

# THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF PERCEIVED IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONS EVIDENCE FROM THREE SURVEY EXPERIMENTS

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**Abstract** Theoretical and empirical models describing how voters form perceptions of political candidates assume that such perceptions are independent of each other, even though decades of evidence in cognitive science have shown that context influences the perceptions of various stimuli. In this research note, we argue that such perceptions depend on the full range of available ideological platforms. Data from three survey experiments in Israel provide strong support for the hypothesis that voters consistently view candidates as more centrist when a more extreme candidate appears next to them on the ideological spectrum. Our results imply that voters consider the full spectrum of political actors when they form opinions about the ideological stance of any candidate, and the same pattern holds for the perception of the ideological position of parties.

A long tradition of research has analyzed how citizens form opinions about the ideological position of political parties and political candidates (Koch 2001; Adams 2012; Fortunato and Stevenson 2013). The significance of this literature is that it links empirical models of spatial voting (Jessee 2009) to research seeking to explain the strategic repositioning of political platforms (Adams et al. 2004; Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Ezrow et al. 2011). Interestingly, while much of the formal modeling literature on spatial voting assumes that voters' perceptions of each party's policy positions "correspond exactly with the policy promises the party elites issue to the public" and that "all voters

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have identical perceptions of each party's policy positions" (Adams 2012, 403), recent empirical studies on voter perceptions in multi-party democracies fail to support these assumptions (Adams et al. 2004; Adams 2012). We show that one reason that perceptions depart from what parties and candidates say is that perceptions are interdependent, and vary systematically based on the range of salient parties and candidates.

Most explanations for this apparent disconnect rely on the assumed lack of ability and/or motivation of voters to follow political campaigns (e.g., Zaller 1992). On the other hand, a growing body of empirical research focuses on the perceptual biases that individuals exhibit when they form their perceptions of political platforms (Conover and Feldman 1989; Lauermann 2013). This paper suggests and tests a new mechanism affecting the perceived ideological position of political parties and candidates. Namely, because voters evaluate platforms vis-à-vis each other, their perceptions about them are interdependent (Callander and Wilson 2006, 2008).

Our argument is based on the findings of cognitive psychology that when individuals evaluate stimuli, their perception of those stimuli depends on the context in which they are evaluated (Parducci 1965). Such contextual effects have been found in the fields of visual perception (Laberge and Brown 1986), pain research (Watkinson et al. 2013), and marketing (Hutchinson 1983; Simonson 1989). These studies show that when evaluating a stimulus, people identify what they perceive to be the extreme end values and accordingly work out a range that serves as the context for evaluating the stimulus (Yeung and Soman 2005). In other words, the perceived intensity of various stimuli depends on the distribution of the stimuli to which people are exposed, with individuals exposed to more extreme stimuli evaluating others as less intense.

Analyzing the effect of question wording and response options on various attitude measures, public opinion scholars have come to very similar conclusions. A large body of evidence (e.g., Schwarz et al. 1985; Zaller 1992; Rockwood, Sangster, and Dillman 1997) shows that when answering closed questions, survey respondents are influenced by the range of response options. In fact, recent research (Broockman 2016; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016) finds that providing individuals with a wider range of policy alternatives to choose from can lead to radically different conclusions about the distribution of mass opinion about political issues.

Applying these notions to perceptions about the ideology of political actors, including both parties and individual candidates, implies that changes in the *ideological distribution of platforms* running for office systematically alter voters' perceptions about the positions taken by these actors. Given that even in multi-party systems voters are generally capable of perceiving the ideological direction of parties accurately (Blais et al. 2009), such contextual effects are expected to influence the perceived ideological distance of each party from the center. Thus, we hypothesize that *after the entry of an additional*

*candidate or party at one end of the spectrum, the position of the candidates or parties that occupy the same side will be perceived as more moderate.*

## **Data and Measurement**

To test this hypothesis, we use data from three experiments embedded in public opinion surveys fielded in Israel before the general elections of 2009 and 2015. Each experiment measured the perceived ideological position of several candidates and parties. To induce variation in the perceived distribution of candidates and parties on the political spectrum, each experiment manipulated the set of candidates or parties that respondents were asked to consider.

### SAMPLES

Our three studies differed in the samples they used, the political context in which they were conducted, and the number of experimental conditions they contained. Study 1 was conducted in January 2009, a few weeks before the Israeli elections ( $N = 696$ ). Participants were recruited from shoppers in two large malls and asked to fill out a short questionnaire without any compensation for their participation. In order to increase response rates, we kept the questionnaire length at a minimum and did not collect detailed demographic data on respondents. The median age was 28, and 51 percent were female.

Study 2 was conducted through a web panel survey by Amidgam Panel, a leading professional Israeli polling firm, on March 15, 2015, two days before the Israeli parliamentary election ( $N = 796$ ). This study was composed of a nationally representative sample to gauge whether the results could be generalized to the adult Israeli population (see online appendix B for the sample's descriptive statistics and sampling details). Study 3 was conducted simultaneously with study 2, using a different sample from the same panel of participants ( $N = 800$ ).

### EXPERIMENTAL CONDITIONS

We achieved experimental control over the distribution of political positions on a given side of the political spectrum by making different sets of candidates/parties salient for our participants. Each participant was asked to place some "target" candidates/parties on a standard left-right scale. In study 1, respondents were asked: "On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is extreme left and 5 is extreme right, where would you place Benjamin Netanyahu/Tzipi Livni/Avigdor Lieberman?" Study 2 used the same question wording but measured the perceived positions on a 0–100 scale, giving respondents more space to place the candidates. The scale in study 2 was adopted, given how the five-point scale in study 1 limited some respondents who chose to measure candidates using non-rounded scores. To make the results comparable across studies, we recoded all of the outcomes so they were between 0 and 1. The questionnaires

and experimental manipulations are presented in online appendices C and D. The distribution of the unstandardized dependent measures is reported in online appendix E (figures E1 and E2). Additionally, some participants were asked to consider other candidates/parties and place them on the same scale. In each of the three studies, the “target” candidates/parties were moderate, while the additional candidates/parties were extreme. Before asking participants to place candidates or parties on an ideological scale, we asked them which candidates they would vote for from among the choice set assigned to them.

We measured vote intention before our dependent variable so as to prime respondents about the set of viable candidates and parties without confounding the experimental manipulation with the order in which the placement of candidates were elicited. In order to avoid question order effects, the order of the placement question was randomized in each study.

The three studies differed in the targeted and extreme candidates/parties included in the choice sets. In study 1, each subject was asked to rate Benjamin Netanyahu (moderate right) and Tzipi Livni (moderate left), the two main-stream candidates for the 2009 election. Half of the respondents were randomly assigned to place the right-wing extremist Avigdor Lieberman on the same scale. We hypothesized that the respondents exposed to Lieberman in the three-candidate choice set would perceive Netanyahu as more centrist than those who were asked to consider only Netanyahu and Livni.

Study 2 included additional experimental conditions, testing the inclusion of an extreme right-wing candidate, an extreme left-wing candidate, and both extreme candidates. The target candidates were Benjamin Netanyahu (Likud) and Isaac Herzog (Zionist Union Party), and the extreme candidates whom subjects in the treatment groups were asked to place on the ideological space were Zehava Gal'on (the leader of the left-wing Meretz Party) and Naftali Bennett (the leader of the right-wing Jewish Home Party).

Study 3 used the same experimental design as study 2, but instead of manipulating and eliciting the perceived position of candidates, we used political parties as the stimuli. This issue is of particular importance in Israel, because while Israeli politics have become extremely personalized, as in most Western democracies, Israelis vote for parties, not individual candidates. On the other hand, since our hypothesis should be applicable to both candidates and parties, we wanted to expand the generalizability of our findings. [Table 1](#) summarizes the experimental conditions (targeted and extreme candidates/parties) used in the three experiments.

#### STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

We identify the interdependence of the perceived positions by comparing the mean perceived ideological position of the targeted candidates across the experimental conditions. In particular, we regressed the left-right placement of the targeted candidates (and parties, in the case of study 3) on indicators for each experimental group. We denote these variables *Extreme Right* in the

**Table 1. Candidate/Party List by Study and Experimental Condition**

|                             | Study 1                         | Study 2                                  | Study 3   |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Control                     | Livni<br>Netanyahu              | Herzog<br>Netanyahu                      | Zionist Union<br>Likud                          |
| With extreme right          | Livni<br>Netanyahu<br>Lieberman | Herzog<br>Netanyahu<br>Bennett           | Zionist Union<br>Likud<br>Jewish Home           |
| With extreme left           |                                 | Herzog<br>Netanyahu<br>Gal'on            | Zionist Union<br>Likud<br>Meretz                |
| With extreme left and right |                                 | Herzog<br>Netanyahu<br>Bennett<br>Gal'on | Zionist Union<br>Likud<br>Jewish Home<br>Meretz |

If the elections for the Israeli prime minister/Knesset were held today, and the candidates/parties were [candidate list/parties list], which of these candidates/parties would you vote for?

case of study 1 and *Extreme Right*, *Extreme Left*, and *Both* (the condition with four candidates or parties) for studies 2 and 3. To facilitate the interpretation of the findings, we also computed the effect sizes as the percentage change in the mean placements compared to the mean placement in the control group.

## Results

**Table 2** reports our main results. The first and second columns display the treatment effects based on study 1, showing the effect of introducing Lieberman, the extreme right-wing candidate, into the choice set on the perceived position of Netanyahu and Livni, respectively. As expected, presenting the participants with Lieberman as a viable candidate shifted the perceived position of Netanyahu to the left ( $b = -0.034$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), but the perceived stance of Livni remained unaffected.

The third and fourth columns present the same estimates for study 2, replicating the previous finding in a different election and representative sample. The estimates now show the effect of including Bennett, the extreme right-wing candidate, Gal'on, the extreme left-wing candidate, or both of them on the perceived position of Netanyahu and Herzog, respectively. The results indicate that introducing the extreme right-wing candidate shifted Netanyahu's position in the eyes of voters toward the center ( $b = -0.032$ ,  $p = 0.059$ ), but left the perceived position of Herzog unchanged. Conversely, exposure to the extreme left-wing candidate made Herzog seem more centrist ( $b = 0.035$ ,  $p = 0.045$ ), but now the perception of Netanyahu remained unchanged.

Table 2. Spatial Candidate and Party Perceptions by Treatment

| DV: Placement of...    | Study 1             |                    |  | Study 2            |                    |  | Study 3            |                    |  |
|------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--|--------------------|--------------------|--|--------------------|--------------------|--|
|                        | 1                   | 2                  |  | 3                  | 4                  |  | 5                  | 6                  |  |
|                        | Netanyahu           | Livni              |  | Netanyahu          | Herzog             |  | Likud              | Zionist Union      |  |
| Extreme right          | -0.034**<br>(0.008) | -0.005<br>(0.009)  |  | -0.032*<br>(0.015) | 0.004<br>(0.017)   |  | -0.037*<br>(0.015) | -0.014<br>(0.02)   |  |
| Extreme left           | -                   | -                  |  | -0.004<br>(0.016)  | 0.035**<br>(0.017) |  | 0.007<br>(0.015)   | -0.006<br>(0.021)  |  |
| Both                   | -                   | -                  |  | -0.012<br>(0.016)  | 0.005<br>(0.017)   |  | -0.008<br>(0.016)  | -0.007<br>(0.021)  |  |
| Constant               | 0.801**<br>(0.006)  | 0.577**<br>(0.007) |  | 0.715**<br>(0.011) | 0.309**<br>(0.012) |  | 0.708**<br>(0.01)  | 0.344**<br>(0.015) |  |
| Effect on "targeted"   | -4.2%               | -                  |  | -4.5%              | 11.3%              |  | -5.2%              | -1.7%              |  |
| Effect on "untargeted" | -                   | -0.9%              |  | -0.6%              | 1.3%               |  | 1.0%               | -4.1%              |  |
| Observations           | 695                 | 695                |  | 796                | 794                |  | 800                | 800                |  |
| R-squared              | 0.027               | 0                  |  | 0.006              | 0.007              |  | 0.012              | 0.001              |  |

NOTE.—Robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variables were recoded on 0–1 scales.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

Finally, the last two columns provide the results from study 3. Closely mirroring the results of study 2, participants exposed to the Jewish Home Party (the extreme right-wing party led by Bennett) shifted the perception of Likud toward the center ( $b = -0.037$ ,  $p = 0.029$ ). Interestingly, there was no evidence that the introduction of either of the extremist parties influenced the perceived position of the Zionist Union Party. Studies 2 and 3 also allowed us to estimate the effect of exposing participants to multiple extreme candidates or parties. Consistent with expectations, when both a left-wing and a right-wing extremist party were introduced, the participants' perceptions of the moderate parties and candidates remained unchanged.

## **Conclusion**

This study applied the concept of contextual effects to the study of voters' perceptions of the ideological position of political parties and candidates. Altogether, the three studies provide strong support for our hypothesis: Changes in the distribution of the ideological positions of political parties/candidates considered by voters lead to changes in the perception of the more centrist parties/candidates. In all three studies, voters primed to consider extreme right-wing (left-wing) candidates rated moderate right-wing (left-wing) candidates as more centrist. The observed effects are very large, amounting to 10–15 percent of the baseline measures of perceived positions. Our results suggest that voters think of ideological positions in relative, not absolute, terms.

The key implication of our finding is that overlooking such contextual effects (that could arise either because of changes in the political landscape of a country or simply because response options vary across surveys) can change how voters perceive the positions of political platforms, whether that platform is of a party or an individual candidate. More generally, similar mechanisms might play a role when survey takers are asked about their policy preferences (Simonovits 2017) or their food consumption habits (Tourangeau et al. 2014). Therefore, we suggest that voters' perceptions of individual political platforms should not be analyzed in isolation, and future research should both explore the interdependence between these perceptions and deploy survey instruments that are less sensitive to these issues.

These findings have two important implications for the study of voter perceptions about party ideology. First, the interdependence of perceptions about candidate and party ideology could explain the puzzling lack of updating on the part of voters after the repositioning of parties (Adams 2012). If external shocks in the political environment cause several parties to reposition themselves on the political spectrum, voters might not update their perception of the parties, simply because shifts in the individual parties' stances are counter-balanced by changes in the full distribution of their positions. Exploring this possibility using aggregate data would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Second, our analysis shows that survey researchers interested in measuring perceptions of candidate and party ideology should be aware that contextual effects like the one described in this study can affect responses to such questions. While some researchers have made the case for addressing this problem in the context of expert surveys (Bakker et al. 2014) and comparative surveys research in general (King and Wand 2007), the problem has gone unnoticed in the study of mass perceptions about party platforms. Future research should thus develop methods to measure changes in the perceived position of platforms that are less prone to contextual effects.

Our empirical analysis focuses on a single country, and it is likely that the magnitude of effects that our study revealed varies across contexts, possibly as a function of political institutions. For instance, one might expect that the political institutions that limit the number of parties sharpen citizen perceptions of their platforms. At the same time, the recent developments in majoritarian systems, such as the emergence of UKIP in the UK as well as the success of extremist candidates in the 2016 US presidential primaries, suggests that contextual effects are not limited to proportional systems with many parties.

The scope of this research note is limited to the study of voters' perceptions of parties and candidates. At the same time, assuming that voters base their choices at least partially on how close they feel to the candidates based on their ideological stances (Jessee 2012), it is possible that the effects uncovered in our study may influence election outcomes as well. In particular, the interdependence of perceived ideologies could lead to the counterintuitive result that the entry of right-wing extremist parties helps moderate conservative parties. While research exists on how extreme parties affect mainstream party competition (Meguid 2005, 2008; Hall 2015), future studies could explore implications of our findings for party competition.

## Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available at *Public Opinion Quarterly* online.

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