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Political judgments, perceptions of facts, and partisan effects

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ABSTRACT

We test two competing hypotheses about the impact of partisanship and information on people's political judgments and perceptions of facts using Canadians' reactions to a major scandal. Our findings with respect to subjective political judgments confirm the argument that partisan predispositions are crucial. But there is no evidence to support the argument that the polarizing effect of partisanship is most evident among the most informed. When it comes to perceptions of "objective" facts, the results are consistent with Zaller's reception axiom: the more informed people are, the more likely they are to correctly perceive objective facts. Partisanship does not appear to affect these perceptions.

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1. Introduction

In representative democracies the hope is that citizens know what they want and what their representatives stand for. As a consequence, they are able to choose those representatives who are most likely to adopt the policies that they would like to see adopted. That said, researchers have documented the thin layer of political knowledge among the mass public (Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). While the debate about whether or not politicians are responsive enough to citizens' needs and wants is still alive (Stimson et al., 1995; Monroe, 1998; Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000; Erikson et al., 2002), most scholars reach the same conclusion on people's overall lack of information.

Scholars disagree, however, about the consequences of the public's lack of political awareness. Some argue that the consequences are limited because uninformed voters can use "shortcuts" or "cues", most particularly party identification, to make relatively correct judgments (Popkin, 1991; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Sniderman et al., 1991). Sceptics contend, by contrast, that these shortcuts are often inaccurate or inappropriate and the uninformed are prone to make many mistakes (Althaus, 1998; Bartels, 1996).

Party identification is a pervasive political predisposition that may function as an informational shortcut by providing reasons to support one's political judgment. In the seminal *The American Voter*, Campbell et al. claim that party identification is a "perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favourable to his partisan orientation" (Campbell et al., 1960: 1333). The impact of partisan predispositions has been extensively scrutinized, and most researchers agree with the claim that partisan attachments strongly affect not only voting behaviour but also the formation of opinions on the issues of the day (Stokes, 1966; Pomper, 1972; Jacoby, 1995; Zaller, 1992).

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Our study deals with the effects of information and party identification on voters' perceptions and judgments. We are interested in the relative magnitude of these two effects but we are also keen to examine how they interact. What happens, for instance, when partisans are exposed to information that conflicts with their partisan predispositions? We are interested in the impact of information and party identification on two distinct fronts. First, the analysis focuses on how information and party identification affect citizens' capacity to accurately perceive "objective" facts. We then turn to ascertain how they influence the formation of subjective judgments about political actors.

An important line of thought is that opinions on political issues among strong partisans become more polarized as the level of information increases. One of the most well known proponents of this argument is Zaller. According to him (Zaller, 1992), highly informed partisans are more likely to be aware of partisan divisions among political elites, and they tend to recognize and to resist information that is at odds with their partisan predispositions. Other scholars argue that partisanship has a divisive effect. People selectively process the information that they receive on the basis of their prior beliefs, and they are too stubborn to change their perceptions and judgments (Taber and Lodge, 2006; Taber et al., 2001).

Yet others credit people with the ability to sort out what is right and what is wrong and accordingly update their evaluation of policy and issues. For instance, Gerber and Green assert that partisans revise their opinion as they consume information (Gerber and Green, 1998, 1999). Gaines et al. lend some support to Gerber and Green by showing slight revisions in opinions on the Iraq war among weak Republicans and independents (Gaines et al., 2007).

In this study, we examine voters' reactions to a major scandal and to the public inquiry about the scandal. We distinguish between perceptions of "objective" facts about the conclusions reached by the commission of inquiry and subjective judgments about the role of the Canadian Prime Minister in the affair, and we determine how party identification and level of information affect each.

Political judgments turn out to be most significantly affected by partisanship. Nonetheless, information also plays a significant role. Intriguingly, no polarization effect is found. On the other hand, perceptions of facts are hardly influenced by people's partisanship. Although greatly swayed by their party identification when they make subjective judgments, people do not selectively screen information. In this case, perceptions of the verdict of the commission of inquiry into the scandal were strongly affected by people's overall level of political knowledge and they were strikingly impervious to their partisan predispositions.

2. Competing hypotheses about the role of partisanship and information

The primary objective of this study is to examine how political information is received by partisans and how acceptance of new information influences their judgments. We conceive of this process as a two step one, the first being about the reception of a message and the second concerning the formation of an opinion as such. Thus, there

are two questions to be addressed. First, how does partisanship affect the reception of political information? Second, how do political information and party identification affect political judgments on the issue?

Those who assert that partisan affiliation interacts with political knowledge contend that partisans with higher levels of political knowledge are prone to cling most tenaciously to the party line. This perspective emphasizes people's eagerness to reach a desired conclusion. The psychological mechanism that provides the basis for the argument is the process called "motivated political reasoning", which implies that "directional goals" lead people to access and accept information which justifies their conclusion. This affects people's reasoning and results in biases in both their perceptions and opinions (Kunda, 1990, 1999; Taber et al., 2001). According to this perspective, new information will fail to sway the opinions of well-informed partisans if it conflicts with their partisan predisposition. Poorly informed partisans, however, are more likely to be influenced because they are unable to discern whether the new information challenges their prior views (Zaller, 1992). Thus, when an issue divides political elites along party lines, well-informed partisans are the most likely to divide along similar lines. Polarization is more intense among the politically well-informed group because they are more attentive to partisan cues and more receptive to political messages that are congruent with their partisan predispositions. According to Zaller, the positions taken by the political elite are one of the most important sources of polarization among highly informed partisans. Because they are less attentive, poorly informed partisans are less likely to receive elite messages and even if they do receive them, they are less likely to resist messages that are inconsistent with their partisan predispositions (Zaller, 1992).¹

Gerber and Green (1999), by contrast, argue that public opinion, when encountering new information, changes in parallel ways in the same direction, independent of partisan affiliation. Employing a Bayesian updating model, they suggest that people of all partisan affiliations objectively receive new political information and use it to re-evaluate the performance of political parties. The study uses longitudinal data of approval ratings of presidents and appraisals of the economy. The initial starting points of partisans differ substantially on these subjects. However, Gerber and Green note that informational effects among both Democrats and Republicans are similar, leading to parallel shifts of opinion in the same direction over time, which implies similar degrees of political updating by partisans of both parties. They also suggest that partisan differences in political learning arise either from distinctive political preferences and values or from "different assessments" of the credibility of political information, but they are not necessarily biases (Gerber and Green 1999: 193).

¹ Zaller (1992) indicates that no partisan gap will emerge in the case of mainstream issues on which there is no partisan division at the elite level. For instance, the Vietnam War did not initially divide political elites along partisan lines and it was supported in its early stage by better educated people regardless of their partisanship. Opinions became polarized only when party elites disagreed.

Bartels (2002) takes issue with this perspective, arguing instead that the parallel change is the product of strong partisan-biased processing of information, which prevents public opinion from converging. Without partisan-biased learning, according to Bartels, the Bayesian theorem predicts that the views of well-informed liberals and conservatives would converge. Bartels conducts a set of analyses of the impact of partisanship on opinion change, using data from the American National Election Studies. He examines evaluations of George Bush's handling of economy and foreign policy and his overall performance as president from 1990 to 1992. He finds a strong and pervasive partisan impact on these evaluations. Bayesian convergence is offset by partisan divergence, with the global outcome being a parallel change in voter perceptions over time. He also finds that the partisan impact is essentially the same among the highly informed and their less informed counterparts. Bartels' analysis challenges not only Gerber and Green's updating Bayesian theory but also Zaller's "partisan resistance" theory. He emphasizes the penetrating effect of partisan attachments at all levels of information and its "ubiquitous" presence (Bartels, 2002: 129). Gaines et al.'s study of public opinion about the war in Iraq similarly finds that, while both Democrats and Republicans update their factual information, how they incorporate new information into political opinion is largely determined by partisan predispositions (Gaines et al., 2007).

In contrast to the substantial research on how partisan orientations and information influence political judgments, far less attention has been paid to how partisanship and information affect the reception of "objective" information. Zaller briefly states that the reception of "objective" information is determined by a person's level of information and attentiveness to politics, that is, her "intellectual engagement with a given issue" (Zaller, 1992, 44), not by her general predisposition (Zaller, 1992, 139). One particularly interesting study on this matter is the one by Gaines et al. (2007) about public opinion regarding Iraq. The authors distinguish four models of updating processes: complete updating, fact avoidance, meaning avoidance, and opinion disconnect. They divide the updating process into four stages and check if partisanship interferes at different stages. They find that Democrats engage in "complete updating"; they follow the changing reality and adjust their factual beliefs and opinions accordingly. Republicans do not avoid the facts that might contradict what they might wish to believe. But they chose not to revise their interpretation of the situation. Gaines et al. (2007) conclude that the findings lend some support to both Gerber and Green and Bartels. As they note, "all partisan groups updated their factual beliefs... Yet, in support of Bartels, Democrats and Republicans maintained their polarized policy opinions." (Gaines et al., 2007, 971) Their conclusions are consistent with Zaller's views about the reception of information, as they see no evidence of fact avoidance.

Nonetheless, some political psychologists are more dubious about people's rationality when they confront objective information. They argue that, driven by the desire for their opinions to be supported by consistent evidence, people are often prone to distort the information process so

that their factual beliefs correspond with their values or ideology (Kunda, 1990; Klein and Kunda, 1992; Lodge and Taber, 2000; Taber et al., 2001). Taber and Lodge (2006) demonstrate that people who are highly informed and who have strong predispositions are the most reluctant to accept an idea that is not consistent with their prior position. Indeed, they strive to maintain their predispositions by seeking confirmatory evidence and, in doing so, consolidate their predispositions. Taber and Lodge show that "even-handed" information cannot induce participants to be "fair-minded" if they are highly biased at the initial stage. Strongly opinionated and politically sophisticated people rarely change their views (Taber and Lodge, 2006). And Shani (2006, 2) finds "that the more politically knowledgeable people are far more biased in their perceptions of 'objective' national conditions, meaning that their partisan loyalty colors their perceptions to a much larger extent than it does for less knowledgeable citizens." In the same vein, Bartels argues that "partisan bias is widespread and its effects are not significantly mitigated or enhanced by access to objective political information" (Bartels, 2002). According to Bartels, then, even perceptions of "objective" facts are influenced by partisan biases.

In short, there is little debate in the literature that party loyalties strongly affect political judgments. There is more disagreement about how much or how little voters revise their opinions on the basis of new information and whether the more politically knowledgeable exhibit stronger or weaker partisan biases. There is also disagreement about how much or how little partisan orientations influence perceptions of objective facts. We confront these competing views with data about Canadian voters' perceptions and judgments about a major political scandal.

3. The Canadian sponsorship scandal

Jean Chrétien, the former Prime Minister of Canada (from 1993 to 2003) and leader of the Liberal Party, created a sponsorship program following the razor-thin victory of the No side in the 1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty (50.6% No, 49.4% Yes). With a total budget of \$250 million over six years, the program aimed to promote the benefits of federal programs and to increase the visibility of Canada in the province of Quebec.

Following allegations of irregularities in program expenditures, Prime Minister Chrétien called for a report to the Office of the Auditor General of Canada. The sponsorship program thus became the "sponsorship scandal". In December 2003, two months before the Auditor General's report was made public, Jean Chrétien stepped down as Prime Minister of Canada and was replaced by Paul Martin, after Martin was elected as leader of the Liberal Party. Martin had been Minister of Finance from 1993 to 2002, and he was thus the most powerful minister (and a minister from the province of Quebec) when the sponsorship program was under way. Martin was also a long time rival of Jean Chrétien.

The very first decision Martin made as Prime Minister, announced the day his new cabinet was sworn in, was to cancel the sponsorship program. Over the next few months Martin took a number of steps to deal with the brewing

scandal including the creation of a commission of inquiry into the sponsorship program headed by Justice John H. Gomery. The Gomery Commission began its public hearings in the fall of 2004. These hearings lasted nine months; they were intensely covered by the media and they produced startling testimonies that left no doubt that there had been corruption. Advertising agencies had received lavish amounts of money for very little actual work, and some of that money had been funnelled back into Liberal party coffers. Judge Gomery's first report released in the fall of 2005 confirmed that there had been serious wrongdoing, but it cleared all politicians of guilt except for the former minister of public works. Most relevant here, it explicitly said that "Mr. Martin...is entitled, like other Ministers in the Quebec caucus, to be exonerated from any blame for carelessness or misconduct" (Canada Commission of Inquiry into the Sponsorship Program and Advertising Activities 2005–2006, 77).

Following the release of the Gomery report, the Liberals emphasized Martin's lack of involvement in the scandal, while the opposition parties predictably referred to widespread corruption within the Liberal party and downplayed Martin's innocence. Thus, the sponsorship scandal is clearly an issue on which political parties were polarized, and as such it provides a suitable test for the "polarization effect".

We focus on two dimensions. The first is perceptions of a fact, specifically the Gomery commission's conclusion that Martin was not to blame.² The second concerns personal judgments about Martin's role in the affair: Did people think that Martin was aware of the scandal at the time he was Finance Minister? This enables us to ascertain whether partisan differences emerge regardless of level of information or whether they are confined to the better informed. We also examine how much influence information exerts on subjective judgments. Finally, we evaluate whether partisan predispositions affect perceptions of an "objective" fact as well as subjective opinions.

According to Zaller's reception axiom (1992, 139), "a person's predispositions, although affecting acceptance of persuasive messages, do not affect reception."³ The claim is supported in the study of partisan opinion on Iraq war by

² It could be argued that the report only concluded that Martin should be exonerated from any blame for carelessness or misconduct but does not explicitly rule out other reasons. It is difficult, however, to imagine what kind of wrongdoing or negligence that would not imply some carelessness or misconduct. Some, especially on the opposition side, may have felt that Gomery came to that verdict because his mandate was not sufficiently broad and could have been reluctant to say that the report exonerated Martin. In short, some may have viewed the commission not as a neutral fact-finding body but as a skewed, politically convenient cover. Yet, the point is that we are interested here in perception of a fact, that is, that the commission concluded that Martin was not to blame. We should add that our findings, which show, that these perceptions were affected by level of information and not at all by partisanship, are consistent with our distinction between facts and opinions.

³ In Zaller's terms, we examine whether voters received the message of the Gomery report that Martin was not to blame and then whether they accepted or rejected that message. We prefer to highlight the contrast between perceptions of facts (about the content of the Gomery report) and judgments about the role of Paul Martin. Zaller makes different predictions about the two aspects while Bartels argues that partisan bias permeates all perceptions and opinions.

Gaines and his colleagues. Others argue the opposite. Bartels shows that "partisan predispositions exerted a powerful impact on perceptions of 'objective' economic events" (Bartels, 2002, 134), such as whether inflation or unemployment had increased or decreased. Shani examines more diverse types of informational questions and finds polarization of reception of political information among the better informed (Shani, 2006). If Zaller and Gaines et al.'s claim of no partisan effect in receiving factual information is correct, we should see no divergence between partisans regarding their knowledge of the Gomery verdict. Only a person's information level should play a role. If partisan affiliation is ubiquitous or even has polarizing power, as Bartels and Shani contend, we should see that the probability of knowing the verdict of the Gomery inquiry depends to a great extent on one's partisanship. If polarization occurs, the best informed Liberals should be most likely to be correct on the verdict, while the best informed opposition partisans should be least likely to admit that the Gomery inquiry reached the conclusion that Paul Martin was not to blame.

When it comes to subjective judgments about Martin's role, one critical question becomes: Do highly informed partisans differ most in their subjective judgments, as Zaller and other scholars would predict? If so, we should see the greatest divergence between the best informed Liberal and opposition partisans. The best informed Liberals should be the most likely to think that Martin had not been involved in the scandal, while the best informed opposition partisans should be the most likely to think that he had been.⁴ But, if information allows partisans to update their initial views, we should observe convergence in judgments over Martin's awareness of the scandal between Liberal and opposition partisans.

4. Data and method

We use data from the campaign waves of the 2004 and 2006 Canadian Election Study.⁵ In both 2004 and 2006, over 4000 respondents (response rates of 55% and 57%) were interviewed by telephone. Half of the 2006 sample consists of panel respondents who had initially been interviewed in 2004. We are confining the analysis to panel respondents, since we are interested in attitude change.⁶

⁴ Things were more complicated for Liberal partisans, since Liberals were feuding over the matter of whether Martin, Chrétien, both, or neither, were to blame for the sponsorship fiasco. Liberals were thus quite divided in their overall reactions to the scandal. We still expect Liberal partisans as a group to be more inclined to believe that their leader had not been involved in the scandal.

⁵ The 2004 CES was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, with support from Elections Canada. The 2006 CES was funded by Elections Canada. The campaign surveys were based on a rolling cross-section. The fieldwork was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University. The data and questionnaires are available at: www.ces-eec.mcgill.ca. We refer to the 2006 election or election campaign but it should be kept in mind that the campaign started in late November 2005.

⁶ Panel respondents had higher levels of information and party identification than non-panel respondents but their views about the scandal were quite similar.

Also, party identification, as measured in 2004, provides us with a more appropriate estimator, since it preceded the Gomery report (which was released in 2005) and avoids any endogeneity problem which might arise by using 2006 survey responses.

The study focuses on two aspects. The first is whether people correctly perceived that the Gomery inquiry cleared Paul Martin of any wrongdoing. The exact wording of the survey question presented to respondents was: “What does the Gomery report say about Paul Martin. Does the report say Paul Martin was to blame, was not to blame, or are you not sure?” A small majority (54%) gave the correct answer (not to blame) while 7% claimed that Martin was blamed and 38% did not know.

The second concerns subjective judgments: Did people think that Paul Martin knew about the affair before becoming Prime Minister? The question wording was: “Before becoming Prime Minister, do you think that Paul Martin knew about the scandal?” In 2004, when the scandal erupted and before the beginning of the inquiry, an overwhelming majority (79%) believed Martin was aware. That finding seems to confirm McGraw’s (1991) verdict that pleas of ignorance do not work very well. Only 11% said that they believed Martin was not aware, and another 10% had no opinion. By 2006, after the Gomery commission had issued its first report, the percentage who thought Martin knew about the affair had declined, but by only about 7 points. More than two-thirds of Canadians did not accept Judge Gomery’s verdict that the Prime Minister was completely innocent.⁷ Since we are interested in the dynamics of public opinion, we look at how views about Martin’s role changed between 2004 and 2006. In the case of perception of the Gomery verdict, there cannot be any dynamic analysis, since the Commission had not started its work in 2004.

The 2004 survey is used to measure respondents’ partisan affiliation and level of political knowledge. For party identification, we have three groups. Respondents who identified with the Liberal party are coded as “Liberal partisans”, while those who identified with the Conservatives, NDP or Bloc Quebecois are coded as “opposition partisans”. Those who did not identify with any of the parties are coded as “non-partisan”. The respondent’s level of political information is the proportion of correct answers on a set of factual questions. These questions relate to party promises on various issues, general political knowledge, knowledge of federal party leaders, as well as interviewer ratings of respondents’ level of political information. All correct answers are coded as 1 and all other responses as 0. The questions are presented in Appendix A. The resulting scale ranges from zero (no correct answer) to one (all correct). The mean score is .53.

Finally, factors that have been shown to influence Canadians’ vote choice, including region, religion (Catholic), level of education, and dummies for gender and for

non-white racial background (Blais et al., 2002) are included as control variables.

With respect to methods, we employ a multinomial logistic estimation because our dependent variables have three categories. Some scholars advocate the advantage of multinomial probit instead of multinomial logit because of the latter’s restrictive Independence of Irrelevant Alternative assumption (IIA) (Alvarez and Nagler, 1995, 1998). Unlike multinomial logit, multinomial probit does not require the IIA assumption, which is said to enhance the accuracy of the estimates. Others emphasize the simplicity and the efficiency of multinomial logit, which does not require intensive computation. Dow and Endersby particularly show in their simulations of American and French presidential election results that MNL and MNP show very little difference in outcomes (Dow and Endersby, 2004).

With these competing perspectives in mind, we performed Hausman and Small-Hsiao tests for each MNL regression to check if there is any violation of IIA assumption. The results are displayed in Tables 1 and 2. Some Hausman tests produce a negative Chi-square which prevents us from determining whether the IIA assumption is violated. Furthermore, the verdicts from Hausman and Small-Hsiao tests are different and mixed.⁸

As an additional precaution, we performed multinomial probit (MNP) analyses for the MNL regressions where the tests signalled possible violation of IIA assumption so as to check if there exists any huge discrepancy between MNP and MNL results. In this comparison, no major discrepancy emerges between MNP and MNL results. The only significant difference emerges when non-partisans are asked if the Gomery report says Martin was to blame or not. Those who answered that Martin knew of the scandal in 2004 are much less likely to say “don’t know” in 2006 according to the MNL estimation but the pattern is not statistically significant. In the MNP estimation, however, the coefficient becomes significant due to the decreased standard error. Other than this, all signs of coefficients and the presence of statistical significance converge in the two models. In addition, as Dow and Endersby indicated, the “IIA is a logical property of decision-making, not a statistical property such as consistency and unbiasedness.” (Dow and Endersby, 2004; 112) Simply put, logit estimates would not be inconsistent or biased even with the violation of IIA (Dow and Endersby, 2004; Train, 1993). We conclude that the multinomial logit estimation is appropriate in this case.

The MNL method provides a convenient estimate to compare the probabilities of each answer, but there are interactions to consider. We are interested not only in the independent influence of partisan affiliations or level of political knowledge but also in how these two factors interact.

When an interaction term is present in the model, it becomes trickier to interpret the findings (Ai and Norton,

⁷ We do not know exactly why so many people did not accept Judge Gomery’s conclusion. Perhaps many reasoned that while the Commission may not have been able to find unequivocal evidence that Paul Martin had been involved the circumstantial evidence strongly suggested that he must have known about the whole affair.

⁸ Long and Freese point out in their work that neither the Hausman-McFadden nor the Small-Hsiao test is particularly helpful for determining violations of IIA because both tests have limited and poor size properties. This has been regarded as being particularly true for Hausman tests, but Small-Hsiao tests are not dramatically better (Long and Freese, 2006).

Table 1

Perceptions of a fact (Does the Gomery report say Paul Martin was to blame, not to blame, or are you not sure?): a multinomial logit estimation.

	Not to blame vs. to blame	Not to blame vs. to blame (Liberal PID)	Not to blame vs. to blame (Opposition PID)	Not to blame vs. to blame (Non-partisan)
Liberal PID	0.01 (0.30)			
Opposition PID	–0.21 (0.27)			
Information	3.90*** (0.58)	4.20** (1.51)	3.23** (1.08)	4.31*** (0.81)
Martin knew of the scandal – yes (2004)	–0.88 (0.54)	–1.14 (0.81)	0.36 (1.13)	–1.36 (0.99)
Martin knew of the scandal – DK (2004)	–0.38 (0.71)	–0.89 (1.04)	0.20 (1.34)	0.18 (1.43)
Constant	1.32 (0.65)	1.36 (1.33)	0.08 (1.17)	1.97 (1.13)
Observations	1618	386	529	703
Pseudo R ²	0.154	0.212	0.134	0.174
Chi ²	325.20	106.86	100.41	159.61
Log-pseudo likelihood	–1138.24	–245.21	–377.25	–492.53
Hausman test IIA	–.69	–.24	2.557	–.167
p > Chi ²	NA	NA	.99	NA
Evidence	NA	NA	No violation	NA
Small-Hsiao test IIA	13.62	134.85	143.80	65.39
p > Chi ²	.48	.00	.00	.00
Evidence	No violation	Violation	Violation	Violation

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Note: Numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors. The model also includes region, religion, education, gender, and ethnicity. For the sake of simplicity, we do not report comparisons between Don't know and To blame or Not to blame.

2003; Powers, 2005; Hoetker, 2007; Huang and Shields, 2000). Given the interpretative challenges of interaction terms, we perform three separate analyses, on the basis of respondents' party identification (Liberal partisans, Opposition partisans, and Non-partisans), an approach which is recommended by Hoetker (2007). If the polarization theory is right, we should see a significantly negative effect of

information in the opposition partisan group versus a significantly positive effect of information among Liberal identifiers. A graphical presentation of the estimated effects is also offered to facilitate readers' understanding of the results.

Another concern of this study is to find out how strongly party identification and level of information affect people's

Table 2

Judgments about Martin's role (Do you think that Martin was aware of the scandal?): a multinomial logit estimation.

	No vs. yes	No vs. yes (Liberal PID)	No vs. yes (Opposition PID)	No vs. yes (Non-partisan)
Liberal PID	0.72*** (0.18)			
Opposition PID	–0.71*** (0.19)			
Information	1.88*** (0.39)	1.17 (0.64)	2.91** (0.97)	2.21*** (0.59)
Martin knew of the scandal – yes (2004)	–2.39*** (0.20)	–2.39*** (0.32)	–2.79*** (0.60)	–2.42*** (0.30)
Martin knew of the scandal – DK (2004)	–0.76** (0.28)	–0.97* (0.45)	–0.94 (0.73)	–0.42 (0.42)
Constant	–0.38 (0.32)	1.15 (0.52)	–1.67 (0.86)	–0.72 (0.49)
Observations	1618	386	529	703
Pseudo R ²	0.182	0.167	0.122	0.171
Chi ²	392.80	114.15	68.52	177.17
Log-pseudo likelihood	–1015.57	–296.96	–244.88	–454.11
Hausman test IIA	.568	2.06	–1.60	–.18
p > Chi ²	1.00	.99	NA	NA
Evidence	No violation	No violation	NA	NA
Small-Hsiao test IIA	11.61	6.97	108.03	16.66
p > Chi ²	.64	.86	.00	.16
Evidence	No violation	No violation	Violation	No violation

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Note: Numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors. The model also includes region, religion, education, gender, and ethnicity. For the sake of simplicity we do not report comparisons between Don't know and Yes or No.

political judgments. Consequently, the first regression results that we present show the independent impact of party affiliation and information.

5. Findings

The first matter to consider is how perceptions of the “objective fact” that the Gomery report completely cleared Paul Martin were related to partisanship and overall political awareness. Table 1 relates (correct) perception of this fact (the Not To Blame verdict) to party identification, overall level of information, and prior perception of Martin’s awareness of the scandal. For the sake of simplicity, we focus on the contrast between those who said that Paul Martin was to blame and those who answered that Martin was not to blame (see Appendix B for a presentation of the full results).

The regression results presented in the first column include information level and party identification together.⁹ The data confirm the crucial role of knowledge. Perceptions of the Gomery verdict are completely unaffected by partisanship (or prior judgments about Martin’s role). As Zaller’s reception axiom predicts, all that matters is the respondent’s level of information. Consistent with Gaines et al.’s findings, partisan affiliation does not blind people’s acceptance of objective information. As level of political information increases, one is more likely to provide the correct answer (Not To Blame) about the Gomery verdict.

Is there a polarization effect on perceptions of objective facts? The following three regression results provide the answer. One’s level of political information turns out to be a very important factor among all three types of partisans. Its magnitude is largest among non-partisans, followed by Liberals. The patterns are slightly different across the three groups (the pattern appears to be less linear in the case of Liberal partisans). That said, level of political knowledge is the most important factor in the acceptance of objective information, and its effect is the same among all partisan groups. There are no differences in informational effects across partisan groups, and thus no evidence of polarization. Fig. 1 shows that information makes a huge difference in the probability of knowing the Gomery verdict. Almost all the well informed know the verdict while hardly any of the least informed does. Partisanship, for its part, does not color at all people’s perception of the fact. This is a striking and encouraging result. Perceptions of facts, it seems, depend on level of information and they are impervious to partisan predispositions.

The bottom line question, however, is whether the “objective” information provided by Judge Gomery led some people to revisit their initial judgment that Martin was aware of the scandal at the time he was Minister of Finance, and, if so, what role party identification and

general level of knowledge played in the process. To address this question, we relate judgments (in 2006) about whether Paul Martin knew about the affair to partisanship and level of information. Because we are interested in the dynamics of opinion formation, we control for the same judgments measured in 2004.

Table 2 presents the findings.¹⁰ Again for the sake of simplicity we focus on the comparison between those who believed that Martin was aware of the scandal and those who thought that Martin was not aware, and we leave aside comparisons with those who said they did not know. The first column pertains to the whole sample. As the results show, partisanship is a determining factor in people’s opinion about whether Martin knew about the scandal. Liberal partisans are significantly more likely to think that he was unaware. Opposition partisans, by contrast, are much more prone to believe that he was aware. Information also plays a role. Those who follow politics more closely are more inclined to think that Martin was not aware of the affair when he was Finance Minister.

But, which variable is more influential? The results in Table 2 seem to suggest that information has a greater impact than party identification. Logit coefficients cannot be interpreted directly, but when level of information increases from the minimum (zero) to the maximum (1), the probability of perceiving that Martin was not aware of the scandal increases by 21 percentage points. Changing from being non-partisan to Liberal partisan also increases the same probability by 10 percentage points while a shift from non-partisan to opposition partisan decreases the probability by 7 percentage points.¹¹ Again, the impact associated with level of information (21 points) is only slightly larger than the distance between Liberal and opposition partisans (17 points). Overall, the effects of partisanship and level of information are of similar magnitude.

Fig. 2 illustrates the impact of political information and partisan affiliation. The graph plots the predicted probability of judging that Martin was not to blame by partisan groups and level of information. The predicted probability of believing that Martin was not aware is clearly highest among Liberals and lowest among opposition partisans. Non-partisans occupy the middle ground. The gap between partisans slightly widens as level of information increases. But for the most part information increases people’s perception that Martin was not aware to a similar degree in each group.

⁹ As shown in Appendix B, knowledge of the Gomery verdict is also positively related to level of education and is lower among Catholics.

¹⁰ Quebecers and those from non-European origin are also more likely to be sceptical about Martin’s innocence. Among Liberal identifiers, those who reside in Atlantic Canada are less likely to perceive that Martin was not involved in the scandal.

¹¹ The fact that Liberal partisans differ more from non-partisans than opposition partisans suggests that the feud that was taking place between the Chrétien and Martin “camps” within the Liberal party about who was most to blame for the sponsorship fiasco did not extend to perceptions of Martin’s awareness of the affair. We should also note that NDP partisans were less inclined to believe that Martin knew about the scandal than Conservative and Bloc partisans.

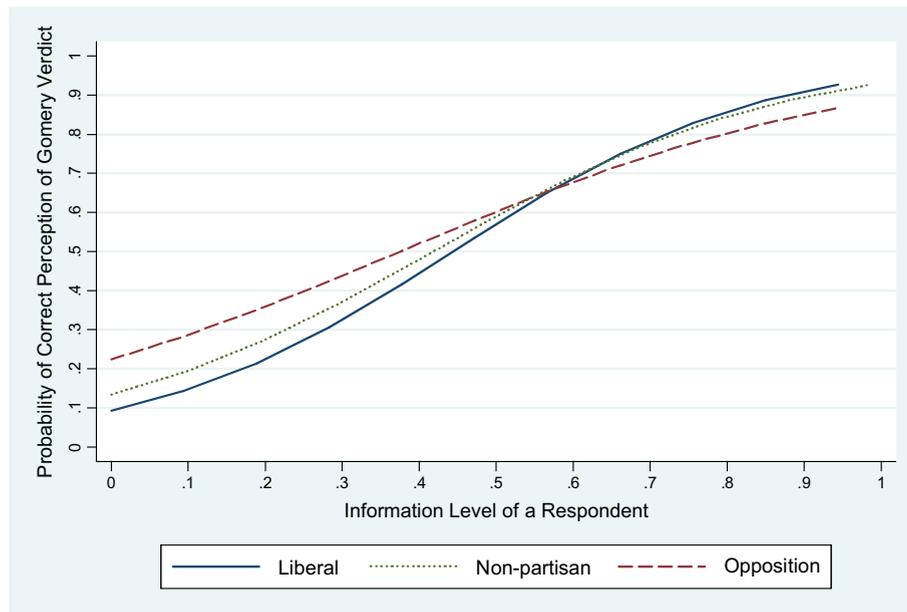


Fig. 1. Predicted probability of knowing Gomery verdict.

Does information foster partisan polarization? Polarization theory predicts a positive impact of information among Liberal partisans and a negative one among opposition partisans. The next three columns in Table 2 show that the effect of information on the propensity to think that Martin is not to blame is positive across all groups.

Fig. 2 also shows that those who do not follow politics were almost unanimous in rejecting the possibility that Martin was not aware of the affair (which was the verdict of the Gomery commission), except if they were Liberal partisans. Note also that the propensity to give Mr. Martin the benefit of the doubt increases somewhat with level of information. The effect of information is, however, limited. The gap between Liberal and opposition partisans slightly increases until a person reaches a level of information of .7. Then, the gap slowly starts to decrease, as better informed opposition partisans catch up somewhat with Liberals. That being said, there is no sign of a polarizing effect here; information basically works in the same direction in each group.¹²

The main story is that while information certainly plays a significant role, partisan predispositions are also crucial, and they are ubiquitous. It is important to keep in mind that we are looking at the impact of party identification on people's propensity to revise their judgment between 2004 and 2006. Prior judgments (in 2004) were already strongly

affected by partisan loyalties but these are neutralized in our setup.

6. Conclusion

The preceding analysis aimed to evaluate competing hypotheses about how partisan attachment and general political knowledge affect people's perceptions of facts and their political judgments, using survey data about Canadian voters' reactions to a major political scandal. With respect to perceptions of facts, the findings are quite clear. Contrary to Bartels and to the motivated reasoning perspective, there is no evidence that party identification colors perceptions of facts. Instead, the results support Zaller's argument that the reception of political information is entirely dependent on one's general exposure to politics.

There is strong support, however, for the view that party identification critically affects political judgments. To be sure, information does play a role, as the better informed are more likely to believe that Martin was not aware of the scandal. But partisanship remains a crucial factor and its impact is not conditional on general level of political information. Our study confirms the consistent and pervasive effect of partisan attachment on opinions.

The patterns uncovered here are quite similar to those reported by Gaines et al. who find that while "all partisan groups update their factual beliefs" the opinion gap between partisans is essentially maintained (Gaines et al., 2007: 971). The similarity in findings is particularly striking given that the two studies deal with very different issues (the Iraq war versus a scandal) in countries which appear to differ in their levels of partisan attachment.

¹² We also checked whether specific information about the Gomery verdict has an effect that is similar to that of general level of information. The regression analyses (not reported) indicate very similar patterns. No polarization is found, as there is a positive impact of specific information across the three partisan groups.

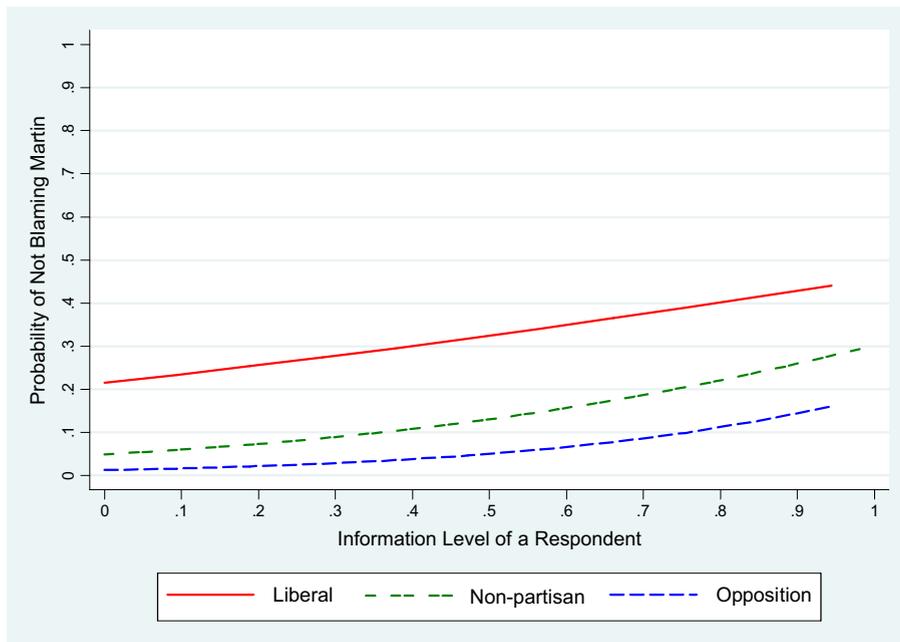


Fig. 2. Predicted probability of believing that Martin was not aware.

Whether these findings apply more broadly to different kinds of issues in different contexts remains to be established.

The results do not, however, support the polarization thesis advanced by Zaller (1992), according to which partisan cleavages are strongest among the most informed segment of the electorate. The findings are consistent with Bartels' (2002) claim that partisan effects are pervasive, that they shape everyone's opinions, whatever their level of political information. But partisan effects may not be ubiquitous, that is, partisan predispositions are not strong enough to prevent people from recognizing "objective" facts. They come into play, as Gaines et al. (2007) have argued, when it comes to interpreting these facts.

Appendix A.

General knowledge

"Do you happen to recall the name of the Premier of your Province?" (.72)

"Do you happen to recall the name of the Minister of Finance of Canada?" (.09)

"Do you recall the name of the British Prime Minister?" (.57)

"Do you happen to know the name of the female cabinet minister who ran against Paul Martin for the leadership of the Liberal Party?" (.43)

"Do you happen to know which government has the PRIMARY responsibility for health, education and social welfare?" (.50)

Party leaders

*"Do you happen to recall the name of the leader of the Federal party?"

Liberal party (.74) (.79)

Conservative party (.57) (.60)

New Democratic Party (.46) (.57)

Campaign promises

"Do you happen to recall which party is promising to get rid of the gun registry?" (.50)

"Which party is promising to do away with the Federal Sales Tax on family essentials?" (.42)

"Which party is promising to increase military spending by 2 billion dollars each year?" (.47)

"Which party is promising to spend 250 million for fighting AIDS in poor countries?" (.32)

"Do you happen to recall which party is promising to spend 4 billion dollars to reduce waiting times for surgeries?" (.40)

"Which party is promising an inheritance tax on estates over 1 million dollars?" (.27)

Interviewer rating (0 = .08) (.33 = .19) (.67 = .43) (1 = .30)

• = Question asked in both the campaign and the post-election surveys.

NB: The numbers in parentheses indicate the proportion of correct answers (with various scores in the case of interviewer ratings).

Appendix B. Full results for multinomial logit regressions

Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3
Perceptions of a fact (Does the Gomery report say Paul Martin was to blame, not to blame, or are you not sure?).

	Not to blame vs. to blame	Not to blame vs. don't know	Not to blame vs. to blame (Liberal PID)	Not to blame vs. don't know (Liberal PID)	Not to blame vs. to blame (Opposition PID)	Not to blame vs. don't know (Opposition PID)	Not to blame vs. to blame (Non-partisan)	Not to blame vs. don't know (Non-partisan)
Liberal PID	0.01 (0.30)	0.10 (0.30)						
Opposition PID	−0.20 (0.27)	−0.17 (0.27)						
Information	3.90*** (0.58)	−0.34 (0.56)	4.20** (1.51)	−0.99 (1.49)	3.23** (1.08)	−0.09 (1.08)	4.31*** (0.81)	−0.17 (0.79)
Martin knew	−0.88 (0.54)	−0.95 (0.55)	−1.14 (0.81)	−0.66 (0.84)	0.36 (1.13)	−0.37 (1.11)	−1.36 (0.99)	−1.61 (1.02)
of the scandal – yes (2004)								
Martin knew	−0.38 (0.70)	−0.03 (0.71)	−0.89 (1.03)	0.04 (1.10)	0.20 (1.34)	0.27 (1.29)	0.18 (1.43)	0.14 (1.45)
of the scandal – DK (2004)								
Atlantic	0.18 (0.43)	0.59 (0.43)	0.74 (1.02)	1.76 (1.07)	0.46 (0.80)	0.58 (0.84)	−0.37 (0.65)	−0.02 (0.64)
West	0.24 (0.30)	0.44 (0.30)	1.14 (0.83)	1.02 (0.84)	0.71 (0.53)	0.75 (0.53)	−0.46 (0.48)	−0.02 (0.47)
Quebec	0.37 (0.33)	−0.05 (0.34)	1.12 (0.63)	0.63 (0.63)	−0.32 (0.65)	−0.73 (0.69)	0.13 (0.55)	−0.28 (0.56)
Catholic	−0.52* (0.26)	−0.50 (0.27)	−1.27* (0.55)	−1.22* (0.56)	0.04 (0.59)	0.40 (0.61)	−0.37 (0.39)	−0.55 (0.40)
Non-European origin	−0.59 (0.45)	0.06 (0.44)	0.26 (1.12)	1.08 (1.05)	−1.52 (0.91)	−0.32 (0.81)	−0.45 (0.63)	−0.06 (0.62)
Male	−0.44 (0.24)	−0.48* (0.24)	0.05 (0.48)	−0.45 (0.49)	−0.56 (0.44)	−0.43 (0.44)	−0.62 (0.38)	−0.57 (0.38)
Education – below high school	−0.58* (0.29)	−0.24 (0.28)	−0.55 (0.66)	−0.17 (0.63)	−0.32 (0.51)	−0.33 (0.50)	−0.83* (0.42)	−0.23 (0.40)
Education – university or higher	0.97** (0.34)	0.38 (0.35)	−0.18 (0.63)	−0.47 (0.65)	1.63* (0.67)	0.85 (0.69)	1.14* (0.56)	0.49 (0.57)
Constant	1.32* (0.65)	3.06*** (0.64)	1.36 (1.33)	3.35* (1.32)	0.08 (1.17)	1.96 (1.11)	1.97 (1.13)	3.95*** (1.14)
Observations	1618		386		529		703	
Pseudo R ²	0.15		0.21		0.13		0.17	
Chi ²	325.20		106.86		100.41		159.61	
Log-pseudo likelihood	−1138.24		−245.21		−377.25		−492.53	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Note: Numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors.

Table 4
Judgments about Martin's role (Do you think that Martin was aware of the scandal?).

	No vs. yes	No vs. don't know	No vs. yes (Liberal PID)	No vs. don't know (Liberal PID)	No vs. yes (Opposition PID)	No vs. don't know (Opposition PID)	No vs. yes (Non-partisan)	No vs. don't know (Non-partisan)
Liberal PID	0.72*** (0.18)	0.06 (0.23)						
Opposition PID	−0.71*** (0.19)	−0.67** (0.23)						
Information	1.88*** (0.39)	0.41 (0.47)	1.17 (0.64)	0.36 (0.78)	2.91** (0.97)	−0.35 (1.07)	2.21*** (0.59)	0.68 (0.70)
Martin knew of the scandal – yes (2004)	−2.39*** (0.20)	−1.24*** (0.31)	−2.39*** (0.32)	−1.42** (0.52)	−2.79*** (0.60)	−1.16 (0.76)	−2.42*** (0.30)	−1.30** (0.45)
Martin knew of the scandal – DK (2004)	−0.76** (0.28)	1.07** (0.35)	−0.97* (0.45)	1.12 (0.57)	−0.94 (0.73)	0.30 (0.92)	−0.42 (0.42)	1.40** (0.51)
Atlantic	−0.15 (0.25)	0.42 (0.31)	−0.83* (0.42)	0.09 (0.60)	−0.66 (0.70)	0.26 (0.57)	0.35 (0.36)	0.51 (0.46)
West	−0.14 (0.18)	0.39 (0.24)	−0.38 (0.33)	−0.05 (0.52)	0.26 (0.40)	−0.24 (0.46)	−0.14 (0.28)	0.79* (0.34)
Quebec	−0.60* (0.24)	−0.06 (0.29)	−0.68 (0.36)	0.26 (0.47)	−0.61 (0.58)	−0.34 (0.66)	−0.48 (0.39)	−0.16 (0.46)
Catholic	−0.05 (0.17)	0.06 (0.21)	−0.23 (0.28)	−0.51 (0.38)	−0.06 (0.39)	−0.22 (0.50)	0.04 (0.28)	0.47 (0.31)
Non-European origin	−0.95* (0.40)	−0.14 (0.35)	−1.02 (0.55)	−1.03 (0.76)	−0.27 (1.09)	0.36 (0.87)	−1.28 (0.76)	−0.05 (0.47)
Male	−0.17 (0.16)	−0.44* (0.19)	−0.06 (0.25)	−0.39 (0.39)	−0.40 (0.35)	−0.76 (0.41)	−0.15 (0.24)	−0.32 (0.28)
Education – below high school	−0.01 (0.23)	0.40 (0.26)	−0.08 (0.37)	0.23 (0.51)	−0.30 (0.60)	1.21* (0.51)	0.04 (0.37)	0.14 (0.37)
Education – university or higher	0.22 (0.17)	0.01 (0.22)	−0.22 (0.29)	−0.32 (0.47)	0.64 (0.35)	0.86* (0.40)	0.22 (0.27)	−0.26 (0.32)
Constant	−0.38 (0.32)	−1.39** (0.43)	1.15* (0.52)	−0.74 (0.72)	−1.67 (0.86)	−1.51 (1.09)	−0.72 (0.49)	−1.80** (0.59)
Obs.	1618		386		529		703	
Pseudo R ²	0.18		0.17		0.12		0.17	
Chi ²	392.80		114.15		68.52		177.17	
Log-pseudo likelihood	−1015.57		−296.96		−244.88		−454.11	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Note: Numbers in parentheses are robust standard errors.

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