media sources become available, it is partisans with low sophistication who “catch up” with sophisticated partisans, rather than the other way around.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The conventional wisdom among political scientists is that partisanship plays a crucial role in most people’s political behavior. Indeed, there is widespread consensus that partisanship provides a simple shortcut for choosing which candidates to support, motivates electoral participation, influences policy attitudes, and even biases “objective” perceptions – like perceptions of retrospective economic performance – through a process of “partisan rationalization.” Despite this consensus, however, political scientists have been slow to recognize that the extent that the supporters of different parties seem to engage in partisan rationalization can vary dramatically across parties even though some works have found that the strength of this effect to vary cross-nationally (Hobolt et al., 2013; Van Dalen 2020).

In this paper, I remedy this problem by mapping, for the first time, the extent of partisan rationalization (the strength of the partisan screen) about the economy across a large number of parties in different electoral contexts (81 parties in 14 countries over four time periods). This exercise both confirms the variability in the strength of the partisan screen and suggests its potential sources. Specifically, most of the variation in the partisan screen is at the party level, with additional variation attributable to countries (across parties) and less to secular differences over time (that apply to all parties in all countries). This means that differences in perceptions of the economy across individuals are mostly attributed to the characteristics of the party that they identify with

²⁶ In Appendix 8, I show that the relationship between parties’ roles and the strength of the partisan screen is partially mediated by the availability of partisan media.

²⁷ Note that in this model, the dependent variable is not the absolute strength of the partisan screen but rather the strength of the partisan screen including the directional component (i.e., the measure that runs from –1.35 to 1.3).

²⁸ While the result may be in the expected direction, it is not statistically significant at the conventional levels. Given the somewhat subtle nature of the hypothesis, couple with the need to divide the sample into sophisticated and unsophisticated partisans and calculate the difference in their strengths of the partisan screen only on certain level of availability in the partisan media, it greatly reduces the amount of information that I can use to fully investigate how the changes in the media environment affect different partisans within the same parties. Thus, results about differences across different group of partisans in different media environment should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

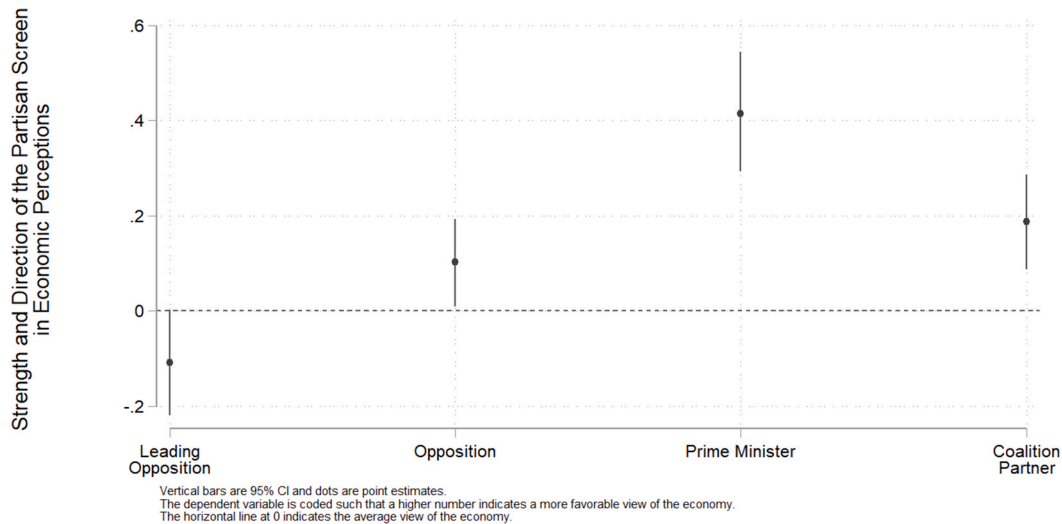
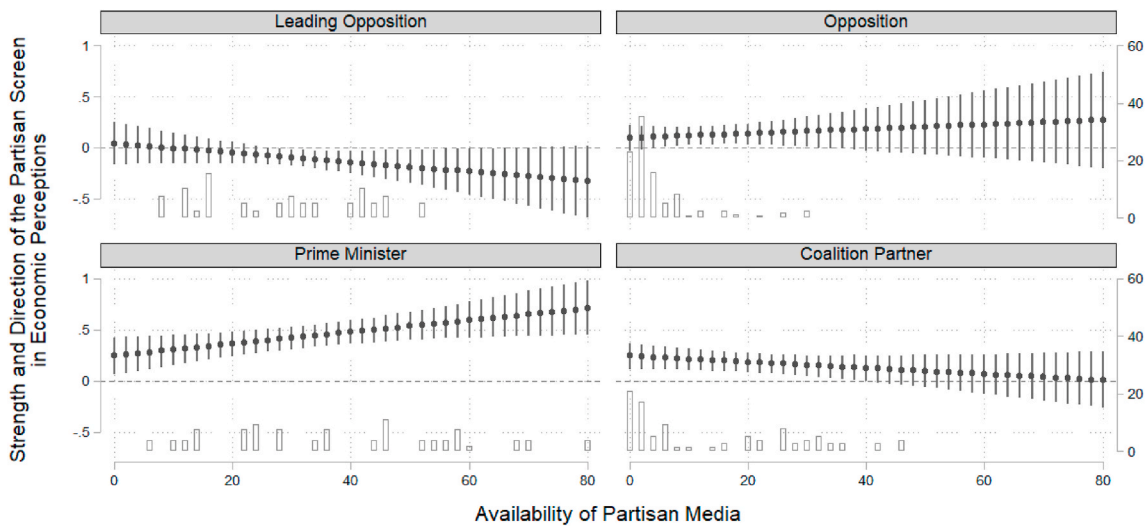


Fig. 2. The strength and direction of the partisan screen by party role.



Right axis is the percentage of observations

Fig. 3. Effects of the availability of partisan media on the strength and directions of the partisan screen by party roles.

rather than the contextual conditions of the countries at a specific point of time or the characteristics of a country that are constant over time.

As such, my search for an explanation of this variation focuses on variables that vary across parties in the same context: mainly the differences in the availability of partisan media across parties. Specifically, it draws on the idea that the way people form their beliefs is determined by the information to which they have been exposed. The more exposure to information from media outlets that are favorable to the party that

they identify with, the more likely it is for these individuals to have stronger partisan screen. Thus, my theoretical contribution, in part, comes from recognizing that the availability of partisan media varies across parties, which make it more or less difficult for different partisans to be exposed to partisan messages. This should then induce differences in the extent to which partisan views differ from other voters.

Likewise, I operationalize and test my this Hypothesis by drawing on the literature in political communications that has tried to measure partisan bias in different media outlets across countries (Van Kempen 2007; Van Dalen 2020). Specifically, I propose a measure of availability of the partisan media based to capture it. The estimated effect of the availability of the partisan media on the strength of the partisan screen in economic perceptions, accounting for plausible cofounders, confirms my hypothesis and is robust to variations in model specifications and measurement. This is the first robust evidence that the partisan structure of the media environment has a direct impact on the strength of the partisan screen for different partisans across countries.

Further, my exploration of heterogeneity in the effects of the partisan media across different parties in different contexts revealed that the effect is much greater for partisans of prime ministerial and leading opposition parties than for partisans of other kinds of parties. This is

Table 4

Predicted values of the strength of the partisan screen by different groups of partisans.

Availability of the Partisan Media	Low Sophistication	High Sophistication	Difference	
			Estimate	P-Value
No/Limited Partisan Sources	0.0689 (0.0515)	0.143 (0.0625)	0.0741 (0.081)	0.179
Presence of Partisan Sources	0.158 (0.0306)	0.168 (0.0434)	0.01 (0.0531)	0.43

Note: Robust Standard Errors are in parentheses.

entirely consistent with the literature that finds economic voting to mainly accrue to such parties – and provides a potential alternative (or at least supporting) explanation for why. Conversely, the relationship between partisan media and the strength of partisan economic perceptions is not dependent on the saliency of the economy to the party.

Finally, this paper suggests directions for future research. While this paper shows that an increase in the availability of partisan media strengthens the partisan screen for partisans in general, it does not conclusively test the relationship between the availability of the partisan media and the strength of the partisan screen for different partisans of the same party. As theorized in [Appendix 1](#), increase in the number of partisan sources and messages could have bigger influence in strengthening the partisan screen for less sophisticated voters than high sophisticated voters. Although the results in [Section 5.4](#) are in the expected direction, they are not statistically significant at the conventional level. Such finding however, suggest a productive way forward with this research agenda.

For example, a better measurement of political sophistication (i.e. using factual questions in addition to political interest to construct the sophistication score) and partisan media environment (i.e. using non-expert based such as content analysis of the outlets) could help better shed light on how the dynamics in the media environment affect different partisans of different sophistication within the same parties. This research agenda could also address another weakness of this paper, my inability to (as yet) validate the expert assessments of the relationship between the media and the party against either “objective” measures of media content or voter perceptions of such content. One promising approach may be to expand the number of surveys that carefully elicit respondents’ media usage for specific outlets, including media outlets that operate on the online platform and match these with (automated) analysis of the content of the coverage.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102314>.

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