

# **The advantage of being against. A comparison between the persuasive power of different Euroskeptic party messages<sup>1</sup>.**

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## **Resumen**

This paper tries to answer to the following questions: how and when are political parties able to affect citizens' support for European Union? Which kind of parties' messages are more persuasive, and why? Using experimental data, and taking the "pro-con" dimension into account, this paper tries to distinguish between the effect of the cue's position on Europe (Euroskeptic or Pro-EU) and the effect of the cue's position on the status quo (for or against a change). The aim is to check if, in this period of crisis where a defence of European Union is difficult, euroskeptic parties have the same persuasive power when they oppose further integration than they have when proposing steps back; in other words, the aim is to check if, although it is surely difficult today to propose more European integration, we can at least consider the already reached results as hardly reversible. Results are partially consistent with hypothesis when we look at which are the characteristics of the message that make it be more persuasive, but do not confirm the persuasive power of political parties in each kind of cue.

Key words: European Union, Experiment, Political Parties, Euroskepticism, Heuristic

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## Introduction

This paper tries to answer to the following questions: how and when are political parties able to affect citizens' support for European Union? Which kind of parties' messages are more persuasive, and why? The influence of political parties' stance on electors' policy positions has been demonstrated on several issues (see, for example, Coan et al. 2008, Brader and Tucker 2009, Kam 2005). Concerning the European Union support, the few studies that take into account parties' positions as determinant of citizens' level of Europeanism have underlined the importance of some mediator factors; in particular, some authors focused on political national context (e.g. electoral law, referendum occurrence, etc.) or on political parties' features (e.g. salience of European issue in the party, level of intra-party dissent on European issues, etc.) to discover under which conditions the message of the parties on EU is more persuasive (Ray 2003, Steenbergen et al. 2007).

However, we know virtually nothing about which are the party positions on EU that are more attractive for European citizens; we know virtually nothing about which are the features of the *political messages* (and not of the political or party context) that act as a moderator of the persuasive power of parties' positions. Pointing out this gap in the literature, Maier et al. (2012) say that "Research on elite cueing takes structural context variables of domestic party systems as proxies for the cues that dominate within any given country. The implicit assumption of such research is that structural features of party system determine public political communication and that the cues reach out to all citizens or all partisan supporters" (Maier et al. 2012, p.4). This means that scholars take for granted that a particular structure of the political and/or party system determines party messages with particular features; what scholars do not do in the context of European Union support is to actually analyze the message itself for determining which of its features affect more its persuasive power.

Following the direction indicated by Maier et al. (2012), this paper use experimental data for testing which are the party messages on Europe that are more persuasive. Maier et al. (2012) find that the power of the cue changes according with whether or not it portrays the European Union as a risk or as an opportunity. However, this kind of categorization does not allow to take into account the full range of possible positions that a party can have on a European Union issue. In particular, it does not allow to distinguish between different kind of Euroskepticism (and Pro-Europe positions). A political party can express a position against Europe in two ways: it can *oppose* further steps on the integration process, or it can *propose* steps back for returning to a pre-integration situation. The same thing can be said for a Pro-EU message: it can *propose* further steps on the integration

process, or it can *oppose* steps back. According with Cobb and Kuklinsky (1997), when a party “proposes” it is actually challenging the status quo, while when a party “opposes” it is actually defending it; given that “citizens will naturally be inclined against change in the face of uncertainty” (Cobb and Kuklinsky 1997, p. 92), positions that defend the status quo will always experience a bigger persuasive power because “when making decisions, they [citizens] place more emphasis on avoiding potential losses than on obtaining potential gain” (*ibid.*, p.91).

Taking this “pro-con” dimension into account, this paper tries to distinguish between the effect of the cue’s position on Europe (Euroskeptic or Pro-EU) and the effect of the cue’s position on the status quo (for or against a change). The aim is to check if, in this period of crisis where a defense of European Union is difficult, euroskeptic parties have the same persuasive power when they oppose further integration than they have when proposing steps back; in other words, the aim is to check if, although it is surely difficult today to propose more European integration, we can at least consider the already reached results as hardly reversible.

Thus, the contributes of the present study are different. First, it expands the virtually inexistent literature that uses experimental data for testing the party cues effect on European Union support; in this way it contributes to the shift of the attention from structural political features that are supposed to determine a particular kind of communication, to the actual characteristics of this communication. Secondly, using the definitions of Cobb and Kuklinsky (1997) of con-pro arguments, this paper takes into account the full range of possible positions that a party can express on European Union issues; this will allow to directly compare the persuasive power of the different cues, and to check if the persuasive power of Euroskeptic messages holds also when they challenge the European Union status quo to which European citizens are accustomed.

This paper is organized as follow: in the first section I will show how in each of the paradigms that try to explain the citizens’ level of Europeanism is always reserved a prominent role for the political parties. In the second section I will explain which is the process that makes the party cue being so influential, and which are the factors that, according with the literature, affect their persuasive power on citizens’ level of Europeanism. In the third section I will expose Cobb and Kuklinsky’s (2012) categorization of con and pro messages and I will formulate my hypothesis according to it. The design of my experiment is described in the forth section, while I will show the results in the fifth. Finally, the last section is reserved for the discussion of the results and the conclusions.

## **Do parties matter?**

Are the positions of political parties influent in structuring the level of Europeanism of public opinion? According with David Easton, support is of great importance in ensuring the persistence of every political system. When the political authorities, and the institutions within which they have established their control, seem to be indifferent to the needs of the various social groups, the whole political system might be brought into question (Easton 1965). Within this context, the case concerning the European Union presents many peculiarities. Because of its history, it is of great importance within this specific political system to emphasize the relationship between the attitudes of public opinion and political elites. In particular, in the first studies about integration, the public opinion of member States was basically relegated to a marginal role (Sinnot 1995); it was assumed that European citizens were basically uninterested on European integration, and that they merely provided a “permissive consensus” (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970) which allowed the political elites to continue pursuing the European ideal free from the pressure of the public opinion. However, over the years, the limits that negative attitudes of public opinion could impose to the integration process have been increasingly visible. If, in fact, the stimulus for the conclusion of certain treaties came from political elites, it is equally clear that public opinion is increasingly influencing the national policymakers and the European Institutions (Eichenberg e Dalton 1993) e.g. through referenda, European elections, or national elections. What the electors are providing now to the political elites is a “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe and Marks 2005, 2008)

However, the new role of the public in shaping the integration process does not entail that the political elite cannot anymore influence the way in which European citizens conceive the European Union. It does not mean that the level of Europeanism of European citizens is independent from the attitudes of political elites. The literature that studies the determinants of citizens’ attitudes toward the EU can be classified in three categories; each of them assigns an important role to political parties.

This is evident, first of all, in those works that focus on political variables for explaining the attitudes of public opinion toward the integration process. The assumption of this approach is that the domestic political context strongly affects the level of Europeanism of European Union’s citizens. Factors as the satisfaction for, or the trust in, the national political system, for example, have proven to be good predictors of public’s attitudes toward the integration (Sánchez-Cuenca 2000). Or, more important here, same scholars have also demonstrated how citizens’ opinion about the EU is also affected by their party affiliation; the electors structure their level of Europeanism

according with the party they vote for or they feel closest to (Anderson 1998, Hooghe and Marks 2005).

Also the other two main approaches present in the literature require, to some extent, a role played by the political elite. The economic approach focuses on the relationship between costs and benefits that European citizens can get from the integration process; it is supposed, in other words, that the attachment of European citizens to EU institutions is basically utilitarian. Given the evident economic connotation of the integration project, this kind of approach examines economic variables of different nature (e.g. position in the labor market, subjective perception of economic situation, national unemployment rate, etc.) to understand whether or not the citizens think it is worth being part of the European Union (Eichenberg and Dalton 1993, Gabel 1998, Gabel and Whitten 1997). This kind of analysis, however, assumes that European citizens are constantly well informed about economic issues, a circumstance far from being confirmed (Anderson 1998). So, how can citizens be simultaneously uninformed about economic processes of EU and structure their level of support on the basis of economic remarks? In his study Gabel (1998) affirms that the evaluations of the public opinion are formulated thanks to *cheap information* that public opinion can find in the political and social context: that is to say, the better informed groups (politicians, journalists, trade unions members) provide citizens with more understandable information about European Union. So, according with this approach, citizens vary in their level of Europeanism according with their own analysis of the economic benefits of the integration; but the information they use for this analysis are provided, among others, by political parties. Once again political elites appear to play an influential role.

Finally, the expansion of the European project in the wake of the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992 led the experts to focus on cultural variables. In particular, it was argued that being part of the European Union means, on one hand, to delegate to the supranational institutions many of duties traditionally reserved to member States and, on the other hand, to go toward a certain dilution of national specificities due to the homologating effect of the European policies (Carey 2002). These studies therefore focused on variables such as the attachment to the own national identity or the fear of other cultures for predicting public's attitudes toward the EU (McLaren 2002, Carey 2002, Duchesne e Frogner 1995). Also in this context the role of political elite cannot be underestimated: it has been documented how right-wing extremist political parties can successfully mobilize these national identity considerations against the EU (De Vries and Edwards 2009)

It appears clear, therefore, that political elites can affect public's evaluation of the integration process and that "though the days of elite-level bargaining insulated from public opinion by a

*permissive consensus* seem to be over, the fate of the European Union still lies in the hands of the political leadership of Europe” (Ray 2003).

## **Cues and European Union**

At this point it is clear that political parties matter in shaping citizens’ attitudes toward the European integration process. Why? Which is the process that makes political parties be so influential on citizens’ opinions about the European Union?

There is an abundance of evidence that the average citizen knows little about politics, and public opinion researchers agree on the fact that ordinary people tend to pay only occasional and then usually superficial attention to politics (Sniderman et al. 1991); so they lack factual information about politics (Hobolt 2007). Because of this, when citizens have to express an opinion on political issues, they usually rely on what the literature calls “heuristic”, that is “judgmental shortcut, efficient ways to organize and simplify political choices, efficient in the double sense of requiring relatively little information to execute, yet yielding dependable answers even to complex problems of choice” (Sniderman et al. 1991, p. 19). This means that, because of lack of information among electors, “cues offered by informed actors can influence the opinion of less informed individuals on complex issues” (Hellström, 2008, p.1130). Among the different kinds of heuristics that people can use, the position of the party they vote for or they feel closest to is obviously a popular choice, given they have in common ideological predispositions (Zaller 1992). Moreover, this influence of parties’ stances is not limited to a particular issue, but has been demonstrated in different kinds of economic, foreign, administrative and immigration policies (see Coan et al. 2008, Brader and Tucker 2009, Kam 2005). In sum, the position of a party on a particular issue offers a judgment shortcut that allows the electors to infer their own position without having detailed information on the issue at stake (Hobolt 2007).

In the European context, the need for using party heuristics can be even higher because people can perceive the EU as a more distant political system, compared with the national one, given its complex functioning and the less direct influence that citizens have on it. As already said, people are not well informed about national politics; but their level of knowledge of EU politics is even lower (see Hobolt 2007, Hooghe and Marks 2005, Anderson 1998). Moreover, “Political contestation in Europe is essentially framed by political parties (...)” (Hobolt 2007, p.160). And in fact the influence of parties’ positions on public’s attitudes toward European Union has been

demonstrated in several studies (Ray 2003, Steenbergen et al. 2007, Wessels 1995, Gabel and Scheve 2007).

What strengthens this influence? In the literature on EU support, the attention of the scholars has been sometimes attracted by the contingent nature of this cueing process. In particular, some authors focused on national contextual factors (e.g. electoral law, referendum occurrence, etc.) or on political parties' features (e.g. salience of European issue in the party, level of intra-party dissent on European issues, etc.) to discover under which conditions the leading role played by political elite is more powerful (Ray 2003, Steenbergen et al. 2007). What it seems to lack is the analysis of the actual message's characteristics: are some party positions on the European Union more persuasive than others?

As noted by Maier et al. (2012), "Research on elite cueing takes structural context variables of domestic party systems as proxies for the cues that dominate within any given country. The implicit assumption of such research is that structural features of party system determine public political communication and that the cues reach out to all citizens or all partisan supporters" (Maier et al. 2012, p.4). This means that scholars take for granted that a particular structure of the political and/or party system determines a particular kind of message from the political parties, without checking the message itself. For example, concerning specifically the literature about support for European Union, Steenbergen et al. (2007) demonstrate that in countries with a proportional electoral law, the influence of parties is higher: parties tend to split more often than in countries with a plurality system; because of this, parties will be less large and therefore they will present a vision of Europe more uniform than will convince the electors more easily. On the other hand, Ray (2003) demonstrates that the level of consensus among parties on the European issue will diminish their influence on electors: when the variation in positions taken by political parties is low, this suppresses the politicization of the issue and therefore the persuasiveness of parties' messages. Therefore the electoral law and the level of consensus are used as independent variables, taking for granted that the former is an indicator of the messages' uniformity that parties communicate on Europe, and the latter is an indicator of the political significance that they can have for citizens. In sum, with the only exception of Maier et al. (2012), the literature about support for the EU prefers to concentrate on "structural" features rather than on cues' features, in the belief that the latter are a consequence of the former, but without testing this relation.

Therefore, the first contribution of this study is to enlarge the really narrow body of literature that actually analyzes the direct relation between the parties' cues (and their characteristics) and the electors' opinions about European Union. In this way it contributes to the shift of the attention from

structural political features that are supposed to determine a particular kind of communication, to the actual characteristics of this communication.

## **The dimensions of the cues**

Which are the message's characteristics that improve its persuasive power? When is the party cue more likely to be followed by the electors?

There are different studies in the literature than stress the more powerful persuasive effect of negative messages in politics compared with the positive ones (de Vreese et al. 2010, Maier et al 2012, Schuck and De Vreese 2009). These studies mainly use a distinction between positive and negative messages based on the concepts of risk and opportunity; a positive message is the one that portrays the object of the discussion (in this case, the EU) as an opportunity for the citizens, while the negative message describes it as a risk. For Maier et al. (2012), for example, "a positive cue presents the EU as an opportunity for the future and describes it with positive characteristics whereas a negative cue does the opposite" (Maier et al. 2012, p.6). The idea that these studies prompt is that, given that a position that depicts the European Union as a risk is more persuasive than one depicting it as an opportunity, Euroskeptic parties should experience an advantage in shaping citizens' opinions.

This categorization, however, does not exploit all the potentialities that the study of European Union can offer: limiting the classification to just two possible positions, it does not allow to take into account the full range of possible parties' stances on European Union. In particular, it does not allow to distinguish between different kind of Euroskepticism (and Pro-Europe positions). A political party can express a position against Europe in two ways: it can *oppose* further steps on the integration process, or it can *propose* steps back for returning to a pre-integration situation. The same thing can be said for a Pro-EU message: it can *propose* further steps on the integration process, or it can *oppose* steps back. As we are going to see, this means that Euroskeptic messages cannot always experience a persuasive advantage.

In this paper I will rely on a categorization of messages on European Union based on Cobb and Kuklinsky (1997); the two authors affirm that when people are presented with the proposal of a new policy, their opinion will be biased toward the status quo, so toward the rejection of the proposal. "Con" messages, those offered in opposition to a policy initiative, will hold more weight than those in favor ("Pro" messages). This disproportion is due to the fact that, when making a decision,

people place more emphasis on avoiding potential losses than on obtaining potential gain, *ceteris paribus*: if no new policies are implemented, the status quo does not change and the possibility to experience losses is reduced. As the authors say, “citizens will naturally be inclined against change in the face of uncertainty. Thus, those proposing a new direction in public policy will encounter a more formidable task than those advocating the status quo, all else equal” (*ibid.*, p.92).

If we apply this categorization to parties’ messages on EU, we are able to go beyond the simple division between Euroskeptic and Pro-EU messages; within each of these two categories we can also distinguish between con and pro messages. We can classify parties’ messages according with two different dimensions: the first one is the Euroskeptic/Pro-EU dimension that separates messages that are against the EU from messages that are in favor of the EU. The second one is the con-for dimension that separates messages that defend the status quo from messages that challenge it proposing a change.

The consequence of applying the conceptualization of Cobb and Kuklinsky (1997) to parties’ messages on EU is to recognize that not just Euroskeptic parties can experience a persuasive advantage, but also Pro-EU ones. If we think about the European integration, in fact, it is sure that a con message can be expressed against a proposal of further integration (and in favor of the status quo); but it is also true that a con message can be expressed against a proposal of steps back on the integration (and then, again, in favor of the status quo). In this last case, in fact, would be the pro-Europe parties (and their messages) to defend the status quo, and the Euroskeptic parties to push for a change. So, from this point of view, would be better for parties to oppose steps back on the integration process than to advocate them. This would “balance” again the persuasive power of pro-Europe and Euroskeptical parties.

There is, however, a last point to take into account: the tendency of people toward the status quo is determined by the uncertainty surrounding the policy’s future impact on citizens’ lives (Cobb & Kuklinski 1997): given that there are not univocal voices about the consequences of a new policy, electors tend to prefer the status quo because, in this way, they are sure, at least, that they will not experience losses. This uncertainty on the consequences of a change in status quo, however, could be smaller in the case of a pro Euroskeptic message. In fact, if it is sure that a policy proposing a step back on the integration would alter the status quo, it is also evident that it would propose to come back to a situation (the pre integration one) that, at least in part, has already been experienced by the electors. This means that the advantage in persuasion power of a con Pro-EU message (that is, a message that defend the status quo against steps back) should be relatively narrow given that electors will be less afraid of a change in the status quo.

Therefore, the second contribution of this paper is the introduction of a categorization of parties' messages that relies on two different dimensions, the Euroskeptic/Pro-EU and the Con-Pro. Adopting the definition of Cobb and Kuklinsky (1997) this paper takes into consideration the full range of possible position that a party can express on European Union issue, allowing a deeper comparison between the persuasive power of Euroskeptic and Pro-EU parties. The differentiation between con and pro messages is not just theoretical, but it is intended to distinguish between the effect of the cue's position on Europe (Euroskeptic or Pro-EU) and the effect of the cue's position on the status quo (for or against a change) that are likely to be merged when using a single dimension approach.

More in general this article provides an answer to the following questions: which is the advantage of the Euroskepticism? It is more persuasive just when it opposes more integration, or it maintains its advantage when it proposes steps back on the integration process challenging the status quo to which European citizens are accustomed? For putting it in another way: if it is surely difficult today to propose more European integration, to what extent can we at least consider the already reached results as hardly reversible? This paper tests the persuasive power of different kinds of opposition to European Union that, since the beginning of the economic crisis, are increasingly becoming defining features of the political debate.

## **Hypothesis**

According with the theoretical framework exposed above, several hypothesis can be formulated. First of all, we have seen how electors, given their lack of political knowledge, use the positions of the party they vote as a cognitive shortcut for inferring their own position without needing detailed information on the topic. So, the first hypothesis is the following:

H1: parties' position on integration policies has an impact on their electors' position on the same policy

Secondly, we have seen how, given citizens' fear of changes in the status quo, a con position experiences more persuasive power than a pro one. This means that a position that opposes changes in the status quo of the integration process should be more persuasive than one than propose a

change, regardless if the position is an Euroskeptic or a Pro-EU one. So, the second and the third hypothesis are the following:

H2: A position that opposes further integration (Euroskeptic-Con) is more persuasive than a position that proposes further integration (ProEU-Pro)

H3: A position that opposes steps back on the integration (ProEU-Con) is more persuasive than a position that proposes steps back on the integration (Euroskeptic-Pro)

Finally, according with Cobb and Kuklinsky (1997), the persuasive advantage of con positions is based on the uncertainty on the consequences of a new policy. People prefer to preserve the status quo because, given that they do not know for sure the consequences of a change, at least they are sure that they will not experience losses. The uncertainty, however, could be smaller when a party proposes to come back to a pre-integration situation, because this situation has already been experienced by the electors. Therefore, the forth hypothesis is the following:

H4: the persuasive advantage of Con messages is smaller when they defend the status quo against steps back than when they defend status quo against further integration.

As already revealed, these hypotheses will be tested using an experimental design.

## **Experimental design**

As I said above, the experimental design allows me to actually check the impact of cues' features on their persuasive power; moreover, as it will be evident below, using an experiment perfectly suit the need of comparison among the persuasive power of the different cues.

The experiment is included in an on-line survey designed by the research Group "Democracy, Elections and Citizenship" of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). The sample is composed of about 1.000 Spanish respondents.

Respondents were randomly exposed to one of 8 different cues: 4 cues were from a political party, while the other 4 were from a no-party (neutral) source:

- 1- Party cue for a closer integration (A)
- 2- Neutral cue for a closer integration (B)
- 3- Party cue against a closer integration (C)
- 4- Neutral cue against a closer integration (D)
- 5- Party cue for a step back (E)
- 6- Neutral cue for a step back (F)
- 7- Party cue against a step back (G)
- 8- Neutral cue against a step back (H)

So, according with the theoretical framework exposed above, the cues are differentiated on the base of three dimensions. The first one is the source of the cue: it can come from a party or from a neutral (no-party) source; this differentiation will allow us to understand if the position of the party actually have a persuasive power on their electors. The second dimension of the cues is its position toward the European integration: we will use this dimension for comparing the persuasive power of Euroskeptic and Pro-EU party cues. The last dimension refers to the cue's position toward the status quo, namely if they propose a change or oppose it: this difference will be useful for understanding if con-positions are more persuasive than for-position, given the citizens' inclination against change in face of uncertainty. Table 1 shows the position of each cue on the three dimensions.

Any respondent was exposed to a position on a specific policy of EU. In the "party cues" groups (A, E, G and C), the positions was attributed to the respondent's preferred party (previously ascertained in the survey). In the "neutral cue" groups (B, F, H, and D), the position was attributed to "some people". After the stimulus, respondents were asked about their level of agreement (a scale from 1 to 10) with the position of the cue.

The policy proposal was the same in groups A, B, C, and D. My idea was to expose the respondents to a "fake" proposal for more European integration. In groups A and B the cue was in favor of the proposal, while in groups C and D it was against. The proposal was the same in all 4 groups, regardless the respondent's preferred party; there was no reason for changing it, since I am not interested in the differences in persuasive power among different parties, but just between the preferred party's cue and the neutral one; of course, the policy proposal needed to be generic enough so that a con or a pro position could be attributed to all parties.

The same logic was applied in groups E, F, G, H, with the only difference that the policy proposal was about a step back on the European integration process. In groups E and F the cue was in favour of this step back, while in groups G and H it was against.

As you can see in the Appendix A, the policy proposal in all groups always refers to the role of the European Union in food's control in Spain. Moreover, in all groups are presented the same "good" and "bad" consequences of the proposal. The reasons for using this kind of stimuli are several. First of all, this improves the comparability of the different groups. If the object of the policy proposal changed according with the group, a possible difference in the power of the cues could be due to the different importance attached to the different issues.

Secondly, if in each cue are highlighted the same features of the proposal, this allows to control for a framing effect. To frame an issue means to portray it in a particular way, "emphasizing a subset of potentially relevant considerations" (Druckman and Nelson 2003, p.730). For this reason, in each stimulus, I describe the same good and bad consequences of the policy; otherwise, a possible difference in the power of the cues could be due to the aspect that I choose to stress, and not to the nature of the cue.

Thirdly, I chose to use "fake" proposals because it was important to choose an issue not on the political agenda. This, in fact, reduces the likelihood that the respondents are pre-treated (Slothuus 2012): in an experiment on party influence can happen that scholars do not find a cues effect when, in the real world, this effect is very powerful. "Because parties have policy reputations, experimental participants may already know where the parties stand before they are told in the experiment—they are 'pre-treated'" (*ibid.* p.1). In such situation, we would find the same results in the control and in the treatment groups, not because the cue does not have effect, but because it did before of the experiment, and all the electors will take the position of the party.

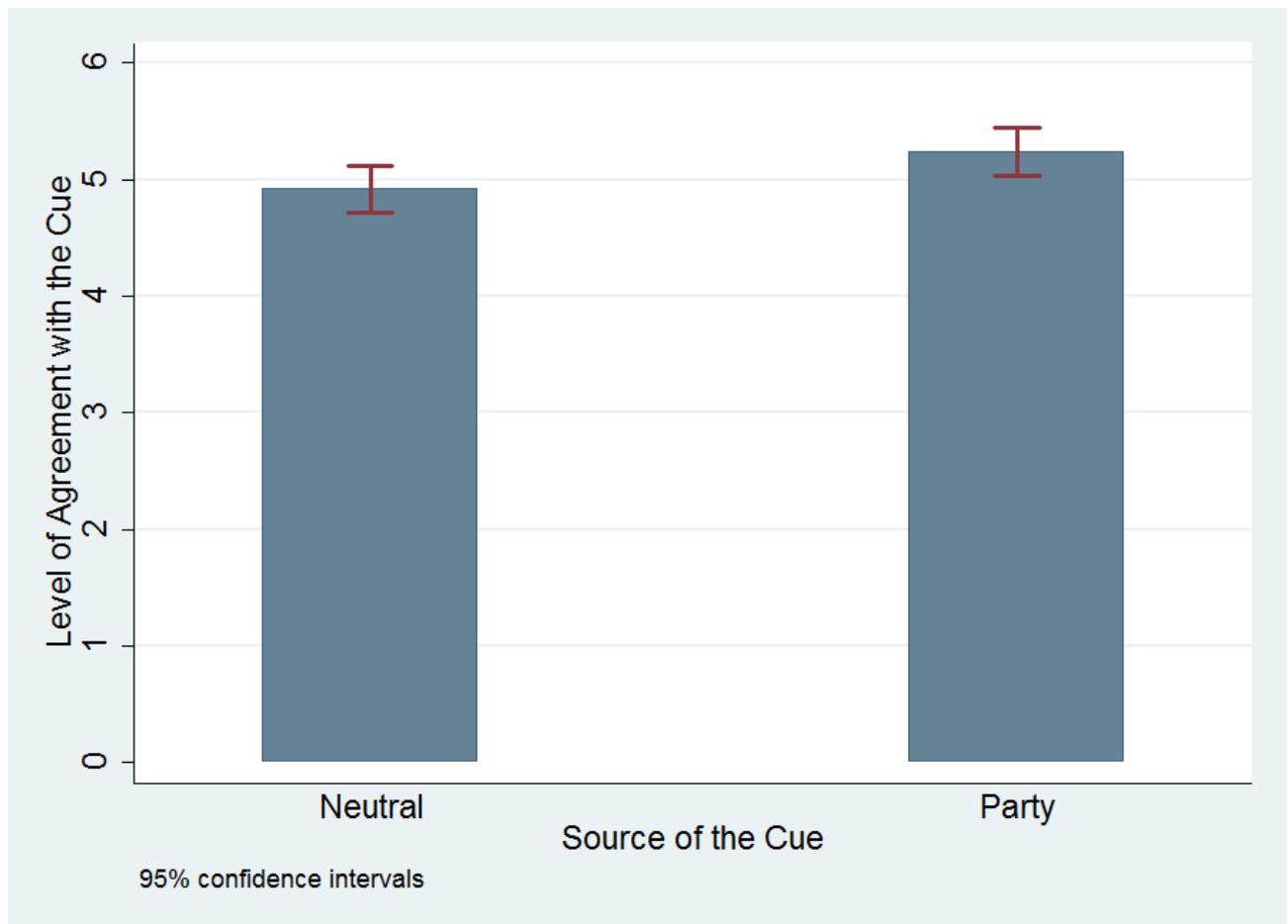
	<b>PRO-EUROPE</b>	<b>EUROSKEPTICAL</b>
<b>PARTY PRO</b>	The party proposes further integration in food's control (A)	The party proposes a step back on the integration in food's control (E)
<b>PARTY CON</b>	The party opposes a step back on the integration in food's control (G)	The party opposes further integration in food's control (C)
<b>NEUTRAL PRO</b>	Some people propose further integration in food's control (B)	Some people propose a step back on the integration in food's control (F)
<b>NEUTRAL CON</b>	Some people oppose a step back on the integration in food's control (H)	Some people oppose further integration in food's control (D)

Table 1 - The 8 cues of the experiment according with the three dimensions

## Results

The results of the experiment are only partially consistent with the hypothesis stated above. As we will see, the different persuasive power of the different messages is basically confirmed when we look at the general results, but the expectation on the persuasive power of different party cues are not met.

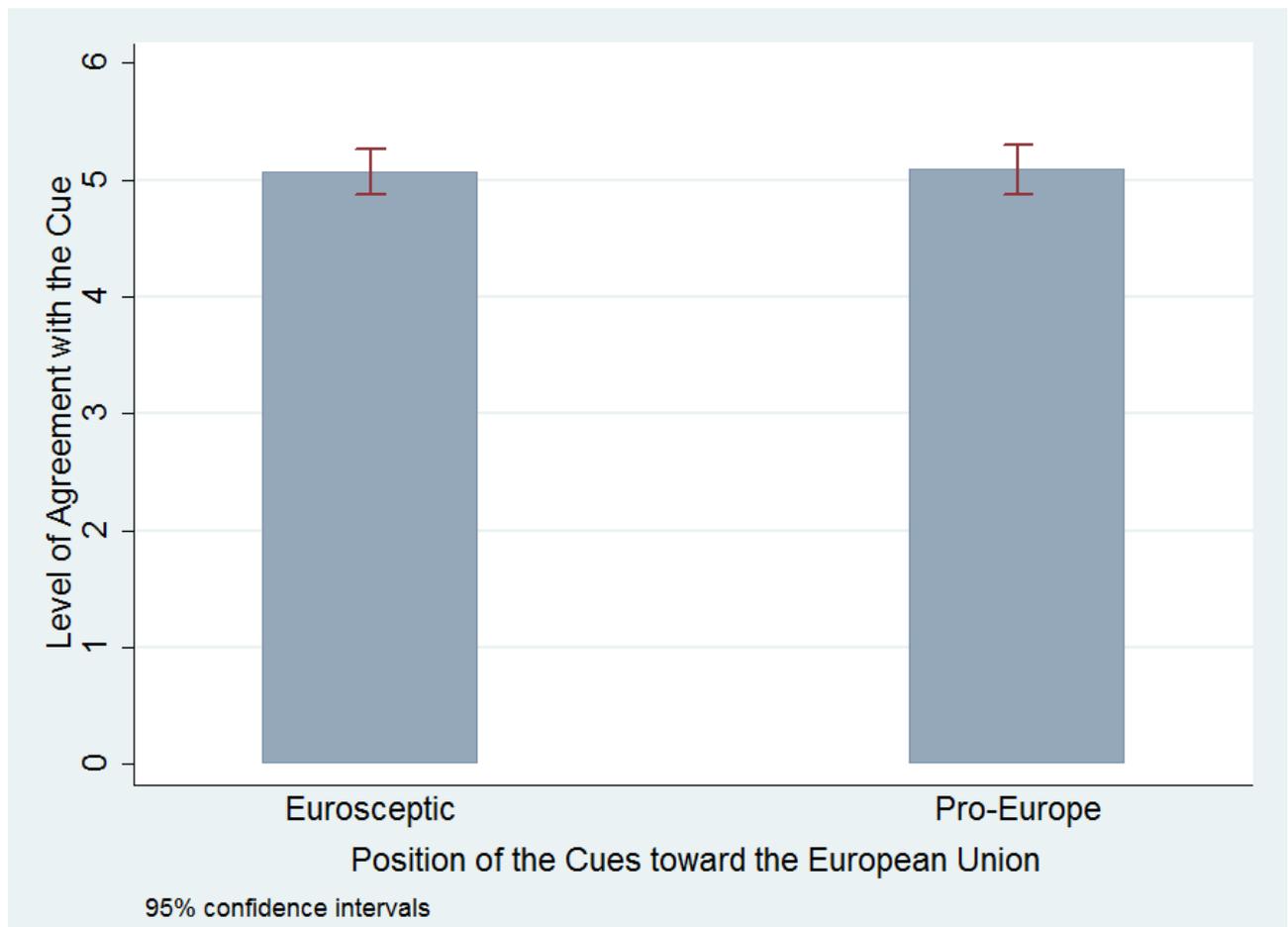
First of all, we can compare the level of agreement that respondents have with neutral and party messages. The general results are in Graph 1.



Graph 1 - The persuasive power of the source of the message

As we can see, the same messages reach different level of agreement according with the source they come from. Even if the difference is not really relevant, the graph shows that political parties are a more persuasive source of political positions compared with a neutral one. The difference between them is statistically significant as we can see from the results of the T-Test in the Output 1 (Appendix B). So we can say that the source of the message matters for electors in the moment they have to decide if they share or not a political position.

But are also the other two dimensions of the message relevant for determining its level of persuasiveness? The results about the position toward the European Union are in line with the expectations. As we can see in Graph 2, for electors it is not important if the message is a Pro-EU or an Euroskeptic position<sup>3</sup>. The levels of agreements are virtually the same and also the T-Test confirms that this dimension is not relevant (Output 2, Appendix B). This is a first evidence that when previous studies find a more persuasive power of Euroskeptic messages probably they are merging different aspect of the party's position.



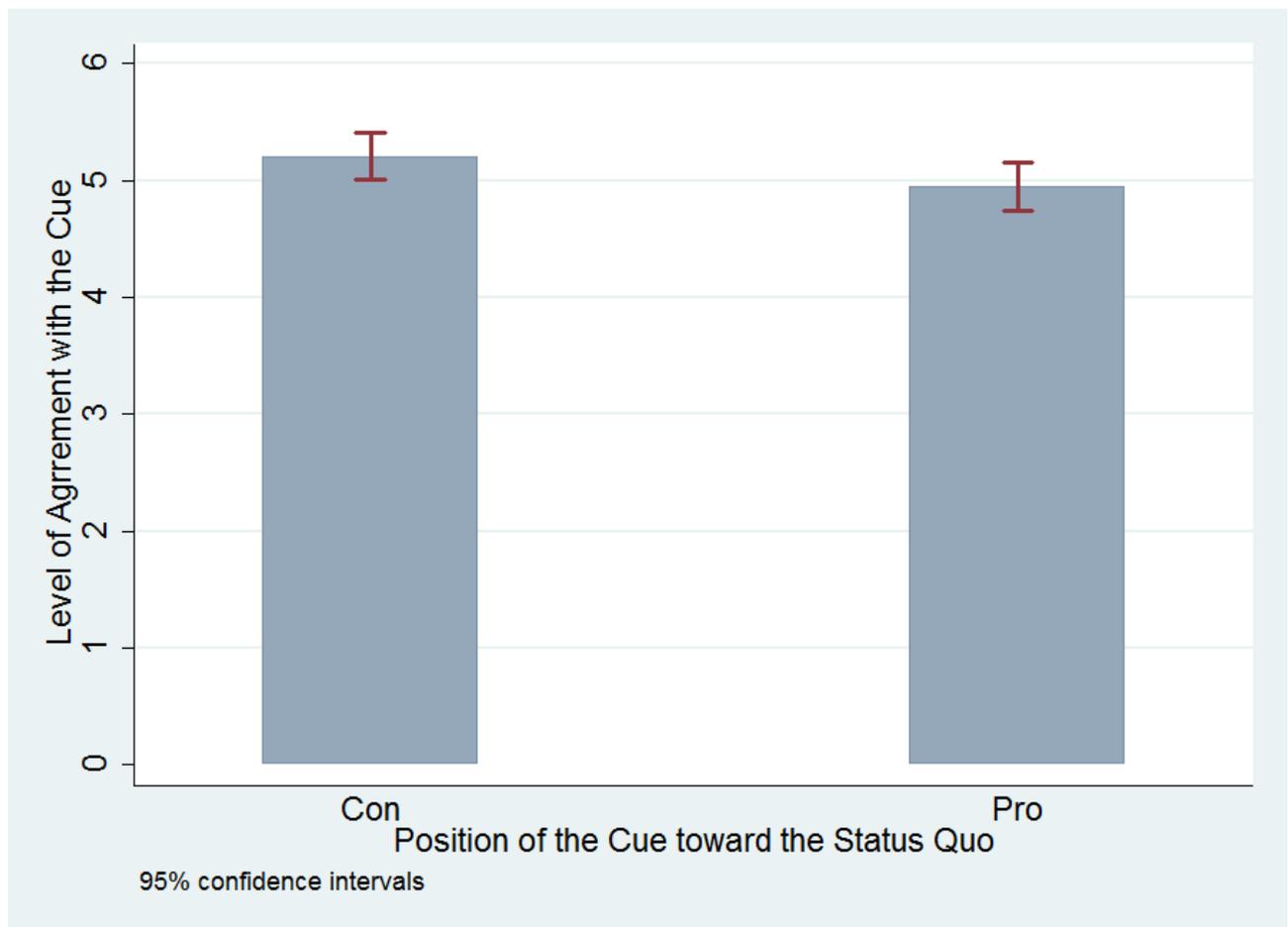
Graph 2 - The persuasive power of the message's position on EU

Finally, Graph 3 shows the difference in persuasive power between messages that defend the status quo, and messages that challenge it. Like in the case of the source of the message, the difference among the two groups is not really relevant, but statistically significant (see Output 3 in

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that at this stage, like in the previous and in the next graph, we are not comparing the persuasive power of the different party's positions. We are looking to which are the characteristics of the message (source, position on the EU, and position on status quo) that make it be more persuasive.

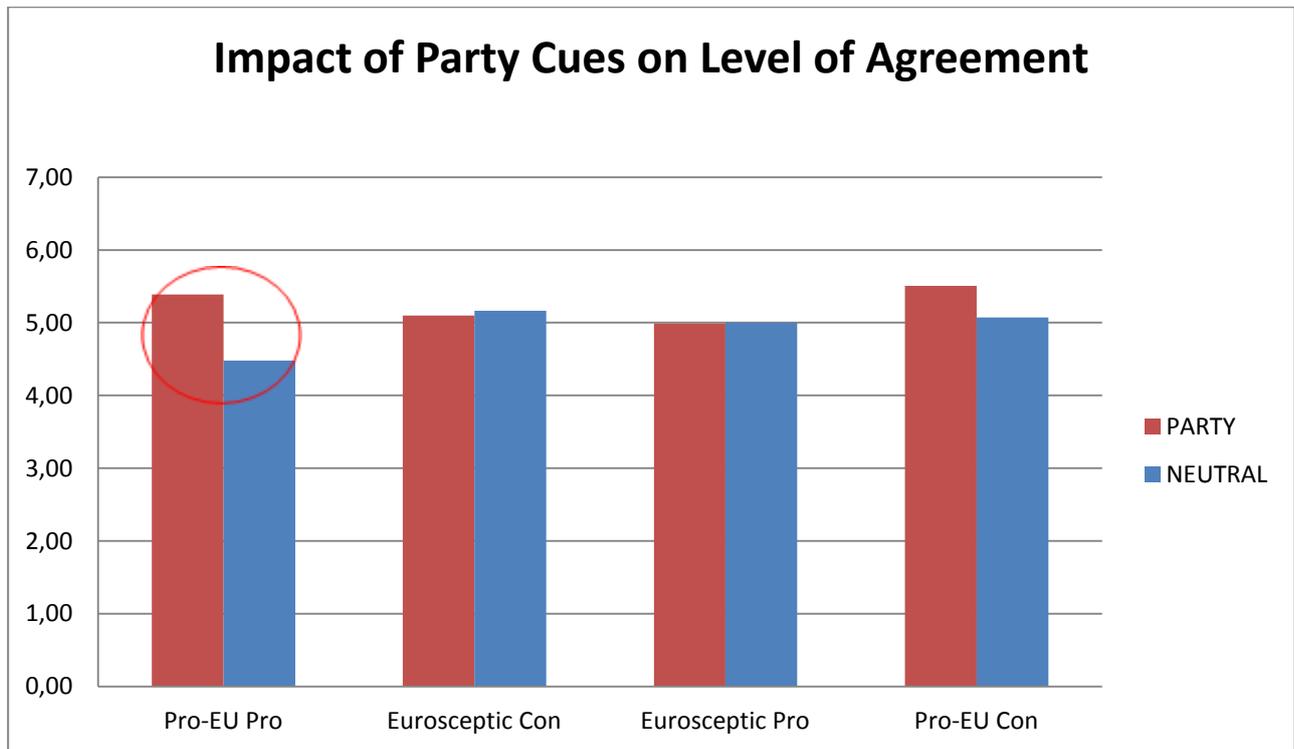
Appendix B). So, because people tend toward the status quo in situation of uncertainty, political positions that propose a change in the status quo experience a persuasive disadvantage.

At general level, therefore, the expectations concerning which are the aspects of a message that affect more its persuasive power are confirmed: citizens are more likely to agree with a position expressed by their political party and with a position that defends the status quo against a possible (and unknown) change. On the other hand, the message's position on the EU does not seem to have any effect: for public opinion is not important if a political message is for or against the European integration process. When the effect of the euroscepticism is separated from the effect of the position on status quo, the former disappears while the latter still holds. It is hard to persuade citizens to support more integration, but at the same time it is also difficult that they will agree with steps back. It is not the integration that scares them, it is the change.



Graph 3 - The persuasive power of the message's position on status quo

However, even if our expectations on message's characteristics are confirmed, the results concerning the effect of parties on each message are not consistent with the stated hypotheses. As we can see in Graph 4, the impact of the parties is quite low. People agree more with the message just in the case of Pro-EU positions, and the difference with a neutral cue is statistical significant just in the Pro-EU Pro case (see Output 4 in Appendix B for Oneway ANOVA Test).



Graph 4 - The persuasive power of parties.

There are no evidences that a particular cue offered by the preferred party is more persuasive than the same cue offered by a neutral cue (except than in the Pro-EU case), therefore H1 cannot be accepted for all messages. Moreover neither H2 nor H3 are confirmed: con messages are not more persuasive when they come from the closer political party. All that can be said from these data is that a Pro-EU messages that proposes a change in the status quo is more persuasive when come from the political party than when it come from a neutral source.

Why political parties do not seem to affect the opinions of their electors? There are some possible explanations that deserve to be taken into account. First of all, trust in political parties in Spain is very low and it is really unlikely that people take the position of a source that they do not trust. In the survey experiment the respondents were asked the following question: “How much do you trust

each of the following institutions? – Political parties”<sup>4</sup>; for the answer they could use a 0-10 scale where 0 meant “Not trust at all” and 10 meant “Complete trust”. The mean values for this variable is 1,07 with 56.79% of respondents saying that they do not trust political parties at all. In this context of low reputation, it is not surprising that political party have no effect on citizens’ attitudes.

The other possible explanation refers to a pre-treatment effect. As already explained in the research design section, Slothuus (2012) points to the fact that in an experiment on party influence can happen that scholars do not find a cues effect when, in the real world, this effect is very powerful. When electors already know the position of their party (and have already been influenced by it) , in both treatment and control group they will express the same level of agreement with the statement. In such situation, results are not consistent with the party influence hypothesis, not because the cue does not have effect, but because it did before of the experiment, and all the electors will take the position of the party. In our data, parties do not have any kind of effect in the euroskeptic position; this can be due to the fact that, given that euroskeptic positions are widely spread and widely shared in this crisis period in the Spanish society, a message against European Union is persuasive also when it come from a neutral source.

The third (and last) possible explanation is similar to the previous, but refers to the interpretation of the data. We know that people are less likely to be persuaded by a position that challenges the status quo (and more likely to share a position that defends it). And we know that this is due to the fact that citizens are afraid of changes with uncertain consequences. According with this theory, the Pro-EU Pro position is the less likely to be shared by electors while the Euroskeptic Con is the more likely, because the former challenges the status quo proposing totally unknown consequences and the latter minimizes the possibility of losses proposing to do not change anything. On the other hand, we also know that people use party position as a heuristic when they have to express a judgement on the European Union. However, it is likely that in the Euroskeptic Con position the source does not matter for the persuasive power of the message: given that in any case people will “naturally” tend toward this kind of position, they will agree with the message in both control and treatment group. On the contrary, in the case of Pro-EU Pro cue, people, following their “natural” tendency, will not share it when the position is expressed by a neutral cue, but will express a higher level of agreement when the same position is expressed by their preferred party. In sum, the role of party influence is more evident when it expresses a position that is less “seductive” for citizens, because in this case people will not follow their normal tendency. From this point of view, the results of the experiment do not seem so in contrast with the theory explained above.

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<sup>4</sup> The wording in Spanish was “¿Cuánta confianza tienes en cada una de las siguientes instituciones? –Los partidos políticos”

## Conclusion

The objectives of this paper were basically two. The first one was to enrich the narrow literature that takes into account the features of political messages for understanding their persuasive power. The paper wanted to contribute to the shift of the attention from structural political features that are supposed to determine a particular kind of communication, to the actual characteristics of this communication. This is why I actually chose to use an experimental design for this paper.

Secondly, the other objective of this paper was to compare the persuasive power of different kind of Euroskepticism. Using the categorization of Cobb and Kuklinsky (1997), I wanted to check if the persuasive advantage of Euroskeptic parties holds also when they challenge the status quo to which citizens are accustomed.

The results of this paper, however, are not completely consistent with my hypotheses. Focusing on the general characteristic of the, and without checking the persuasive party of each position, the data show that the difference among Euroskeptic and Pro-EU messages is just half of the story. The persuasive advantage of Euroskeptic messages seems do not hold when it proposes a minor role of the European Union. The implications for the role of the Euroskepticism are relevant: a political party can be tempted to switch toward positions that oppose a bigger role of the EU for gaining more consensus among electors. But if this party will push its Euroskepticism toward position that ask to reduce the role of the EU, its strategy is likely to fail.

However, results also show that political parties do not seem to have a higher persuasive power than a neutral cue. Except for the Pro-EU Pro message, people show the same level of agreement with the position regardless the source of the message. Even if there are some alternative explanations that will deserve higher attention, for now we cannot affirm that people are affected by the position of their preferred party.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **STIMULI**

The participants of the experiment were randomly exposed to one of the following 8 cues:

#### **TEXTO A**

##### **[PARTY] A FAVOR DE UN MAYOR PAPEL DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA EN EL CONTROL DE ALIMENTOS**

[PARTY] está a favor de un mayor papel de la Unión Europea en las políticas de control de alimentos. Esto dificultaría la influencia de los consumidores españoles en la toma de decisiones importantes. Sin embargo, el partido considera que un mecanismo a nivel europeo mejoraría los controles de alimentos en nuestro país.

#### **TEXTO B**

##### **A FAVOR DE UN MAYOR PAPEL DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA EN EL CONTROL DE ALIMENTOS**

Algunas personas están a favor de un mayor papel de la Unión Europea en las políticas de control de alimentos. Esto dificultaría la influencia de los consumidores españoles en la toma de decisiones importantes. Sin embargo, un mecanismo a nivel europeo mejoraría los controles de alimentos en nuestro país.

#### **TEXTO C**

##### **[PARTY] EN CONTRA DE UN MAYOR PAPEL DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA EN EL CONTROL DE ALIMENTOS**

[PARTY] está en contra de un mayor papel de la Unión Europea en las políticas de control de los alimentos. Un mecanismo a nivel europeo podría mejorar los controles de los alimentos en nuestro país. Sin embargo, el partido considera que esto podría dificultar la influencia de los consumidores españoles en la toma de importantes decisiones.

#### **TEXTO D**

##### **EN CONTRA DE UN MAYOR PAPEL DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA EN EL CONTROL DE**

## **ALIMENTOS**

Algunas personas están en contra de un mayor papel de la Unión Europea en las políticas de control de los alimentos. Un mecanismo a nivel europeo podría mejorar los controles de los alimentos en nuestro país. Sin embargo, esto podría dificultar la influencia de los consumidores españoles en la toma de importantes decisiones.

### TEXTO E

#### **[PARTY] A FAVOR DE REDUCIR EL PAPEL DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA EN EL CONTROL DE ALIMENTOS**

[PARTY] está a favor de una reducción del papel de la Unión Europea en las políticas de control de alimentos. Esta reducción del peso de la UE podría debilitar el control europeo de los alimentos en nuestro país. Sin embargo, el partido considera que podría aumentar la influencia de los consumidores españoles en la toma de importantes decisiones.

### TEXTO F

#### **A FAVOR DE REDUCIR EL PAPEL DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA EN EL CONTROL DE ALIMENTOS**

Algunas personas están a favor de una reducción del papel de la Unión Europea en las políticas de control de alimentos. Esta reducción del peso de la UE podría debilitar el control europeo de los alimentos en nuestro país. Sin embargo, podría aumentar la influencia de los consumidores españoles en la toma de importantes decisiones.

### TEXTO G

#### **[PARTY] EN CONTRA DE REDUCIR EL PAPEL DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA EN EL CONTROL DE ALIMENTOS**

[PARTY] está en contra de una reducción del papel de la Unión Europea en las políticas de control de alimentos. Esta reducción del peso de la UE podría aumentar la influencia de los consumidores españoles en la toma de importantes decisiones. Sin embargo, el partido considera que podría debilitar el control europeo de los alimentos en nuestro país.

### TEXTO H

#### **EN CONTRA DE REDUCIR EL PAPEL DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA EN EL CONTROL DE ALIMENTOS**

Algunas personas están en contra de una reducción del papel de la Unión Europea en las políticas de control de alimentos. Esta reducción del peso de la UE podría aumentar la influencia de los consumidores españoles en la toma de importantes decisiones. Sin embargo, podría debilitar el control europeo de los alimentos en nuestro país.

## DEPENDENT VARIABLE

After having read one of these 8 texts, the respondents were asked about their level of agreement with the position exposed:

**¿En qué medida estás de acuerdo con la posición expresada por [este partido/estas personas]?**

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Totalmente en desacuerdo										Totalmente de acuerdo

## PRE-TREATMENT QUESTION

Before exposing respondents to the stimuli of the experiment, the following question was asked:

**¿Cuál de los siguientes partidos consideras más cercano a tus propias ideas?**

El PSOE

El PP

IU

ICV

CIU

La CUP

Ciutadans

El PNV

UpyD

Amaiur

ERC  
El BNG  
CC  
Compromis  
Equo  
FAC  
Geroa Bai  
NABai  
UPN  
Cha  
Otro  
Ninguno

People that answered “Otro” were excluded from the experiment, while people that answered “Ninguno” were redirected to the following question:

**Aunque no te sientas más cercano o cercana a ningún partido, ¿hay algún partido con el que estés más de acuerdo que con los demás?**

El PSOE  
El PP  
IU  
ICV  
CIU  
La CUP  
Ciutadans  
El PNV  
UpyD  
Amaiur  
ERC  
El BNG  
CC  
Compromis  
Equo  
FAC

Geroa Bai  
 NABai  
 UPN  
 Cha  
 Otro  
 Ninguno

If also in this case the respondent answered “Ninguno”, he was excluded from the experiment.

## APPENDIX B

### Output 1 – T-Test for the levels of agreement according with different source of the message

Two-sample t test with equal variances

Group	Obs	Mean	Std. Err.	Std. Dev.	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Neutral	401	4.917706	.1027151	2.056869	4.715777	5.119635
Party	404	5.235149	.1038134	2.086623	5.031065	5.439232
combined	805	5.077019	.0731922	2.076648	4.933348	5.220689
diff		-.3174428	.1460476		-.604123	-.0307626

diff = mean(Neutral) - mean(Party) t = -2.1736  
 Ho: diff = 0 degrees of freedom = 803

Ha: diff < 0 Pr(T < t) = 0.0150	Ha: diff != 0 Pr( T  >  t ) = 0.0300	Ha: diff > 0 Pr(T > t) = 0.9850
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Output 4 Oneway ANOVA Test for the levels of agreement according with each of the 8 cues

Analysis of Variance					
Source	SS	df	MS	F	Prob > F
Between groups	67.6510016	7	9.6644288	2.27	0.0275
Within groups	3399.57384	797	4.26546279		
Total	3467.22484	804	4.31246871		

Bartlett's test for equal variances:  $\chi^2(7) = 9.4121$  Prob> $\chi^2 = 0.224$

**BONFERRONI**

	Party Pro-EU Pro	Neutral Pro-EU Pro	Party Eurosceptic Con	Neutral Eurosceptic Con	Party Eurosceptic Pro	Neutral Eurosceptic Pro	Party Pro-EU Con
Neutral Pro-EU Pro	-905937 0.046						
Party Eurosceptic Con	-.29041 1.000	.615527 0.738					
Neutral Eurosceptic Con	-.222707 1.000	.68323 0.450	.067703 1.000				
Party Eurosceptic Pro	-.397755 1.000	.508182 1.000	-.107345 1.000	-.175049 1.000			
Neutral Eurosceptic Pro	-.387755 1.000	.518182 1.000	-.097345 1.000	-.165049 1.000	.01 1.000		
Party Pro-EU Con	.117621 1.000	1.02356 0.013	.408031 1.000	.340328 1.000	.515376 1.000	.505376 1.000	
Neutral Pro-EU Con	-.314071 1.000	.591866 1.000	-.023661 1.000	-.091364 1.000	.083684 1.000	.073684 1.000	-.431692 1.000