

Does Political Information Matter? An Experimental Test Relating to Party Positions on Europe

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This article focuses on whether the provision of ‘objectively’ correct information to voters about where parties stand on an issue affects their placement of the parties, and ultimately their own position, on that issue. Classic theories of how mass publics make voting decisions assume that voters are able relatively accurately to place themselves and the parties on various issue dimensions. While these assumptions have been challenged, it is generally assumed that the provision of new information makes voters’ placements more informed. We explicitly test this idea using a survey experiment focusing on one political issue – European integration. In the experiment, all respondents were twice asked to place the three main British parties and themselves on a bipolar scale of European integration. This was done towards the beginning, and then at the end of the survey. Most respondents were also given information on the ‘informed’ positions of the parties, derived from expert survey placement. Our analyses indicate that individuals’ placements did change, and the tendency was related to both political sophistication and the inherent difficulty of placing the party. Only less sophisticated voters updated their placements, and these changes are concentrated on the placement of the Labour party, where the elite stance on Europe has been more conflicted. For all respondents we do not detect any corresponding changes in self-placement that would be congruent with ‘cueing’ effects.

Most would agree that the proper functioning of democracy requires an informed public.¹ Citizens must have meaningful preferences and they must have reasonably accurate information about what the incumbent government is doing, as they otherwise cannot effectively reward or punish the government. To ensure accountability and political competition, people also need information about what other competing political parties and candidates prefer. It is not that people need to know everything, but they do need to know something. They need to have enough information to keep politicians honest; in effect, to correct ‘errors’ in their policy behaviour, that is, when their behaviour departs from what people want.

Traditionally the scholarly view of the public has not been terribly flattering. Early on, Walter Lippmann (1922) saw a public that was largely uninformed. He argued that due to the sheer flow and increasing complexity of information, the public could neither absorb nor truly understand what was happening around them. Thus for Lippmann, rule by the people had become effectively obsolete. The first mass surveys of voters in the 1940s and 1950s to a large extent confirmed Lippmann’s arguments for it appeared that the public was badly



informed about issues, policy and candidates (Berelson *et al.*, 1954; Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1944). Philip Converse (1964) extended these ideas to offer a more refined view of the mass public. He depicted heterogeneity, where some people actually have well-developed preferences and are attentive to, and therefore informed about, politics. According to Converse, however, most people fall far short of this ideal, and rely instead on more primitive cues, such as party and social group identifications, or else short-term forces like economic performance. Taken together, it would seem that the requirements for effective representative democracy are not met, at least in a very broad way. At best, we appear beholden to a handful of informed 'elites'.

This, along with more recent investigations of electorates' knowledge levels such as Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter's (1996), is the starting point for much of the work on deliberative democracy (see for example Fishkin, 1991; 1995; Gastil, 2000). In this literature, representative democracy is considered to be in a tenuous state. Public opinion is uninformed, and most voters are largely incapable of making decisions based on policy preferences. High incumbent re-election rates indicate that sitting politicians have effectively stifled meaningful alternatives for voters to choose from. It has engendered the misrepresentation, high levels of non-voting and distrust that have been observed in the US, and increasingly across the rest of the Western democracies. According to these scholars, the answer to the civic neglect that they identify is deliberation, where citizens are brought together to discuss issues face to face.²

Others claim that in fact things may not be as bad as these portrayals would lead us to believe (Erikson *et al.*, 2002; Soroka and Wlezien, 2005; Wlezien, 1995). Recent research has argued that limited information need not prevent voters from making 'correct' choices, as they can rely on cues or heuristics to overcome the problems of little information (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Lupia, 1994; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman *et al.*, 1991). By either implicitly or explicitly defining 'correct' choices as the choices that would have been made in the presence of full information, these authors have argued that cue taking leads to situations in which parties/governments can be held to account.

This is not to gainsay the value of providing additional information to voters. After all, with more information, there is reason to suppose that people's opinions will change; moreover with more 'representative' information opinions should change for the better. Of course this is most likely where people have little information to begin with, as there are presumably diminishing marginal returns. Some prior research supports these suspicions (Baum and Jamison, 2006; Gilens, 2001; Kuklinski *et al.*, 2000). Martin Gilens focused on the effects of providing factual information to respondents. He shows that it makes a difference: when given correct information many respondents changed their preferences. James Kuklinski *et al.* show more specifically that although some factually misinformed (on levels of welfare spending in the US) voters do update views when given new information, this tendency is largely concentrated among the least politically

sophisticated. This is supported by Matthew Baum and Angela Jamison's recent findings that soft news coverage is of most importance in informing the least sophisticated and politically aware voters.³

Clearly these are important findings with potentially big implications: factual information matters but it matters differentially according to prior levels of sophistication. This fits nicely with 'simulation' work by Larry Bartels (1996), Scott Althaus (1998; 2003) and Ryan Claassen and Benjamin Highton (2006), which shows that levels of knowledge affect political choices and attitudes; specifically, increasing knowledge/sophistication produces different aggregate outcomes for both party choice and political attitudes. The extant work has mainly concentrated on factual information about specific policies, however (Gilens, 2001; Kuklinski *et al.*, 2000). Yet effective accountability not only requires that people have informed preferences themselves, but also requires that people know what is on offer from competing parties. That is, people need to be politically informed, as they cannot otherwise bring their preferences to bear on political judgements. Research shows that people do compare parties and candidates when making their political judgements and that part of the evaluation involves issues and ideology (e.g. Erikson *et al.*, 1993; 2002; see also Wlezien and Carman, 2001). But how meaningful are the political assessments? Are they well informed? Does additional information about parties and candidates make a difference?

In this article, we examine the role of information about the policy stances of political parties in Britain, focusing on one particular issue – European unification. The issue represents an ideal case of sorts. On the one hand, although it has been of increasing importance to voters within Britain (Evans, 1998; 1999) it is still an issue of relatively low salience.⁴ Moreover, people are assumed to have a limited amount of information about the policies that competing parties offer regarding the EU. On the other hand, this is not to say that the issue is of no importance at European Parliament elections. Although these 'second-order' elections have in the past appeared to be largely driven by domestic issues (Marsh, 1998; Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Reif, 1984; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996), EU integration does seem to be having an increasing impact on vote choices (Ferrara and Weishaupt, 2004; Hix and Marsh, 2007; Hobolt *et al.*, 2006; Marsh, 2007). Thus, Europe is not an issue of paramount importance, about which voters are particularly well informed, but nor is it of trivial importance to the electorate. It is also an issue for which it is relatively easy to identify party positions, even though voters may not themselves have that information. In this sense we think it forms a useful test case for distinguishing who takes in new information about parties and who does not, as people have some, but not a lot, of existing information and there are real party positions that can be distinguished from one another. Finally, the role of information forms an important part of the debate concerning mass–elite linkages on the issue of EU integration. Whether, and the extent to which, voters have information on where the parties actually stand on the issue of integration is central to arguments regarding the cueing of partisans.

We attempt then to answer a particular question: how does providing information about the positions of political parties on Europe influence people's placements of the parties and themselves? We have three main hypotheses. The first is that particular extra information about parties' positions towards European integration will affect people's views of where the parties stand on that issue.

H1: The provision of information regarding party placement on the issue of European integration will induce respondents to update their own placements of the party.

We also expect this tendency to vary across individuals. Specifically, we are interested in whether it is moderated by political sophistication. Previous research suggests that sophistication plays an important role in influencing whether people are willing to accept new information (Kuklinski *et al.*, 2000; MacKuen, 1984), with less politically sophisticated voters being more receptive. Of course, a similar pattern is predicted by a more basic model of information updating, where new information is of greater marginal value to the less sophisticated. Our second hypothesis is thus:

H2: The provision of information regarding party placement on the issue of European integration will more strongly affect less sophisticated respondents in updating their own placements of the party.

Our final hypothesis relates to whether individuals update their own self-placements, given information about party positions. Gilens (2001) shows that factual information about a policy area can mean that people update their own policy preferences, but what about the effects of providing party policy information? Work on the cueing of partisans in the European context (Gabel and Scheve, 2007; Ray, 2003; Steenbergen *et al.*, 2007) suggests that people will (conditional on party and system characteristics) tend to bring their views into line with their preferred party.⁵ Yet what of those voters who do not know where their party stands on the issue? Our third hypothesis therefore refers to whether people change their own policy preferences given information on the preferred party.

H3: The provision of information regarding party placement on the issue of European integration will alter people's own policy position if the information concerns their preferred party.

To test these hypotheses, we rely on a survey experiment in Britain that was administered as part of the European Election Study of 2004. In the experiment, all respondents were twice asked to place the three main British parties and themselves on a bipolar scale of European integration. This was done first towards the beginning of the survey and then again at the end. In between, respondents were asked a common battery of questions, largely about Europe. Most respondents were also given information on the assumed positions of the three parties, derived from expert survey placements. This was done in four experimental

treatments. Comparing the results of these treatments with those for our control group demonstrates real effects of providing the information, though the magnitude of these effects is structured by political sophistication. Interpretations and implications are considered in the concluding section.

The Design

The British survey was part of the European Election Study (EES), which coordinated surveys in all EU countries at the time of the 2004 European Parliament elections.⁶ It was conducted between 12 and 17 June, just after the elections held on 10 June. One thousand five hundred adult (18+) British citizens were interviewed, excluding Northern Ireland where a separate survey was administered, all drawn from a stratified sample. The interviews were conducted over the telephone and lasted about 30 minutes. The questionnaire itself was designed in cooperation with the EES directors and follows the general format established for previous surveys. In each year, the EES questionnaire includes a core component that remains the same over time and a thematic module that differs. In addition there was a British-specific module, in which our experiment was embedded.

The core component focuses on party preferences and voting choice, which along with demographic items comprises well over half of the questionnaire. The thematic module in 2004 focused on legitimacy and the democratic quality of the EU institutions. These thematic questions account for around one quarter of the survey. The British-specific module fills the rest of the survey. There are four main sets of variables in this section, relating to: (1) support for joining the euro and the European Constitution; (2) the experiment, which provides information and then asks (a second time) about party placements on European integration; (3) assessments of the parties' handling of the European issue; and (4) factual knowledge about European institutions. This listing reflects the ordering of the items. The first and third sets are not used in this analysis, but the second and fourth sets require additional elaboration.

The Experiment

Early in the survey, as part of the core component, respondents were asked about their placements of the political parties as regards Europe. They were told:

Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a 10-point-scale. On this scale, 1 means unification has already gone too far and 10 means it should be pushed further.

Respondents were then asked: 'What number on this scale best describes your position?' Following this, respondents were asked where they would place the three major parties (Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats) along

with the smaller Eurosceptic party, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), asked in random order. The responses represent our pre-treatment observations. We then asked the same questions again towards the end of the survey, responses to which are our post-treatment observations. The experiment involves providing people with different information about the 'true' placements of the political parties. People were randomly assigned to five groups of 300. Each group received different information about the locations of the political parties. In the first group, the control group, no new information was provided, and respondents were simply asked (for the second time) to place themselves and the three major parties on the 1–10 scale, with random party ordering. In the other four groups, we provided additional information right after repeating the introduction to the question (see the preceding paragraph). In condition 2, for instance, we added the following text: 'For example, most people would place the Conservative party at around 3 on this scale'. For conditions 3 and 4, we provided information about Labour and the Liberal Democrats, with placements of 7 and 9, respectively. In the fifth condition, we provided information on all three parties: 'For example, most people would place the Conservative party at around 3 on this scale, the Labour party at around 7 and the Liberal Democrats at around 9'.

The specific 'true' positions were derived from expert survey placements and confirmed by manifesto analysis. The ordering of the parties on the issue of EU integration is relatively clear. Manifesto data show that for the 1997–2001 period the Conservatives are consistently the most Eurosceptic and the Liberal Democrats the most Europhile with Labour somewhere in between (Bara and Budge, 2001; Budge, 1999). We use expert survey data for the specific party placements. Converted to the 1–10 scale that we use here, the two most recent expert surveys conducted in 1999 and 2002 (Marks *et al.*, 2006; Steenbergen and Marks, 2007) and a larger survey conducted by Michael Laver in 1997 (Laver, 1998) would give us positions that range between 2.5 and 2.8 for the Conservatives, 6.2 and 7.6 for the Labour party and 8.3 and 9.6 for the Liberal Democrats. We were reliant on the Laver expert survey data and an even earlier survey by Leonard Ray (1999) when choosing positions in early 2004 and assigned the Conservatives a position of 3, Labour a position of 7 and the Liberal Democrats a position of 9. Fortunately these placements are in fact extremely similar to those we would have chosen given the most recent 2002 Chapel Hill data, which give 1–10 positions of 2.5 for the Conservatives, 7.3 for Labour and 9.6 for the Liberal Democrats.⁷

Measuring Knowledge about Europe

In conducting our analyses, we need to take account of voters' political knowledge and sophistication. As discussed above, a growing body of research indicates that knowledge about policy and policy activity is of real importance to political assessments and judgements. There is also reason to suppose that there is a great deal of variance in knowledge about Europe, and we want to explore whether the magnitude of the experimental effects varies by level of political sophistication.

Knowledge is measured using responses to factual survey items, following previous literature (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993; 1996; Mondak, 2001; Zaller, 1992). For this analysis, we devised three items asking about Europe, each closed-ended, as follows (for full text and response categories, see Appendix):

- (1) You may have noticed that a number of countries just joined the EU this year. Do you happen to know whether two, five, ten or thirteen countries joined?
- (2) As you may also know, the Presidency of the European Council switches every six months. Holland gets the Presidency next month. Do you know which country has held the Presidency for the last six months? Was it Britain, Germany, Ireland or Italy?
- (3) The President of the European Commission serves for five years. Do you know who the current President of the European Commission is? Is it Silvio Berlusconi, Jacques Delors, Neil Kinnock or Romano Prodi?

To be clear, the correct answers are: ten, Ireland and Romano Prodi.⁸ Now, we want to see how the level of factual knowledge structures individuals' party placements, both before and after we provide political information. Our expectation is that those who answer more of these questions correctly, and therefore have more knowledge and are more politically sophisticated when it comes to this issue, will more accurately place the parties prior to treatment. We also expect that treatment effects among this group will be correspondingly less pronounced. These are straightforward expectations. Let us see what the data show.

The Results

Knowledge about Europe and Party Placements

To begin with, we consider responses to the initial set of placement items: for self, the three major parties and UKIP. Summary statistics are shown in Table 1. The first row contains the mean placements. There we can see that the average self-placement (4.18) is on the Eurosceptic side of the centre point (5.5) of the scale (recall that high scores indicate support for more unification). This comes as

Table 1: Party Placements on EU Integration Scale

	<i>Self-placement</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Liberal Democrats</i>	<i>UKIP</i>
Mean	4.18	5.34	4.33	5.16	3.28
Variance	7.96	8.15	5.88	6.26	7.93
N (unweighted)	1,430	1,308	1,241	1,190	1,123

Source: *British European Election Study (2004)*.

little surprise. More surprising is that the mean placements for all of the major parties are also on the low side. Although that is sensible for the Conservatives, it is clearly less so for Labour and even less so for the Liberal Democrats. Indeed, the average placement for the Liberal Democrats (5.16) is actually below that for Labour (5.34). For UKIP, the mean (3.28) is appropriately well below that for the Conservatives (4.33). The pattern of placements implies some uncertainty in people's minds about the placements of some of the parties, especially Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The variance statistics in the second row imply that placements of Labour may be of special concern, as they are more variable than both other party placements and self-placement. This is interesting, particularly given that Labour was in government at the time and had been for seven years, and people were more willing to place Labour than any of the other parties. Arguably the high levels of intra-party dissent on EU integration meant that the party was sending rather mixed messages to voters, however.

The figures in Table 1 conceal differences across the general population. There are various ways in which people's placements can differ; most important for our analysis is the effect of factual institutional knowledge. Table 2 shows how differences in EU knowledge matter for placements. It displays mean placements for self and the parties by the number of correct answers on our quiz.⁹ The results are striking. For the least sophisticated, who answered none of the questions correctly, the pattern of mean placements is much like the overall numbers from Table 1, except that the variance across parties is reduced. Means that were relatively high (for Labour and the Liberal Democrats) are lower and means that were relatively low (for the Conservatives and UKIP) are higher. For those who answered one quiz question correctly, the means are virtually identical to the overall numbers, which are included in the fifth row of Table 2. When we turn to those who gave two or more correct answers, the variance of mean placements widens further still, though especially for the most sophisticated who answered all three correctly. In this group, the mean placement of the Conservatives is less than

Table 2: Party Placements on EU Integration Scale by EU Knowledge Level

	<i>Self-placement</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Liberal Democrats</i>	<i>UKIP</i>
0 correct	4.21	5.19	4.42	4.93	3.47
1 correct	4.13	5.35	4.32	5.11	3.28
2 correct	4.09	5.50	4.21	5.42	3.04
3 correct	4.38	5.95	3.99	6.24	2.57
All	4.18	5.34	4.33	5.16	3.28
N (unweighted)	1,430	1,308	1,241	1,190	1,123

Source: *British European Election Study (2004)*.

4 and the Liberal Democrats more than 6, and slightly above Labour. These people not only see clearer differences between the parties; on average they get what would seem the right ordering as well.

Political sophistication does not equally influence placements of the parties, however. Consider the differences in means for people answering none of the questions correctly and for those answering all three. This difference is least for Conservative placements (0.43 of a point) and greatest for the Liberal Democrats (1.31 points). The difference for Labour placements is in between. Evidently, people are generally better able to place the Conservatives on Europe and less able to place Labour and especially the Liberal Democrats. Sophistication differences matter much more for the latter. This is important and of direct relevance to our analysis, for it implies predictable differences in the effects of providing additional information. To the extent that placements made by sophisticated people indicate practical limits of information effects, then we would expect effects to be least pronounced for Conservative party placements and greater for Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

The Effects of Providing Political Information

Thus far we have seen that knowledge about Europe powerfully structures placements of the political parties. It also would seem to have important implications, for after all effective accountability requires that people have good information about the positions of the competing parties. What we want to know now is whether we can alter the level of political information; that is, can we effectively inform the seemingly uninformed? For this, we turn to the results of our survey experiment described earlier.

Table 3 reports the differences in the means and standard deviations between each wave of questions for each experimental condition. Only respondents who gave numerical placements both times are included in the analyses. In terms of the first hypothesis, we want to see whether the means changed and whether the standard deviations declined (the latter of which would reveal a reduction in the dispersion of placements), focusing especially on the experimental conditions 2–5 in which respondents were given extra information. In fact, the results indicate only small, mainly statistically insignificant and apparently random changes in means. Changes in variance are more pervasive and systematic; in all but one instance the variance of placements declines and in four of the twelve cases those declines are significant. The results thus imply that placements actually improved, if only a little, with the provision of information. We also see declines in the variance of placements for the control group, however. People may make fewer errors in placement the second time they are asked, say, owing to greater familiarity with the scale itself or for other reasons. This also is as we would expect given regression to the mean; i.e. because of basic measurement error in placements at the ends of the scale, high

Table 3: Changes ($\bar{x}_2 - \bar{x}_1$) in the Means and Standard Deviations of Party Placements on the EU Integration Scale by Experimental Condition

Party	Condition 1 (no extra information)	Condition 2 (Labour at 7)	Condition 3 (Conservatives at 3)	Condition 4 (Liberal Democrats at 9)	Condition 5 (all party positions)
Labour					
Mean change	0.05	-0.01	0.13	-0.10	0.01
S.d. change	-0.05	-0.33**	0.01	-0.15	-0.09
N (unweighted)	236	206	227	225	223
Conservatives					
Mean change	-0.13	-0.24	0.11	-0.02	-0.03
S.d. change	-0.17	-0.25	-0.15	-0.25*	-0.27**
N (unweighted)	222	187	208	216	212
Liberal Democrats					
Mean change	0.22	-0.27*	-0.28*	0.06	0.16
S.d. change	-0.01	-0.24*	-0.05	-0.16	-0.07
N (unweighted)	214	176	202	207	202

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Note: Mean change: t-test for paired samples; change in s.d.: Levene's test.

Source: British European Election Study (2004).

(low) placements at time t_1 can only go down (up), causing the variance to shrink. None of the effects in the control group are significant, however, and the mean change (-0.08) is only about half that (-0.17) for the treatment groups. The tendency nevertheless makes it more difficult fully to credit the treatment effects: although the drop in variance is more pronounced among those who were given additional information, the differences compared to the control group are not highly reliable. Thus, while these effects look more systematic than random, they are at best isolated and small.

Of course these aggregate-level analyses may conceal interesting individual-level differences as outlined in the second hypothesis. To assess this possibility, we explicitly model the effects of treatment on party placements. Our dependent variable is the absolute distance between party placement the second time (t_2) and the 'true' placement for each party (as we described it to respondents). We want to see whether and how treatment matters given absolute distance between the first party placement and the 'true' placement. Our independent variables thus include the absolute distance at time t_1 and separate dummy variables for each of the four treatments. Also included are variables to capture the effects of institutional knowledge and by proxy sophistication. There is a dummy variable that takes the value '1' for those with a higher level of knowledge about the EU institutions, who get the right answers to one or more of our quiz questions. Additionally, there are separate interactive variables to tap the effect of each of the four treatments for the more sophisticated.¹⁰ The results of estimating an OLS regression equation for each party are shown in Table 4.

The first column contains the results for Labour party placements. Notice first that the coefficient (0.61) for absolute distance at t_1 is positive and easily distinguished from 0. The coefficient is also significantly different from 1. This may be somewhat surprising, but is actually quite predictable given the drop in variance documented in Table 3. Our treatments also seem to matter. The coefficient for each condition is negative and statistically significant, indicating that those who were exposed to additional information placed the party closer to its 'true' value at t_2 . The effects of treatment are dependent on sophistication, however. This is clear from the coefficients for the interactive variables below, all of which are positive, and three of which are statistically significantly different from zero (the fourth is close to statistical significance). These coefficients neutralise the effects of treatment for the knowledgeable. For these people, treatment has no effect. Additional information only influences those with relatively low levels of political sophistication. Indeed, as is clear in Table 4, high sophistication has a main impact (-0.60) that is virtually identical to the mean impact (-0.57) of the four treatments. Providing information about the 'true' location of Labour fully compensated for pre-existing differences in sophistication, which tended to increase accuracy for the more sophisticated. Although this is an important result, the pattern does not generalise across placements of the other parties.

For the Conservatives, in the middle columns of Table 4, all the treatment coefficients are small and statistically insignificant. There is nothing happening here but basic regression to the mean as indicated by the coefficient for distance at t_1 . This may seem to contrast with what we just showed for Labour placements but actually is not surprising – indeed, it is much as we suggested earlier following Kuklinski *et al.* (2000). That is, we saw in Table 2 that sophistication does not affect Conservative placements; i.e. placements tend to be similar regardless of institutional knowledge level. Thus, to the extent high knowledge placements represent a baseline, there is little reason to expect significant changes owing to our experimental manipulations.

For the Liberal Democrats, we expect more substantial effects as we observed big sophistication effects on Liberal Democrat placements. This is borne out in the last two columns of Table 4, which show a large and significant effect. In contrast with the results for Labour placements, providing information about any one particular party does not make a difference. Rather, only condition 5, where respondents were given information about all three parties, has a real effect, and a sizeable one. The positive, significant coefficient for the interactive variable

Table 4: OLS Regression Predicting Absolute Distance between the Party Placement and the 'True' Value for each Party at t_2

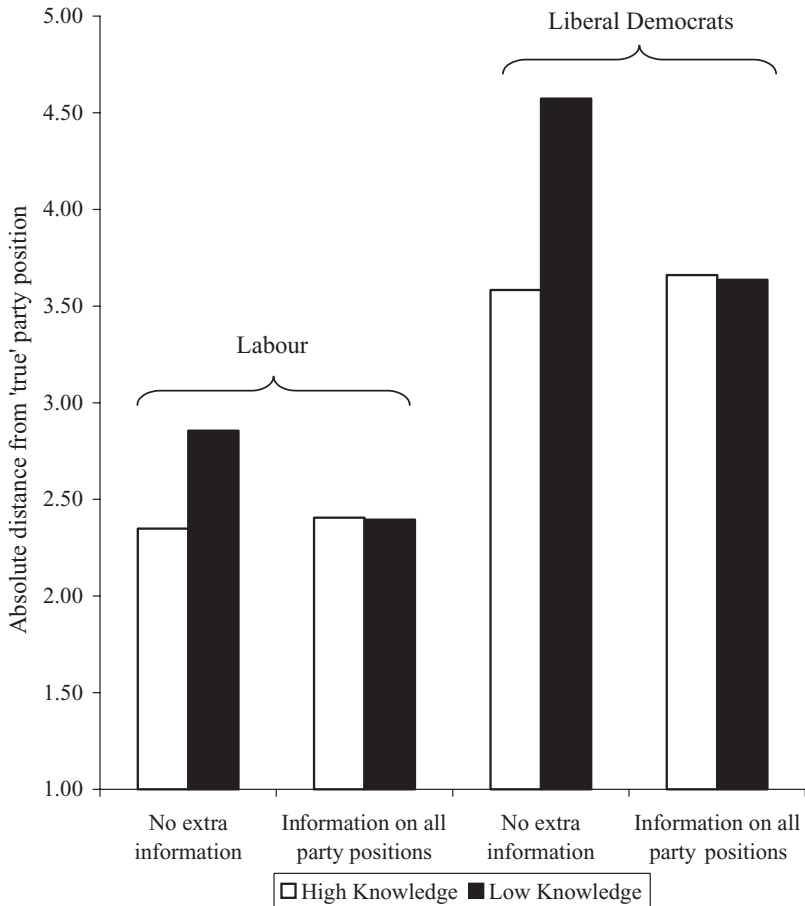
Variable	Labour		Conservative		Liberal	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Absolute distance t_1	0.61***	0.02	0.45***	0.03	0.55***	0.03
Condition 1	0.00	–	0.00	–	0.00	–
Condition 2	-0.54**	0.21	-0.11	0.20	-0.19	0.28
Condition 3	-0.40**	0.20	0.06	0.19	0.14	0.26
Condition 4	-0.71***	0.21	-0.00	0.20	-0.19	0.27
Condition 5	-0.62***	0.21	-0.25	0.19	-0.88***	0.26
Low knowledge	0.00	–	0.00	–	0.00	–
High knowledge (K)	-0.60***	0.20	-0.26	0.18	-0.92***	0.25
Cond 1* K	0.00	–	0.00	–	0.00	–
Cond 2* K	0.44	0.29	-0.06	0.27	0.84**	0.37
Cond 3* K	0.86***	0.28	0.26	0.26	0.39	0.36
Cond 4* K	0.99***	0.28	0.03	0.26	0.31	0.36
Cond 5* K	0.89***	0.28	0.10	0.26	1.28***	0.36
Constant	1.30***	0.16	1.23***	0.15	2.23***	0.22
Adjusted R^2	0.39		0.25		0.34	
N (unweighted)	1,117		1,045		1,001	

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: British European Election Study (2004).

indicates that the effect is confined to those with low sophistication. People with high sophistication already do much better placing the Liberal Democrats a second time around, approximately one point better on the scale than those with low knowledge.

Figure 1: Predicted Values of the Absolute Distance between Party Placements and the 'True' Value for Each Party at t_2



The effects of treatment are especially clear in Figure 1, which plots the predicted values of absolute distance by knowledge and condition, for both the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats.¹¹ For expository purposes, values are shown only for conditions 1 and 5. Of course, we know from Table 4 that the values for conditions 2–4 are much like those for condition 5 with respect to Labour placements and like those for condition 1 with respect to the Liberal Democrats. In the figure we can see that placements of Labour are *much* more

accurate on average, given the true value, than are placements of the Liberal Democrats. This difference probably reflects both the greater familiarity with Labour and the fact that the true placement of the Liberal Democrats allows a much greater range for error, 8 points on the scale instead of 6 (recall that the 'true' placement for the Liberal Democrats is 9 and for Labour is 7). For both parties, institutional knowledge makes a difference in the control group, especially for placements of the Liberal Democrats, where the difference is about one point. For Labour, the difference is about a half point. In condition 5, however, we see that the differences in party placements owing to sophistication disappear. Providing information makes a real difference to those with low political sophistication. In fact, it actually puts them on equal footing with sophisticated voters. As we have shown, the effects of providing information are not pervasive, however. They are mostly felt on placements of Labour, with all treatment conditions having an effect. This is as we might expect given the uncertainty about the party's position on Europe in 2004. It implies that people are fairly certain in their placements of the Conservatives and to a lesser extent the Liberal Democrats, despite real differences owing to political sophistication, at least for the latter.

Political Information and Self-Placements

We have seen that providing information has some effects on party placements. But what about our third hypothesis regarding self-placements: does providing information also influence where people place themselves? Such effects are likely to depend on the extent to which individuals identify with the parties. That is, if I identify closely with a party and am told that the party's true position is further away than I thought, I may place (the party and) myself closer to that position. If I do not identify with the party, I may place myself further from the true position, while perhaps placing the party closer. This is what we would expect if self-placements are endogenous to political evaluations of the parties, and therefore voters are being successfully cued by parties.

It is relatively easy to test. We can model the absolute distance at t_2 between self-placement and the true value for each party. As for our examination of party placements, we want to see whether and how treatment matters given absolute distance between the first party placement and the true placement. Our independent variables thus include the absolute distance at time t_1 and separate dummy variables for each of the four treatments. Also included are variables to capture the effects of identity. For this, we include a variable that taps the respondent's expressed probability of voting for the party, which ranges between 1 and 10.¹² Separate interactive variables are also included to capture the dependence of the partisan identity effect on treatment. Variables tapping the effects of knowledge were included, but to little effect.¹³ The results of estimating an OLS regression equation for each party are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: OLS Regression Predicting Absolute Distance between Self-Placement and the 'True' Value for Each Party at t_2

Variable	Labour		Conservative		Liberal	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Absolute distance t_1	0.65***	0.02	0.56***	0.02	0.64***	0.02
Condition 1	0.00	–	0.00	–	0.00	–
Condition 2	–0.21	0.24	–0.18	0.20	–0.45	0.32
Condition 3	–0.18	0.23	–0.26	0.19	–0.34	0.32
Condition 4	–0.41*	0.23	0.04	0.20	–0.56*	0.31
Condition 5	0.04	0.24	0.22	0.20	0.06	0.32
Prob. to vote for party (PTV)	–0.08***	0.03	–0.07***	0.03	–0.12***	0.04
Cond 1* PTV	0.00	–	0.00	–	0.00	–
Cond 2* PTV	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.10*	0.06
Cond 3* PTV	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.09	0.06
Cond 4* PTV	0.05	0.04	0.01	0.04	0.08	0.06
Cond 5* PTV	0.00	0.04	–0.02	0.04	0.00	0.06
Constant	1.44***	0.19	1.23***	0.15	2.28***	0.25
Adjusted R^2	0.47		0.39		0.48	
N (unweighted)	1,231		1,233		1,224	

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: British European Election Study (2004).

The results show that treatment does not really matter. Two of the twelve main effects of conditions are significant, but barely so ($p = 0.10$). Only one of the interactive effects is significant, and this does not correspond with either of the two significant main effects. The results are essentially what we would expect by chance. All that matters for self-party distance at t_2 is self-party distance at t_1 and identification with the party itself. The former effect is as expected; the latter is somewhat less straightforward, partly because we control for distance at t_1 . Perhaps it picks up the effect of unmeasured true distance. The problem is that the direction of causality is not entirely clear. It may be that parties cue voters and political preferences determine distance, where the more likely a person is to vote for a party, the more likely he or she is to place him or herself close to the party. Nonetheless our findings of no treatment effects are also consistent with the argument that party support does not determine distance, but is rather determined by it instead. Given the research of Marco Steenbergen *et al.* (2007), who argue that the effect of elites on supporters is much stronger outside plurality systems and for internally cohesive parties for which the EU is very salient, perhaps this should come as little surprise. Although we see the effects of providing information on at least

Labour placements (notably the most internally divided party) for the less politically sophisticated, all British voters' self-placements on this issue appear to be exogenous to party placements.

Conclusions and Discussion

Our investigation tells us a number of different things. First, more descriptively, we see that the British public is not only generally ill-informed about the EU, as we would have expected, but also that its placements of the three main political parties on European issues differ significantly from expert judgements of the parties' positions. This said, some sections of the electorate with higher levels of institutional knowledge are quite well-informed regarding party positions. Second, and of broader interest, is the extent to which we could change people's opinions. Consistent with our first two hypotheses, providing political information did matter for party placements, but only for less sophisticated voters. Indeed, they were able to bring their assessments of party positions in line with their more institutionally knowledgeable counterparts, on average. The large differences in the acceptance of information across levels of political sophistication are very much in keeping with previous research that has looked at factual policy information (Kuklinski *et al.*, 2000). Thus the effects of providing 'political' information seem much like those of providing factual information in other policy areas.

Providing political information did not always matter though. For example, Conservative party placements were largely impervious to change, though arguably this is unsurprising since there were only small differences in placements across sophistication levels to start with. More importantly, Liberal Democrat placements only moved in response to receiving the full treatment of all three 'true' party positions. Labour placements were the most consistently susceptible to influence across conditions, and it seems reasonable to suppose that this is at least partly due to problems with identifying the actual location of the party to begin with. This appears quite understandable given the party's conflicted elite stance on European integration, and is interesting in the context of the EU integration cueing literature. Recent work has shown that internally divided parties have more difficulty cueing their partisans on the European issue (Gabel and Scheve, 2007; Ray, 2003; Steenbergen *et al.*, 2007; de Vreese, 2006). The logic of why this happens is simple. The party's position is unclear, so there is poor information regarding party positioning, and therefore endorsement cues by parties are less effective.¹⁴ This clearly fits with our results: it is only for those parties for which there are large disparities between sophisticated voters and unsophisticated voters that we are able to move placements with the presentation of simple information. Following from this, if it is difficult for parties to inform many voters of their positions, it is also therefore difficult to cue them appropriately, and here in fact we find little evidence of cueing. We find that providing information about party placements did not influence

voters' self-placements to any discernible degree as set out in our third hypothesis. This was true not only for Labour, as this pattern of null effects applied regardless of party. Of course these results may be peculiar to the British case, in that elites may be more effective in cueing voters outside plurality systems, as suggested by Steenbergen *et al.* (2007).

Having said all this, any lack of effects could of course be due to the design of our survey experiment. First, it could reasonably be argued that the setting is an unrealistic one – that the information voters typically acquire and the way in which they acquire it differs quite radically from how they are informed here.¹⁵ Second, ideological placements are not really objective, and it may be that for more concrete issues, such as support for the European Constitution, people may be more inclined to update their placements based on new information about parties' actual positions. Third, even to the extent that results are robust in the European domain, they may not generalise to other types of issues, and there is little gainsaying this possibility where there is little difference across levels of sophistication, as we might expect on issues of high salience.

Given these limits, perhaps there is reason to be sanguine. The results do reveal some learning after all, and it may be that people learned as much as could be expected. Predictably, those with lower levels of political sophistication gained the most from the extra information, which fits with work regarding more concrete factual information. Moreover, in the end, respondents did fairly accurately *rank* the parties on what still is an issue of relatively low salience to the British electorate. Possibly this is as far as one can go abstracted from the political world, as we are in this experiment providing information on an assumed public consensus position. It may be difficult to go much further even out in the real world, but that remains a subject for future research.

Appendix

Experimental Battery

- (1) Thinking more generally about the EU, some people say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. I'd like you to imagine a 10-point scale. On this scale, 1 means unification 'has already gone too far' and 10 means it 'should be pushed further'.

Five conditions, respondents randomly assigned to each condition (i.e. 1/5 in each group). Read out text for each condition.

Condition 1: [no text]

Condition 2: For example, most people would place the Conservative party at around 3 on this scale.

Condition 3: For example, most people would place the Labour party at around 7 on this scale.

Condition 4: For example, most people would place the Liberal Democrats at around 9 on this scale.

Condition 5: For example, most people would place the Conservative party at around 3 on this scale, Labour at around 7 and the Liberal Democrats at around 9.

Thinking of your own views, what number on this scale best describes your position?

1 Unification has already gone too far

2

...

9

10 Unification should be pushed further

98 dk

(2) And can I ask you about where would you place the political parties on this scale?

(2a) How about the Labour party?

1 Unification has already gone too far

2

...

9

10 Unification should be pushed further

98 dk

(2b) The Conservative party?

1 Unification has already gone too far

2

...

9

10 Unification should be pushed further

98 dk

(2c) The Liberal Democrats?

1 Unification has already gone too far

2

...

9

10 Unification should be pushed further

98 dk

Knowledge Quiz

(3) Finally we are interested in how much people know about the European Union, so we'd like to ask you a few questions about it. If you don't know the answer to a question, just take a guess please.

- (3a) You may have noticed that a number of countries just joined the EU this year. Do you happen to know whether 2, 5, 10 or 13 countries joined?
- 1 2
 - 2 5
 - 3 10
 - 4 13
 - 8 dk
- (3b) The President of the European Commission serves for five years. Do you know who the current President of the European Commission is? Is it Silvio Berlusconi, Jacques Delors, Neil Kinnock or Romano Prodi?
- 1 Silvio Berlusconi
 - 2 Jacques Delors
 - 3 Neil Kinnock
 - 4 Romano Prodi
 - 8 dk
- (3c) Third, as you may also know, the Presidency of the European Council switches every six months. Holland gets the Presidency next month. Do you know which country has held the Presidency for the last six months? Was it Britain, Germany, Ireland or Italy?
- 1 Britain
 - 2 Germany
 - 3 Ireland
 - 4 Italy
 - 8 dk

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Notes

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1 Although of course, some theorists argue that voters do not need to be informed for democracy to function effectively. This finds a variety of expressions (see Pitkin, 1967), of which the most contrary may be Burke's (1987 [1774]) classic argument that we are best served by 'trustees'.

2 Deliberative fora have been used in the United States (and elsewhere) for some time now, from early efforts to promote civic education to more recent attempts to conduct deliberative polls. There is evidence to suggest that deliberation matters; that is, the process of deliberating causes people's policy preferences to change. This is interesting and important, but it is still not entirely clear how to reveal a meaningful public voice, and a fully fledged deliberative democracy does not seem feasible. This has led some (Gastil, 2000) to recommend using 'citizen panels', where representative samples of the public are brought together to deliberate on the issues of the day. To reflect the results of these deliberations broadly, and in a politically meaningful way, summary information about the

conclusions of the panels would be made available to the voting public. Voters thus would have ready access to the considered opinions of typical people on the important issues of the day. They would be armed and dangerous, at least for incumbent politicians.

- 3 See Druckman (2005) for an interesting essay on the structuring role of political communication.
- 4 While its salience has increased over time, the issue remains less important than the economy, crime, health and some other domestic issues. Data from the European Election Survey shows that in 2004, at the time of the European elections, less than 5 per cent of respondents cited relations with the EU as the most important problem facing Britain, and only slightly over 13 per cent mentioned it at all compared to the 38 per cent that mentioned health and the 29 per cent that mentioned law and order.
- 5 This type of model has deep roots in American and comparative politics research, beginning with Campbell *et al.* (1960).
- 6 The British survey was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (award RES-000-22-0745). For more information about the general project, see: <http://www.europeanelectionstudies.net/>
- 7 Laver's survey of over 100 academics in 1997 places the Conservative party at 4.2, on a 1–20 scale with 20 as most Europhile, Labour at 12.0 and the Liberal Democrats at 16.4 (Laver, 1998). Ray's survey in the late 1990s has eight British academics placing the parties as they were in 1996 (Ray, 1999). On a 1–7 scale, with 7 as most Europhile, the Conservative party was scored at 3.5, the Labour party at 6.0 and the Liberal Democrats at 6.6. This probably understates the Euroscepticism of the Conservatives, as manifesto data suggest that this increased somewhat between the 1992 and 1997 elections. This is what we see when we turn to the most recent data from the Marks/Steenbergen survey using thirteen experts in 1999 and the 2002 Chapel Hill survey that uses eighteen expert assessments (see Marks *et al.*, 2006; Steenbergen and Marks, 2007 for details of these surveys). Again using a 1–7 scale, they place the Conservative party at 2.2 in 1999 and 2.0 in 2002, the Labour party at 5.4 in 1999 and 5.2 in 2002 and the Liberal Democrats at 6.6 in 1999 and 6.7 in 2002.
- 8 These questions did not prove easy for the majority of respondents, with less than a plurality getting any single item correct. People did best on the number of new countries (36 per cent gave the right response), and somewhat worse on the Council (24 per cent) and Commission (19 per cent) questions. If we tally the results across questions, where DK responses are included as incorrect, 48 per cent scored 0, 32 per cent scored 1, 14 per cent scored 2 and 6 per cent scored 3.
- 9 The quiz questions correlate with one another, and scale reasonably well with factor analysis revealing one single factor (with factor loadings ranging from 0.61 to 0.74). We score 'don't know' (DK) responses as incorrect. This is of course contested, with some authors arguing that guessers should be randomly distributed to account for differing propensities to guess; the difference between men and women is especially pronounced (see for example Frazer and Macdonald, 2003 or Mondak and Anderson, 2004). Mondak and colleagues recommend a strategy of initially discouraging DK responses and then randomly reallocating any DK responses to real answers (Mondak, 2000; 2001; Mondak and Anderson, 2004). This approach has nonetheless been criticised by Luskin and Bullock (2005) and Sturgis *et al.* (forthcoming), and many authors continue simply to code DK responses as incorrect (for example Jerit *et al.*, 2006). Reassuringly, whether we reallocate DK responses randomly or use the strategy presented here of treating them as incorrect, our results are largely similar.
- 10 We also tested for an interaction between sophistication and absolute distance from the 'true' value, but this was found to be statistically insignificant for all three parties.
- 11 The predicted values are based on a model that includes condition, knowledge, the interaction between condition and knowledge, and absolute distance at t_1 . We have used the mean score in each subcategory of condition and knowledge level in our predictions. For example, mean absolute distance at t_1 for high-sophistication respondents in condition 5 placing Labour is 2.55, and for low-sophistication respondents in condition 5 placing Labour the mean absolute distance at t_1 is 2.70.
- 12 Specifically, people were asked: 'We have a number of parties in Britain, each of which would like to get your vote. How probable is it that you will ever vote for the following parties? Please specify your views on a 10-point scale where 1 means "not at all probable" and 10 means "very probable". If you think of the Labour party, what mark out of ten best describes how probable it is that you will ever vote for Labour?' A similar question was then asked for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. We use the probability to vote question rather than the survey measure of partisanship for the practical reason that less than 40 per cent of our respondents were willing to give a partisan identification. This was mainly due to question format ('Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular party' with no follow-up question). We therefore prefer to use a proxy for partisanship here, rather than trying to test for treatment effects when we have only, say, 175 Conservative partisans split between five treatment groups. Nonetheless results using partisanship, and for that matter vote choice at the 2004 EP election, are very similar to those presented here.
- 13 That is, the variables had no discernible effects. This is perhaps not surprising given that the dependent variables concern self-placements, not placements of parties or other political actors.
- 14 See also work by Hobolt (2007) looking at party cues in the 1994 referendum on EU membership in Norway. She shows that without information regarding party positioning on the general European dimension parties are not able to cue voters on particular issues, in this case joining the EU.

15 In this context, consider the use of text highlighting what 'most people think' about party positions. Regardless of the nature of the item, or the realism of the setting, it is likely that people may be more or less inclined to update based on the source of the cues. Most research on short-cuts and cues emphasises the nature of a trusted information source, and it may well be that 'most people' does not meet that standard (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman *et al.*, 1991). For example, Druckman (2001) has recently shown that credibility has large effects on whether framing really makes a difference to people's choices in various hypothetical situations. It is certainly not unreasonable to suppose that at least some voters think they know better than 'most people'. It also would go some way towards explaining why we see greater movement of those with less knowledge, as presumably they think of themselves as less informed than 'most people' and therefore 'most people' are seen as a credible source.

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