The role of the political context in voting indecision *

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A substantive portion of the electorate declares in pre-electoral surveys that they are undecided. However, little has been done in trying to understand who these voters are and how they finally decide their vote. In this article, we try to advance the literature by disentangling the circumstances under which voters are more likely to be undecided. While the traditional approach to the study of electoral indecision has been to characterize which individual traits make voters more likely to be undecided, this article provides consistent evidence showing that key elements of the political context may also affect electoral indecision. Using long-term harmonized data from Spanish pre-electoral surveys over thirty years, we find that voting indecision is influenced by two different types of contextual factors. First, there are some political contexts that reduce voters' cognitive costs when deciding their vote i.e. the level of electoral competitiveness and the number of parties competing in the elections. Second, there are other political contexts that increase voters' social or expressive costs i.e. the level of government popularity, since costs of expressing preference for the party in government decreases when its public image is undermined.

Keywords: undecided voters, political context, elections, public opinion.

1

1. Introduction

A minor but relevant portion of the electorate in democratic countries gets to the last weeks of the electoral campaign without having made up their minds about which party to vote for. The electorate who delays its vote choice until the late stages of the political campaign represents more than one out of five voters in most consolidated democracies and this number has been increasing over recent decades (Dalton et al 2000).[1] Although there are well-grounded suspicions that surveys tend to over report the number of undecided voters, the existence of such a percentage of respondents who do not declare their vote intention in pre-electoral surveys generates significant uncertainties in predicting electoral outcomes. This is particularly true if we take into account that a significant proportion of this electorate does not finally abstain on the Election Day and may actually end up being crucial for the outcome in contested elections.

The study of who undecided voters are and how they end up voting has attracted the attention of many scholars. This is so because this electorate is very much the target of the activation strategies that political parties and leaders develop during electoral campaigns (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948; Wolfinger and Rosenston 1980). Indeed, for the classical literature on the effects of electoral campaigns, the relevance of undecided voters stems from the fact that a necessary condition (although clearly not a sufficient one) for political campaigns to influence the electoral outcome is to have voters with some degree of uncertainty about their final decision who can be persuaded before the elections.[2]

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[1] This portion of the electorate represents 23 percent in the US (Nir and Druckman 2008), about 20 percent in Germany (where, for instance, in the 2005 elections 9 percent of voters decided their vote on election day itself) and around 15 percent in Spain in recent elections.

[2] It is possible that undecided voters are more likely to be persuaded by political messages. Yet, they must also be exposed to and have received them. No campaign can be successful with persuadable voters who are inattentive to political messages (Zaller 1992).

The academic interest in undecided voters is generally focused on studying when and how these voters end up deciding their vote.[3] Yet, too often the traditional approach has been to treat undecided voters as a stable, clearly distinguishable electorate. Certainly, in this regard undecided voters are too often conceptualized in much the same way as party identification or other enduring political attitudes.

The literature gives a fairly consistent profile of the main socio-economic and political traits of the undecided voters. Existing research usually characterizes them as individuals with lower levels of education, weaker political preferences and lesser interest in politics.[4] Indecision is also associated with demographics: women and younger voters are more likely to reach the late stages of a campaign without a decision about whom to vote for (Fournier et al. 2004). Among all the above factors, the standard conclusion is that weaker political preferences, and in particular party identification, is the most correlated with being undecided. Yet to say that they follow politics less closely than decided voters does not mean that they do not hold values, beliefs, and attitudes that bear directly on politics influencing their voting decisions.

In sum, according to the literature, undecided voters may be briefly described as less politicized people 'who care little and know less' (Chaffee and Rimal 1996: 269). However, most research fails to consider that voters' uncertainty may also depend upon

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[3] Most of the literature on this field has been interested in two different topics: (a) the time of their vote decision and (b) what determines such a decision. Regarding the former, research has found that the volume of undecided voters follows an electoral cycle (Irwyn and Holstein 2008). As for the second, Chaffee (1996) and Fournier et al (2004) suggest that late deciders are more vulnerable to campaign events. Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous (1994) find that late deciders in the US are less predictable than decided voters and that they are also less influenced by the conventional factors that traditionally influence vote choice. Finally, Lavine (2001) and Kosmidis and Xezonakis (2010) find that the determinants of vote choice of decided and undecided voters significantly differ: while the former group are more likely to be affected by the candidate's personal traits, the latter take the economy more into consideration.

[4] See for instance, Chaffe and Choe (1980) for the 1976 US presidential elections, Kosmidis and Xezonakis (2010) for the 2005 UK general election, Barisione (2001) for the French and Italian case in the 1990s, Authors (forthcoming 2013) for Spain (1986-2011), Lisi (2010) for the Greek and Portuguese cases in the 2000s and Fournier et al. (2004) for Canada.

the particular conditions surrounding the voting decision and not only on voters' personal traits. A remarkable exception were Mendelsohn and O'Keefe who concluded in their study of the Ohio elections that the 'difficulty of voter decision making appears primarily to be a function of circumstances of a particular campaign rather than a characteristic of certain voters *per se*' (1976: 328). Using panel data, the authors found that only 5 percent of the electorate declared not to have a clear vote decision in both the 1972 and 1974 elections. Albeit there were common attributes among these voters (less educated, less politically knowledgeable, younger and less attentive to politics), undecided voters were not the same group of individuals from one election to another.

In sum, is it reasonable to consider electoral indecision only as a result of certain voters' personal attributes? Or does voting indecision also stem from specific characteristics of the political context? In this paper, we argue that it is misleading to consider electoral indecision uniquely as the result of certain stable personal traits of the electorate. Thus, we will provide evidence in the following pages that being undecided is also contingent upon the political context of each election.

In order to investigate whether indecision depends on the circumstances that surround voters' choice, we study the contextual determinants of being undecided in Spain from 1982 to 2012 by taking into account all those elections at different territorial levels (in particular, EU, National and Regional levels) where pre-electoral studies are available. In total, we have been able to collect data for 135 elections, although some of them lack the necessary information to be included in some of our analyses. Using Spain as a single case study over time introduces two key features for the appropriate study of the electoral behavior of undecided voters. First, it provides an important degree of regularity in the institutional and political contexts in each of the electoral arenas analyzed over time. Second, it offers a high degree of comparability for most of the pre-

electoral surveys used as they were carried out by the same opinion poll institution and are based on a similar methodology in terms of the design of the questionnaires and the gathering of the data over time.

The Spanish institutional design –and, in particular, its electoral and party systems- is common in many countries. In fact, according to the International IDEA group,[5] the Spanish List PR system is the most widespread in the world (around 38% of the countries use this system in their legislative elections). There is no doubt that this indeed increases the potential external validity of our case study and the scope of our findings.

The paper is structured as follows. In the following section, Section 2, we review the existing literature. In Section 3 we introduce our research hypotheses to be tested. In Section 4 we describe our dataset with the 135 Spanish pre-electoral surveys, the variables we employ to test our hypotheses and the methods used. In Section 5 we report the results. Finally, in Section 6 we end the paper with some concluding remarks.

2. The role of the political context in voting indecision

There are a variety of factors that may explain why some individuals cannot (or do not want to) report their vote intention in pre-electoral surveys. Among others, indecision may come from indifference, ignorance or lack of information, cross-cutting pressures, or refusal to express vote intention in public. In this paper we structure the relevant determinants of voting indecision by making use of Adam Berinsky's theory about why people refuse to express political opinions in surveys. In his work *Silent Voices* (2004), Berinsky considers that individuals face some costs when they have to come up with an opinion and express it in public. When these costs are high, people may be unable or

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[5] http://www.idea.int/esd/

may refuse to report their opinion. In particular he specifies two different types of costs: the cognitive costs and the social ones.

Regarding the cognitive costs, individuals sometimes experience difficulties in translating their preferences and interests into an opinion about a particular issue. Berinsky employs Carmines and Stimson's (1989) distinction of hard issues and soft issues to explain the cognitive costs of coming up with an opinion. Hard issues are more technically difficult and are less familiar to the general public whereas soft issues do not entail much sophistication and expertise to form an opinion.[6] Good examples of 'hard issues' that bear high cognitive costs are attitudes related with tax policy. Indeed, although most individuals have clear personal interests in this topic, it is not always obvious for many how to translate those interests into a specific policy proposal. Some degree of specialized and technical knowledge is required in order to understand the implications and trade-offs of any tax policy design and how it matches one's interests.

The role of cognitive costs in individuals' likelihood of expressing an opinion is the most recurring factor mentioned in the literature (i.e. Krosnick et al. 2002; Kosmidis and Xezonakis 2010). Yet it is also important to take into consideration the second type of costs: the social ones. These costs appear when individuals have some reservations in expressing their opinions in public as they may not be socially desirable.[7] The existence of social costs of expressing an opinion is related with the well-known Noelle-Neumann's 'spiral of silence' (1984). According to this theory individuals tend to keep

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[6] Berinsky also considers that cognitive costs in surveys are related with the difficulty that individuals might have in translating their preferences and interests into simplified close-ended survey questions. Although this is the case of many of the political attitudes asked in surveys, it is more difficult to think that this also applies to the wording of the vote intention question.

[7] This is consistent with Brehm's seminal work on why people participate in surveys (1993). This author posits three influential factors: (i) possibility of being contacted by the interviewer; (ii) eligibility (being the target of the interview) and (iii) compliance (accepting to participate). Social costs are related with this latter factor.

their opinions to themselves when they perceive that these are not the prevailing ones in society. People refuse to express or discuss an issue when they think they are in a minority and fear it will lead to social isolation.

Clear examples of issues with high social costs are racially related ones. In this case, social pressure may prevent some people from expressing racist attitudes in public. According to Berinsky's estimations for the American case, public opinion is more conservative on racial issues than we might think at first glance. And this is so precisely because non-respondents tend to hold less racially-tolerant opinions than those who publicly express their views. Another well-studied example is related with the propensity of individuals to avoid recognizing in surveys that they did not vote. As has been acknowledged in several studies, social desirability makes individuals over-report vote intention or recall. Non-voters' over-reporting is often explained arguing that it is the best response to generate a good impression on the interviewer and to avoid the shame of letting others know they did not fulfill a sort of moral obligation. (Silver et al. 1986; Bernstein et al. 2001).

Cognitive and social costs are linked with the two different stages of expressing an opinion in public: attitude formation and attitude expression. The former is related with factors such as individuals' cognitive abilities, the technical complexity of the issue or the information available; the latter is largely dependent on the social norms and the personal costs that individuals estimate will arise from expressing their opinions in public.[8]

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[8]As Berinsky suggests: "individuals may come to a *don't know* answer by two very different but still plausible routes: either after they first attempt to form an opinion about a particular political controversy or when –if successful in coming to a judgment- they express their answer to the survey interviewer. In the first case, the respondent fails to answer the question because of cognitive costs; in the second case, question abstention results from the social costs." (2004:p.25)

3. Research hypotheses

In this paper we aim to apply this conceptual framework to the case of vote intention and seek to unveil why some people abstain from reporting their voting intention. Yet, instead of focusing on the individual traits that determine the cognitive and social costs of expressing an opinion, we move to the contextual elements that may influence voters' propensity to express their vote preference. The literature has already studied how, for instance, individuals' political sophistication and interest in politics are related with not being able to express their vote intention in surveys.[9] However, much less is known about how contextual factors may enhance or hinder the cognitive and social costs of expressing vote intention.

In the case of the cognitive costs we focus on some contextual factors related to voters' chances of and incentives for gathering information about the electoral contest. Information is a key element for voters to make up their minds. As Zaller puts it: 'The impact of people's value predispositions always depend on whether citizens possess the contextual information needed to translate their values into support for particular policies or candidates' (1992: 25). The availability of such information does not only depend on individuals' attributes (such as education or interest in politics), it is also largely determined by the context in which they face the decision.

Which contextual settings enhance the availability of information and which do not? We take from the literature on the determinants of turnout some factors that may account for

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[9] In another work Berinksy already recognized the importance of taking political context into account: "While we need to pay attention to and account for the social context surrounding sensitive issues when gauging public opinion we must also pay attention to changes in that context over time. The social norms and conventions that govern discourse in society evolve over time and as those norms change, the way in which respondents react to the survey interview will change as well" (2004: p. 51-2). The author finds that individuals with racially conservative opinions tend to hide their opinions nowadays. Yet this has not always been the case in the past, where social desirability on these issues was less important.

the variation of voters' chances of (or interest in) gathering information about the election (Jackman 1987, Blais 2000, Blais and Dobrzynska 2003, Franklin 2004). In particular we consider the following factors: the level of competitiveness of the electoral race, the number of parties competing in the elections and the type of election (first- or second-order elections).

(i) We hypothesize that competitive elections with uncertain results reduce the number of undecided voters. There are two related arguments behind this proposition: first, close races tend to generate more interest among the electorate. They increase voters' feeling that their vote may make a difference and, therefore, they have more incentives to gather information about the election (Downs 1957, Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Indeed, recent evidence has shown that competitive elections may be crucial for late deciding voters as the electoral campaign exposes voters to information essential for making up their minds and even abandoning their first preferred option if this has no chance of winning (McGregor 2012). And secondly, competitive elections stimulate parties' campaign expenditure and efforts. In settings where there is no clear winner, people may be encouraged to invest more time and money because they expect higher returns (i.e. greater chances of influencing the electoral outcome) (Cox and Munger 1989; Aldrich 1993; Hill and McKee 2005). In sum, highly competitive elections generate more interest among the electorate and increase the information available, reducing voters' cognitive costs of making a decision. Our expectation is consistent with the well-established finding that competitive elections produce higher levels of turnout (i.e. Cox and Munger 1989). Probably, these higher levels of turnout are preceded by a significant reduction in the number of undecided voters: in competitive elections voters have greater incentives to both form a political preference and vote on the Election Day.

(ii) We hypothesize that party systems with a fewer number of parties are less cognitively demanding than others where voters have many political options to choose from. Thus, two-party systems (one party on the right and another on the left) are relatively easier contexts for voters. In these settings, there are not many political options to take into consideration when deciding whom to vote for. On the contrary, multiparty systems with different parties on each side of the political spectrum (or even with different cross-cutting cleavages) make it more difficult for voters to make up their minds. Moreover, multiparty systems are associated with coalition governments. In those settings, voters have more difficulties anticipating the consequences of their vote since the composition of the government not only depends on the electoral outcomes but also on post-election deals between parties (Downs, 1957, Jackman 1987). Such uncertainties on how votes are translated into government formation may increase voters' indecision. Hence, our second general hypothesis is that undecided voters increase with the number of parties in the party system. Also, we expect this effect to be particularly intense during the early years of democracy when the party system is not yet stabilized and, hence, more parties tend to emerge and disappear. It is precisely in this period when higher numbers of parties make voters' decision more costly.

 (iii) Finally, we also expect second-order elections to be associated with higher levels of undecided voters. Second-order elections are perceived as being less important and with having less at stake than first-order ones. This leads all political actors to be less interested in this type of election: voters are less attentive to the information on these elections and political parties have fewer incentives to campaign (Norris 1997). There is some evidence compatible with this claim. Eisinga et al. (1998) find that there is a correlation between the type of election and the timing of voting. Concretely, their results show that Dutch voters make up their minds earlier in first-order elections

(General Elections) than in second-order ones (European Parliament, Provincial State and City Council elections).[10] Indeed, for the literature on electoral indecision the time of vote decision is a key individual-level factor behind the number of undecided voters.[11] Thus, for Eisinga et al. (1998) the different timing of vote decision explains that the final number of undecided voters ends up being higher in second order-elections. In our case, in the pooled dataset developed for this article we regard General Elections as first order ones whereas European and Regional Elections are treated as instances of second order ones.

(iv) For social costs we hypothesize that voters are influenced by the general state of opinion when deciding to express their opinions in public. In particular, we study the influence of the government's popularity on voting indecision. When the government's image is perceived as being negative by society, incumbent supporters are more likely to respond 'don't know' when asked about their vote intention (regardless of their own opinion about the incumbent's performance). Analogously, when the government's reputation is high, we expect those who identify with non-incumbent parties to become more uncertain about their vote intention. In both cases the same logic applies: following the social climate voters try to avoid sanctions by hiding their true preferences.

The literature already provides us with some anecdotal findings consistent with this hypothesis. Studying the Spanish case, Urquizu (2006) shows that the 'don't know / No answer' option was used by many right-wing voters during the first years of democracy so as to hide their true preferences. The rationale behind this is that conservative voters

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[10] While undecided voters begin to make up their minds about nine weeks before the General Elections, they did not decide their vote until one week before Provincial State elections and four weeks before in the EU and City Council elections.

[11] The relationship between the time of vote decision and undecided voters is mentioned already in some classic contributions such as Lazarsfeld et al (1948) and Bereleson et al (1954). More recent literature on the same topic are Chaffe and Choe (1980), Chaffe and Rimal (1996) and McGregor (2012).

preferred to hide partisan preference to the main party on the right (the PP) because many party leaders were linked with the Francoist dictatorship. During these first years of democracy, the conservative PP was stigmatized with a negative image and some voters decided not to declare their vote in order to avoid the risk of social sanctions. Behind Uriquizu's findings lies a more general proposition: voters' propensity to declare their vote in public depends on the image of the party in society. Hence, the hypothesis does not only apply to the PP but also to the Socialist Party in those contexts where its image is poor.[12] The idea that some of those who claim to be undecided are actually hiding their vote has also been studied in other countries (see for instance Arcuri *et al.* 2008).[13]

An alternative explanation to account for the influence of the general state of opinion on voters' indecision is related with the existence of cross-pressured environments. The early studies on electoral behavior of the Columbia and Michigan schools already found that cross-pressured voters have weaker political preferences and tend to show lower levels of political participation (Campbell et al. 1960). The interest in how cross-pressures affect political preferences and behavior is still present today. For instance, Diana Mutz (2002) finds that exposure to dissonant messages makes voters become less confident with their political choices. Similarly, and more recently, Therriault et al. (2011) also find that cross-pressures are related with political indifference. Following this argument, it is also possible to think that the incumbent supporters become cross-pressured when the government's popularity is perceived as poor by public opinion, making them more uncertain about their vote choice.

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[12] In fact, the results reported in section 4 does not change if we leave PP governments aside and only focus on PSOE governments.

[13] Experiments show that when surveys allow respondents to answer their vote intention in a secret ballot box, the number of undecided voters is substantially reduced (Perry 1979). These results suggest that not all respondents who answer 'don't know' are truly undecided voters. Some of them may be actually refusing to express their preferences in public.

4. Data, variables, and methods

Data and variables

The empirical analysis draws on a unique dataset that comprises all available pre-electoral surveys of the different elections held in Spain in the period 1982-2012. We have been able to gather information on 135 elections (and over 340 thousand respondents), although we lose a number of them due to the lack of relevant information for estimating some of our statistical models.[14] In particular, the dataset collects information from the following electoral contests: 9 General Elections, 6 European Parliament Elections, and 120 Regional elections. The period covered spans over thirty years of democratic elections in Spain. Besides, as mentioned in the introduction, all surveys were carried out by the public agency Centre for Sociological Research (CIS). This allows us to have a consistent survey methodology over time and across elections. It is particularly important that all surveys are face-to-face interviews, since the non-response rate is highly sensitive to the interview method. For the case of pre-electoral surveys, this is likely to have reduced the number of undecided voters thanks to the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Berinsky 2008).

In addition to the harmonized individual-level survey information, we have included contextual-level variables over the thirty-year period covered by our data in order to test our hypotheses about the role of the political context in voting indecision. In what follows, we describe the variables used in our empirical analyses.

Dependent variable: following previous research, we measure voter indecision as those respondents who fail to provide an answer in the vote intention item in the pre-electoral

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[14] Some surveys lack relevant variables such as the left-right ideological scale, vote recall in previous elections, or government performance evaluation. As a result, our multilevel models are based on 113 elections (and over 230,000 respondents) and 88 elections (and about 200,000 respondents), depending on the hypotheses being tested.

surveys. Thus, we consider undecided those who respond 'don't know' as well as those who abstain from responding. We characterize undecided voters in this way since some of our hypotheses (i.e. the one related with the social costs of reporting vote intention) apply to both categories ('don't know' and 'no answer') (Berinsky 2008). Yet, the main conclusions of this paper hold if we only focus on those who explicitly report to be undecided (i.e. provide a 'don't know' answer). We treat as decided voters not only those who report a party preference, but also those who respond that they will not vote on the Election Day. Again, our results do not significantly change if we decide to exclude non-voters from our analysis and only consider as decided voters those who have the intention of voting for any of the available parties.[15]

Independent variables: our hypotheses related to the cognitive costs require proxy measures for electoral competitiveness and the number of parties competing in the elections. We measure electoral competitiveness in two different ways. First, we measure it as the margin between the two main parties running in the elections: the smaller the margin, the greater the competitiveness. This is the standard measure in the literature, especially that focusing on American politics (i.e. Mayhew 1974, Ferejohn 1977). Most probably, this measure is particularly suitable for majoritarian electoral systems (where there are usually two big parties competing for just one seat), but its applicability becomes more dubious in proportional systems (such as Spain's). Hence, we also use an alternative measure of competitiveness suggested by Vanhanen (1997) for proportional settings: the vote share of all parties except the winner (thus, the higher the value, the more competitive the election is).

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[15] In the results section we report the minor differences between these different ways of characterizing undecided voters.

The number of parties competing in the elections is measured with the standard

Effective Number of Parties (ENP). This measure provides information about the level

of fragmentation of the party system and it is constructed by weighing all parties by

their electoral strength. The formula is the following:

$$N = 1/\sum_{i=1}^{n} P_i{}^2$$

where n is the number of parties competing in the elections with at least one vote and P_i

is the vote share of each party.[16]

To test our hypothesis of social costs we need a measure of the incumbent's popularity

(or performance) and a measure of the incumbent supporters. In both cases we have

measured them using alternative procedures in order to obtain more robust and reliable

results. In the case of the incumbent's popularity we have three different measures: (i)

the average evaluation of the leader of the incumbent party (using a scale from 0 –very

bad- to 10 –very good-); (ii) the average evaluation of the government's performance

(using a scale of 1 –very bad- to 5 –very good-); and (iii) we also take an objective

measure of the government's performance: the change in the unemployment rates

during the mandate prior to the elections. In all cases we expect a government with a

negative image (and performance) to be positively correlated with a higher number of

undecided voters among the incumbent supporters and negatively correlated with non-

incumbent supporters. Not all surveys have the two subjective proxies of the

government's popularity. Consequently, the number of observations varies depending

on which measure we use in our analyses.

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[16]For example, an ENP=3 means that the party system fragmentation is as if there were three parties of equal size.

Most surveys included in our dataset do not have any measure of party identification. Hence we need to find alternative proxies for incumbent supporters. Considering the information available in the surveys, we can create two different proxies: (i) we use vote recall in previous elections and we consider incumbent supporters to be those who voted for that party in the past. The problem with this proxy is that some voters may be hiding both their vote intention and their vote recall. To overcome this problem we use an alternative strategy based on dividing the left/right ideological scale into three spaces: the first, those placed on the incumbent's ideological side, the second, moderate and non-ideological voters, and the third, voters opposite to the incumbent's ideological side. The ideology of the incumbent party is taken from the average position that traditionally voters give to these parties.[17]

Besides the above variables, the models include some individual- and contextual-level control variables. At the individual level we include respondents' education, sex, age, employment status, left-right self-placement and their evaluation of the government (using either the leader's evaluation or government performance, depending on which variable we use at the contextual level). This latter variable helps us to estimate the effect of the average perception of the government's popularity in society, controlling for the individual perception of each respondent. At the contextual level, we include the control variable 'years of democracy'. Elsewhere we have found that, contrary to the general pattern in developed democracies, in Spain there has been a progressive reduction in undecided voters with the consolidation of the democratic system (Authors, forthcoming 2013).

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[17] For instance, the ideological space of PSOE is the left (less than 5), AP/PP is the right (more than 5).

Methods

In order to test our hypotheses we apply multilevel techniques to our data. The
combination of individual- and contextual-level variables into a single analysis requires
disentangling individual- and contextual-level variation for a proper estimation of
standard errors. This is what a multilevel regression adds to a standard one-level
regression which only includes a single residual term (Snijders and Bosker 2012).

Of all possible options of adding random elements to model variation between groups
we use the simplest one: a logistic *random intercept model*, which only adds a single
random parameter for each of the political context variables introduced at the
aggregated level. In a multilevel regression, the intercept is composed of an average
value for the groups γ_{00} and a random one which reflects the variation across groups
U_{0j}

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + U_{0j}$$

To this basic formulation, one can add group-level variables to explain variation in the
intercept:

$$\beta_{oj} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10}x_{1j} + \cdots + \gamma_q o x_{qj} + U_{0j}$$

Thus, our final model specification including the political context variables will be as
follows:

$$log \frac{(\pi_{ij})}{(1 - \pi_{ij})} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_1 x_{1i} + \beta_1 x_{1j} + R_{ij} + U_{ij}$$

where the random effects are R_{ij} (the unexplained individual-level residual) and U_{0j} (the
group-level one). B_j and γ_i are the coefficients for the contextual and individual level

variables. Accordingly, X_j and X_i are the vectors of contextual and individual-level variables that will be used to explain the likelihood of being an undecided voter.

5. Results

In Table 1 we study our first set of hypotheses related with the cognitive costs associated with having a party preference. We argue that some electoral settings facilitate more voters to make up their minds about which party to vote for than others. In particular we take into consideration three different contextual factors that may influence voters' cognitive costs: the electoral competitiveness, the number of parties running in the elections and the type of election (first- or second-order elections).

[Table 1 about here]

Regarding the electoral competitiveness hypothesis, we have argued above that close elections with uncertain results increase both voters' interest and the volume of available information. As a result the cognitive costs of deciding who to vote for are reduced. Our results support this argument. In Model 2 (of Table 1) we use the classic indicator of electoral competitiveness (the margin between the two main parties) and in Model 3 we use the alternative measure, more suitable to multiparty systems: the sum of the vote share of all minor parties. The two are measured in opposite directions; hence, we expect the indicator for the margin of victory to have a positive effect on indecision, while the sum of minor party vote shares should affect voting indecision negatively. Results show that these two different measures of electoral competitiveness are statistically significant at $p<0.01$ in the expected direction: competitive elections are associated with lower levels of undecided voters.

Similarly, the number of parties running in the elections has the expected effect on voting indecision. The results show that voters' likelihood of being undecided is

18

positively associated with the number of parties. This result holds whether we adjust the number of parties by their relative electoral strength or by the seat share in the chamber. In both cases, our results are compatible with the hypothesis that it is more difficult for voters to make up their minds when they have to choose from among a large number of parties. In Figure 1 we illustrate how voting indecision varies across different values of the effective number of parties and the level of competitiveness. The probability change between the lowest and the highest value of the Effective Number of Parties is 0.17 and the probability change of the level of the electoral competitiveness is 0.12 (for the sum of all parties except the winner) and 0.07 (for the difference between the two main parties). Although, their magnitude is not large in both cases is statically significant.

[Figure 1 about here]

In Model 4 of Table 1 we estimate the interaction between the number of parties and years of democracy. Our results show that, indeed, the effect of the number of parties on voting indecision is particularly strong during early years of democracy. This result suggests that the number of parties increases voters' costs of deciding their vote especially when the party system is not yet stabilized and parties are less known among the electorate.

The last factor of the political context that we have argued may influence the cognitive costs of the voting decision is the type of election. Our hypothesis is that there are more undecided voters in second-order elections than in first-order ones. The causal mechanism is similar to that of the electoral competitiveness hypothesis: second-order elections generate less interest and so less information is available to voters. Our results

do not support this argument. There are no significant differences between National elections (first-order) and regional and EU elections (second-order).[18]

However, in line with the time-of-voting decision literature, it may be argued that a better measurement for this hypothesis could be the proximity between first- and second-order elections which allows considering contamination between electoral arenas as an intervening factor on voters' decisions. Indeed, some Spanish regional elections were held very close to (or even occasionally on the same day as) the National General Elections. Presumably the number of undecided voters should be smaller in these electoral contests. In fact, the results are more compatible with our hypothesis if we measure the distinction between first- and second-order elections as the number of days that separates them. The coefficient of this alternative measure is statistically significant in the expected direction at $p<0.10$).[19]

Although we do not find robust evidence about the importance of the type of the elections in voting indecision, we have found robust evidence of our first two hypotheses. Both the number of parties competing in the elections and the level of electoral competitiveness have an impact on voters' odds of being undecided.[20]

As for our final hypothesis, in order to test the social costs of expressing a party preference we have made an interaction between our three different measures of

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[18] The variable groups all regional elections together. However, it may be argued that there are potentially relevant differences across regions in Spain especially in (i) their level of decentralization and (ii) the presence of centre-periphery conflict. Firstly, if we divide regions according their level of decentralization following Leon's (2012) classification, no statistically significant differences appear. None of the regional elections show higher levels of undecided voters. Secondly, if we separate Catalonia and Basque country (where the national dimension is particularly strong) from the remaining regions we still fail to find differences between General and regional elections. Yet, this latter specification shows significant lower levels of indecision for the two regions. A possible explanation to this finding is that national identity anchors indviduals' vote choice and, thus, reduces their likelihood of being undecided. These models are not reported in the table, but results are available upon request.

[19] The coefficient is not reported in the table, but results are available upon request.

government reputation and our two proxies of incumbent supporters. Having different proxies of these two factors will allow us to draw more robust conclusions.

[Table 2 about here]

The results of the models with these six different interactions are reported in Table 2. All models are compatible with our expectations, no matter which proxy is used. Results show that when there is a general perception that the government's performance is poor, the incumbent supporters tend to be more undecided. This is true for models that measure government popularity using voters' subjective perceptions (either the average evaluation of the leader of the incumbent party, or the average evaluation of the government's performance) as well as for models that use an indirect objective measure of performance such as unemployment growth during the last term in office. Moreover, conclusions do not substantially change depending on how we characterize incumbent supporters: either using vote recall or the ideological self-placement of voters on the ideological scale.

In order to facilitate the interpretation of these interactions, in Figure 2 we have estimated key predicted probabilities. All graphs show the same pattern: the effect of the incumbent's reputation among incumbent supporters follows the opposite trend found for non-incumbent supporters. Let us focus, for instance, on the upper right-hand graph. When the average evaluation of the incumbent is close to 0, we find more undecided voters among the electorate placed on the same ideological side as the incumbent party. Yet when the incumbent is popular (with evaluations close to 10) the opposite occurs. In these circumstances, we find more undecided voters among those who hold an ideology opposite to the incumbent party's.

21

All models in Table 2 show statistically significant interaction terms consistent with our hypothesis. However, in Figure 2 there are some findings worthy to mention. First, the lower right graph shows the expected trend but the confidence intervals indicate there are non-significant differences. Thus, the results are more consistent with our expectations when we measure government popularity with subjective measures of government performance (i.e. incumbent party leader evaluation) than with objective measures (unemployment growth). In some sense, it seems reasonable: government popularity is probably better measured by respondents' subjective perceptions than by the objective economic conditions which need to be subjectively judged to give them a political meaning.

Second, the effect in some graphs seems to be more driven by non-incumbent supporters than by those close to the government. Although our social cost hypothesis operates for both groups, one may expect government popularity to be at least as important for incumbent's supporters as it is for challengers' ones. The asymmetry found in some graphs of Figure 2 is not fully consistent with our expectations. Probably some factors other than social costs may be behind this trend.

[Figure 2 about here]

In sum, all models of Table 2 are largely compatible with our fourth hypothesis since governments' popularity has the expected effect on voters' indecision among incumbent supporters and non-supporters. Finally, it is worth mentioning that although the individual-level control variables are not reported in the table, the models also include individuals' perceptions of the incumbent's performance. Hence, the models estimate the effect of governments' reputation in society while controlling for individual opinions on the performance of the government.

22

Finally, as for the individual-level control variables, their influence is consistent with findings from previous research (see Table 1). For instance, women tend to be more undecided than men. Generally, women are more prone to choose the 'don't know' option in political-related surveys (Barisione 2001). Ideology also shows the expected effect: ideological voters, and among these the extremist ones, are more likely to have their vote decided in pre-electoral surveys. Yet, contrary to previous findings, the Spanish right-wing voters are not more likely to be undecided than the left-wing ones (Urquizu 2006). The propensity of conservative voters to hide their vote behind the 'don't know' and 'no answer' categories during the first years of democracy appears to have progressively vanished (and even reversed) with time.

Surprisingly, education does not have a clear effect on voting indecision. However, the importance of education emerges when we characterize undecided voters only as those who provide a 'don't know' answer. In that specification, voters with lower education attainment are more likely to be undecided.

Our control variable 'years of democracy' is not statistically significant. Although there has been a general increase in the number of undecided voters in developed democracies, the opposite has occurred in Spain. In the 1986 Spanish General elections, around 40 percent of voters reached the electoral campaign without having decided their vote. However, this percentage dropped to 25 percent in 2011.Yet, this time trend in Spain disappears once we control for individual-level control variables.[21] This suggests that the reduction in the number of undecided voters in Spain is explained by the progressive changes in education attainment and the ideology of the population.[22]

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[21]The effect of years of democracy is statistically significant at $p<0.01$ in a model with no control variables.

[22]For instance the percentage of non-ideological voters (who are more likely to be undecided) has substantially reduced during these three decades of democracy in Spain (see de la Calle et al. 2010).

Unemployment growth shows a significant negative effect, which indicates that poor economic performance reduces voters' likelihood of being undecided. Likewise, incumbent popularity has also a significant impact on voting indecision: when governments become unpopular, the number of undecided voters decreases. These findings are consistent with Kosmidis' study of the British case (2011). Yet, as we show later, the effect of unemployment growth and incumbents' popularity are conditioned by voters' ideology.

6. Conclusions

This article has shed light on an overlooked but important phenomenon in the electoral behavior of advanced democracies: the role of the political context in voting indecision. While the traditional approach to the study of voting indecision has been to characterize undecided voters as political outsiders consequence of identifying certain individual traits that make some voters more likely to be undecided, this article has provided consistent evidence showing that key elements of the political context may affect voters' indecision in the electoral contest in line with some scant prior literature (Mendelsohn and O'Keefe 1976). Hence, voting indecision appears as a more complex phenomenon where the traditional explanations provided so far based on lower education, lesser interest in politics, gender or age (Fournier et al 2004; Chaffee and Rimal 1996) do not fully account for the extent of voting indecision. We have shown that a more comprehensive explanation should also consider what characteristics of the political context may hinder voters' ability to make up their minds at the ballot box. Using long-term harmonized data from Spanish pre-electoral surveys corresponding to National, European and Regional elections over thirty years of democratic elections

24

results show that electoral competitiveness and the number of parties running in the elections are two factors influencing how easy it is for voters to decide for whom to cast their ballot. Also we have found some evidence that closeness between first- and second-order elections reduces the number of undecided voters. Building on Berinsky's distinction between the cognitive and social costs individuals face to express political opinions (2004), all these factors of the political context, we have argued, are related to the cognitive costs of the voting decision.

As for the effect of the political context on the social costs of voting, our results confirm that general perceptions of the performance of the incumbent are related to the number of undecided voters among its loyals. Concretely, when such perceptions are negative we find more undecided voters among its supporters, whereas the opposite applies when the general evaluation of the incumbent's performance is positive.

This article has been a first attempt to incorporate the political context in the study of voting indecision. Clearly, even though we have argued that Spain is a good case study for its external validity as representative of a multiparty system, more comparative research is desirable in order to identify regularities and discuss differences in the role of the political context on voting indecision.

Finally, this study has opened up a new line of research showing that not only voters' individual traits affect voting indecision but also that the political context itself in which voters take political decisions plays an important independent role. Future research should seek to integrate both strands of inquiry in order to highlight, for instance, whether, certain characteristics of the political context favour or hinder the influence of the well-established individual determinants of voting indecision.

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Tables and figures

Table 1. Voter indecision and the cognitive costs of reporting a vote intention

	Model 1		Model 2		Model3		Model 4	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Education								
Primary	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)
Secondary	-0.02	(0.02)	-0.02	(0.02)	-0.02	(0.02)	-0.02	(0.02)
Professional	0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)
Univeristy (medium)	-0.06*	(0.02)	-0.06*	(0.02)	-0.06*	(0.02)	-0.06*	(0.02)
University (high)	0.03	(0.02)	0.03	(0.02)	0.03	(0.02)	0.03	(0.02)
Sex (female)	0.18**	(0.01)	0.18**	(0.01)	0.18**	(0.01)	0.18**	(0.01)
Age	0.005**	(0.00)	0.005**	(0.00)	0.005**	(0.00)	0.005**	(0.00)
Employment status								
Retired	-0.05**	(0.02)	-0.05**	(0.02)	-0.05**	(0.02)	-0.05**	(0.02)
Unemployed	-0.01	(0.02)	-0.01	(0.02)	-0.01	(0.02)	-0.01	(0.02)
Student	0.06**	(0.02)	0.06**	(0.02)	0.06**	(0.02)	0.06**	(0.02)
Domestic tasks	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)
Other situation	0.12	(0.09)	0.12	(0.09)	0.12	(0.09)	0.12	(0.09)
Incumbent evaluation*	-0.04**	(0.00)	-0.04**	(0.00)	-0.04**	(0.00)	-0.04**	(0.00)
Left/Right ideology								
Moderate left	0.48**	(0.02)	0.48**	(0.02)	0.48**	(0.02)	0.48**	(0.02)
Centre	1.13**	(0.02)	1.13**	(0.02)	1.13**	(0.02)	1.13**	(0.02)
Moderate right	0.50**	(0.02)	0.50**	(0.02)	0.50**	(0.02)	0.50**	(0.02)
Extreme right	-0.19**	(0.03)	-0.19**	(0.03)	-0.19**	(0.03)	-0.19**	(0.03)
No ideology	1.58**	(0.02)	1.58**	(0.02)	1.58**	(0.02)	1.58**	(0.02)
Contextual variables								
Effective number of parties (NEP)			0.14**	(0.00)	0.28**	(0.00)	0.36**	(0.08)
NEP x Years of democracy							-0.01**	(0.00)
Electoral competitiveness			0.01**	(0.00)	-0.02**	(0.01)	-0.01*	(0.00)
Unemployment growth			-0.04*	(0.03)	-0.04*	(0.02)	-0.05*	(0.02)
Average incumbent evaluation			0.12*	(0.03)	0.11*	(0.05)	0.09	(0.05)
Years of democracy			0.004	(0.004)	0.004	(0.004)	0.05**	(0.01)
Level (regional)			-0.08	(0.12)	-0.06	(0.12)	-0.08	(0.11)
Level (EU)			-0.25	(0.22)	-0.28	(0.22)	-0.28	(0.21)
_constant	-2.17**	(0.03)	-3.41**	(0.43)	-2.40**	(0.52)	-2.40**	(0.52)
Variance components (intercept)	0.38	(0.02)	0.31	(0.02)	0.31	(0.02)	0.30	(0.02)
Number of observations	242080		242080		242080		242080	
Number of groups	113		113		113		113	
Wald Chi2	12585.93		12605.17		12603.51		12603.51	
Prob> chi2	0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00	
Pseudo R-squared (McKelvey & Zavoina)	0.08		0.09		0.09		0.09	

Multilevel logistic regression maximum likelihood estimates. ' significant at p<0.1 * significant at p<0.05

** significant at p<0.01.

Table 2. Voter indecision and the social costs of reporting a vote intention

	Model 5		Model 6		Model 7		Model 8		Model 9		Model 10	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Average incumbent evaluation	0.16**	(0.06)	0.09'	(0.06)			0.14**	(0.05)	0.11*	(0.05)		
Average Government performance					0.74**	(0.21)					-0.68**	(0.20)
Unemployment growth	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.05**	(0.02)	0.05	(0.03)	-0.05*	(0.02)	-0.05*	(0.02)	0.01	(0.03)
Incumbent supporter												
Incumbent voter in previous election	0.47**	(0.07)	-0.81**	(0.01)	2.70**	(0.11)						
Ideology: Same ideological side							-0.08	(0.08)	-0.98**	(0.01)	-2.07**	(0.11)
Ideology: Opposite ideological side							-1.23**	(0.08)	-0.91**	(0.01)	-0.46**	(0.12)
Interaction terms												
Av. Inc. Supp x Incumbent voter	-0.24**	(0.01)										
Unemployment x Incumbent voter			0.09**	(0.01)								
Av. Gov. Perf. x Incumbent voter					-0.65**	(0.05)						
Av. Inc. Supp x Same ideological side							-0.17**	(0.01)				
Av. Inc. Supp x Opposite ideological side							0.06**	(0.02)				
Unemployment x Same ideological side									0.03**	(0.01)		
Unemployment x Opposite ideological side									-0.02**	(0.01)		
Av. Gov. Perf. x Same ideological side											-0.37**	(0.04)
Av. Gov. Perf. x Opposite ideological side											0.16**	(0.04)
Variance components (intercept)	0.31	(0.02)	0.31	(0.02)	0.31	(0.03)	0.32	(0.02)	0.31	(0.02)	0.31	(0.02)
Number of observations	232887		232887		193508		242080		242080		201918	
Number of groups	108		108		84		113		113		88	
Wald Chi2	158026.48		15715.78		12843.02		10987.16		10872.81		9018.43	
Prob> chi2	0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00	
Pseudo R-squared (McKelvey & Zavoina)	0.12		0.12		0.12		0.07		0.07		0.07	

Multilevel logistic regression maximum likelihood estimates. ' significant at p<0.1 * significant at p<0.05 ** significant at p<0.01.

Note: For space reasons, the table does not report the individual and context-level control variables of Table 1. Information is available upon request

Figure 1. The effect of the effective number of parties and electoral competitiveness on the probability of being undecided
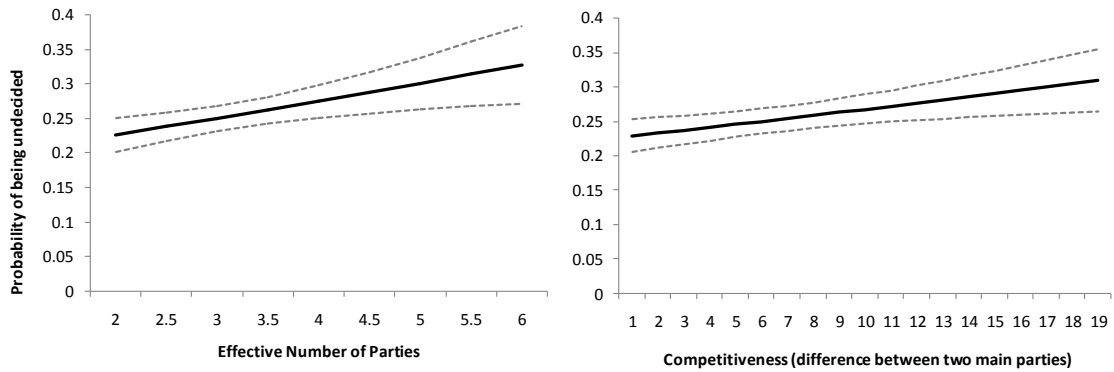
Note: Predicted probabilities using Model 2 of Table 1 keeping all remaining variables at their mean.

Figure 2. The effect of incumbent reputation on the probability of being undecided
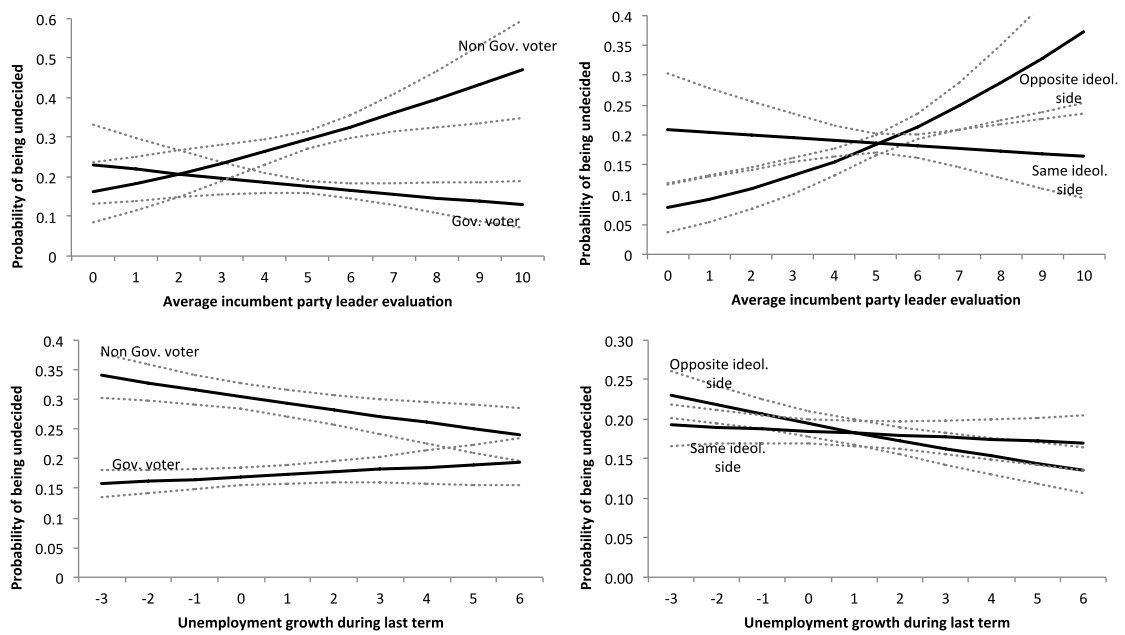
Note: Predicted probabilities using Models 5, 6, 8 and 9 of Table 2 keeping all remaining variables at their mean.