

## POLITICAL PARTIES AND VALUE CONSISTENCY IN PUBLIC OPINION FORMATION

---

MICHAEL BANG PETERSEN

RUNE SLOTHUUS\*

LISE TOGEBY

**Abstract** Many have been concerned about the ability of citizens to ground their specific political preferences in more general principles. We test the longstanding intuition that political elites, and political parties in particular, can help citizens improve the quality of their political opinions—understood as the consistency between citizens’ specific opinions and their deeper political values. We integrate two major areas of research in political behavior that rarely speak together—political parties and framing—to argue that the structure of party competition frames issues by signaling what political values are at stake and hence enables citizens to take the side most consistent with their basic principles. With a unique experimental design embedded in a nationally representative survey, we find strong support for this argument. Our findings imply that low levels of value-opinion consistency are driven not only by citizens’ lack of interest in politics but also by parties failing in providing clear signals.

MICHAEL BANG PETERSEN and RUNE SLOTHUUS are assistant professors in the Department of Political Science at Aarhus University, and Lise Tøgeby was a professor in the Department of Political Science at Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark. Sadly, Lise Tøgeby did not get to see this article appear in print. With her passing away, we – the remaining authors – have lost our mentor as well as a dear friend. The authors thank Hanspeter Kriesi, Paul M. Sniderman and the Research Section for Danish Politics in the Department of Political Science at Aarhus University for helpful comments and suggestions. In addition, the authors thank the editors for providing exceptionally constructive suggestions that helped clarify and structure the manuscript. A previous version of this article was presented at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago, IL. This work was supported by a grant from the Danish Social Science Research Council (275-05-0195) to Michael Bang Petersen, Rune Slothuus, Rune Stubager, and Lise Tøgeby. The authors are listed alphabetically, as they each contributed equally to this research. \*Address correspondence to Rune Slothuus, Aarhus University, Department of Political Science, Bartholins Alle 7, DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark; e-mail: slothuus@ps.au.dk.

From the beginning of systematic empirical research on public opinion, scholars have discussed the degree to which ordinary citizens are capable of forming political preferences that are firmly grounded in their deeper, long-standing values. In his seminal study of belief systems, Converse (1964) found that Americans' political opinions lacked coherence and were only minimally related to ideological principles; most people were "innocent of ideology" (Kinder 1983). Although these empirical results were bleak, Converse and many later scholars have pointed to political elites and, in particular, the political parties as major sources of coherence in public opinion. "Political parties, the mass media, and electoral campaigns all have the potential to educate citizens and enable them to make more carefully considered choices," Chong and Druckman (2007a, p. 637) recently suggested, echoing Key's (1966) intuition expressed forty years earlier: "[I]n the large the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we would expect, *given the clarity of the alternatives* presented to it and *the character of the information* available to it" (p. 7, emphasis added).

However, we still have surprisingly little systematic evidence on the degree to which political elites can help citizens form policy opinions that are consistent with their deeper political values. In this study, we advance a theory and offer the first empirical evidence on how political parties can help citizens attain value-consistent political opinions. We integrate two major areas of research in political behavior that rarely speak together—work on political parties and framing—to explain how party conflict should increase consistency in citizens' opinion formation. Specifically, we contend that political parties, by the opposing positions they take in a policy debate, signal to citizens what political values are at stake, and hence enable citizens to take the side most consistent with their deeper values. Because parties have value reputations and are associated with particular political cleavages, the mere presence of particular parties in a policy debate should provide citizens with diagnostic information about which value to base their opinion on. We test this argument with a unique experimental design embedded in a nationally representative opinion survey. Our findings clearly suggest that citizens utilize the reputations of parties to increase the consistency between their specific policy opinions and their core values.

### Political Parties and Consistency in Public Opinion

Converse's (1964) provocative study sparked an intensive scholarly debate (Kinder 2006; Sniderman 1993). Some of Converse's major critics extended the argument that political elites potentially play a pivotal role in structuring public opinion by claiming that Converse's analysis did not take the political environment sufficiently into account. Specifically, Nie and Andersen (1974, p. 544) argued that "the inherent characteristics of the mass public are less important as determinants of mass ideology than are the variations in the nature and salience of political stimuli." Accordingly, they found increasing

constraint<sup>1</sup> in mass opinion during the 1960s, along with the occurrence of dramatic political events and increasing salience of politics to many people's lives (Nie and Andersen 1974; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976).<sup>2</sup> However, these findings were challenged to be mere artifacts of question wordings (see, e.g., Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1978). Thus, even today, scholars conclude that Converse's findings have "stood up well" (Kinder 2006; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008), and it remains unclear from this debate to what extent political elites can help citizens increase consistency between their longstanding values and specific policy preferences.

To be sure, a large body of research has found that people's opinions are correlated with their partisanship (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Campbell and Valen 1961; Jacoby 1988; Stoker and Jennings 2008). Moreover, studies of party cues have shown that when forming political opinions citizens tend to follow the positions of like-minded parties. Thus, if a party endorses a policy, an individual who identifies with or votes for that party would tend to also support the policy (e.g., Carmines and Kuklinski 1990; Carsey and Layman 2006; Gilens and Murakawa 2002; Kam 2005; Mondak 1993; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Zaller 1992).<sup>3</sup> This way, by taking cues from political parties, citizens can arrive at opinions that appear to be value-consistent. However, such consistency might be spurious insofar as it is a rationalization of partisanship. Thus, consistency might be a coincidence stemming from citizens following a party cue because it is generally consistent with their values, without the opinion itself being derived from these values.

As extant research on political parties has offered little empirical evidence on value consistency, research on value consistency has had little to say about political parties. Most notably, research on framing provides one body of work that could potentially have illuminated how parties can help citizens form value-consistent policy preferences. The basic premise of framing is that most political issues are multifaceted and ambiguous and are therefore open to different interpretations. By framing an issue, a speaker emphasizes a subset of potentially relevant considerations—e.g., a particular value—and this

1. Constraint relates to how an individual's ideas and attitudes are bound together and has been defined, in "the static case," as "the success we would have in predicting, given initial knowledge that an individual holds a specified attitude, that he holds certain further ideas and attitudes" (Converse 1964, p. 207). We use constraint, consistency, and coherence interchangeably.

2. In a related vein, some studies have compared attitudes in the United States with European countries and generally found that in the more ideological European multiparty systems, public opinion was better integrated with the left-right ideological continuum than was public opinion in the United States grounded in the liberal-conservative continuum (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989; Niemi and Westholm 1984). Even though these studies corroborated the intuitions from Key, Converse, and others that ideological polarization among parties can increase vertical consistency in opinion, they did not test any direct correlation between party behavior and opinion formation.

3. Recently, studies have also suggested that elite polarization increases the congruence between people's ideology and party identification (Hetherington 2009; Levendusky 2009). However, this research tells us less about whether policy preferences reflect people's core values.

might cause individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions (Druckman and Nelson 2003, p. 730; see Chong and Druckman 2007b for an overview of this literature). Thus, if a frame directly leads citizens to rely on a particular value in forming an opinion, the result can be increased consistency between this opinion and the value (e.g., Shen and Edwards 2005). However, in the framing literature, political parties have rarely been considered (see, however, Slothuus forthcoming; Slothuus and de Vreese forthcoming), and consequently, it remains unclear whether frames emphasizing values will increase consistency when party cues are present.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, despite nearly a half-century of scholarly debate about the role of political elites in helping citizens take consistent sides on policy issues, we have surprisingly little systematic evidence of this intuition. Feldman (2003, p. 489) notes that “there is still little theory that specifies how values or value structures should be related to political attitudes” and “[r]esearchers also have not devoted enough attention to the conditions under which values will be strongly related to political attitudes” (see also Pollock, Lilie, and Vittes 1993). We next advance an explicit account of when and how political parties can help citizens increase value consistency in opinion formation.<sup>5</sup>

## Party Conflict and Value Consistency

In order to clarify when citizens’ opinions are consistent with their underlying, longstanding values, we advance a theoretical account of how the nature of the party system can provide sufficient “clarity of the alternatives” to facilitate value consistency in public opinion formation. Specifically, we argue that salient competition between political parties is a primary means of connecting particular values with specific policy positions. Simply put, party conflict *frames* which values are at stake in a policy controversy and hence which value dimension is appropriate for evaluating the issue.

Due to the logic of electoral competition, political parties build reputations for defending particular values and for pursuing particular policies; as parties compete over time, such reputations are reinforced (Petrocik 1996; Snider-

4. Another problem is that this literature provides no clear answer to what happens if citizens are exposed to competing frames emphasizing different values. Thus, Sniderman and Theriault (2004) suggest that receivers of competing frames will base their opinion on the frame most consistent with their own values. In contrast, Chong and Druckman (2007a) suggest that the stronger frame will be more influential; hence, in order to increase value consistency, this requires that individuals judge the frames according to their own values, and it is not clear whether this will happen. Therefore, the framing literature has little to say about the potential for increased value consistency, particularly in realistic conditions of party competition.

5. Thus, we focus on what, in the tradition following Converse, has been coined “vertical constraint”—i.e., relations between abstract beliefs and specific opinions—and not “horizontal constraint,” referring to interrelations between specific opinions (see, e.g., Hurwitz and Peffley 1987, p. 1100).

man 2000; Sniderman and Bullock 2004). In short, parties have what we term *value reputations*. Such value reputations enable citizens to make value-oriented inferences about policies from the positions parties take. For example, if the Democrats endorse a new policy targeting the poor and the Republicans oppose it, this signals to citizens that supporting the policy will promote liberal ideology—or, in this case, egalitarian values—while opposing the policy will not. This way, partisan conflict suggests which general values citizens should use in their specific opinion formation and how.

In essence, we argue that the structure of party competition *frames* the issue. To borrow a metaphor from Kinder (2006, pp. 200–201), “frames operate as ‘opinion recipes’: advice from elites about what ingredients, in what proportions, should be combined to form a good opinion.” In our thinking, parties provide such advice to citizens by merely disagreeing. Traditionally, framing has been conceived as a communication process in which a speaker emphasizes, for example, a certain value, thereby leading the audience to rely on these same values in their opinion formation. Here, we argue that parties, by merely taking divergent positions on an issue—but even without explicitly emphasizing any values in their communications—can trigger a similar psychological effect. As described above, if parties have a reputed history of clashing over specific values, citizens should make the necessary inferences themselves.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the effect, in this case, arises not from a specific act of communication but from the nature of enduring party competition.

This mechanism is distinct from following party cues in the traditional sense, where the party leads an individual to take a particular position on the issue depending on his or her party affiliation. Instead (or in addition), party conflict clarifies the criteria (i.e., values) that citizens should use in making up their mind—independently of their affiliations. Thus, in contrast to traditional accounts of framing, we argue that parties might help citizens take sides on political issues—not merely by pushing them in one particular direction, but by helping them to see what set of values they should use to respond. In further contrast to most instances of framing, citizens should in this case be less susceptible to elite manipulation because the presence of parties leads citizens to form preferences that correspond more accurately to their values than they would have been able to reach on their own.

In sum, while citizens might not by themselves develop principled political thought, political parties could play a vital role in helping citizens increase

6. The mechanism we suggest resembles to some extent what scholars of political communication call “priming”—that is, altering the criteria (typically, different issues) by which political objects like presidents and governments are evaluated (Althaus and Kim 2006; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Togeby 2007). Our mechanism, though, is more closely related to framing because parties signal which considerations are relevant when judging a specific issue. However, there is some conceptual disagreement on how to distinguish framing from priming, and Chong and Druckman (2007b, pp. 114–16) argue that mechanisms of framing can be generalized to priming.

consistency in opinion. If parties with clear value reputations take sides on policy issues, they signal to citizens “what goes with what.” Accordingly, we expect people to form more consistent opinions when conflict among parties provides clear cues about what values are at stake and hence are relevant to their judgment.

### Testing the Argument in a Two-Dimensional Multiparty Context

Our proposal is that conflict between parties on an issue—by signaling to citizens which values are at stake—can guide citizens to form specific policy preferences that are consistent with their values. This mechanism is, we believe, a general one. However, its particular expression will be contingent upon the given political context—that is, which values citizens hold and what value reputations parties have. In this study, we test our general argument in the specific context of a two-dimensional multiparty system in Western Europe: Denmark. The multitude of parties provides us with the opportunity to study parties that have a strong profile on one value dimension but not on the other, and vice versa. The two-dimensional space allows us to forcefully demonstrate the importance of parties’ value reputations by showing not only that parties are efficient in increasing consistency on issues within their profile, but also that the same parties are *ineffective* on issues outside their profile.

In Western Europe, the traditional economic left-right conflict dimension has been supplemented with one or more other conflict dimensions. In many countries, and not least in Denmark, political conflict is now two-dimensional, and public opinion is organized along the economic left-right dimension as well as a cultural left-right conflict dimension including issues like immigration, law and order, and the environment (Knutsen and Kumlin 2005; Kriesi et al. 2006). Distinct sets of values appear to guide opinion formation in relation to issues on the respective dimensions. Opinions on the cultural issues of immigration, crime, and environmental protections seem to be guided by political values pertaining to the appropriateness of hierarchy and tolerance, while opinions on economic issues are guided by egalitarian values (Flanagan 1987; Stubager 2006).

Moreover, this two-dimensional structure appears to have shaped the structure of electoral competition among parties. Thus, many parties have built distinct value reputations that focus either on issues relating to the economic dimension or on issues relating to the cultural dimension (e.g., Green-Pedersen 2005; Ivarsflaten 2005; Walgrave and de Swert 2007). Today, parties tend to compete over positions within the dimension of their primary interest. For example, parties with a left-wing cultural agenda compete with right-wing cultural agenda parties. Potentially, this creates situations where the two-dimensional system is constituted by two more narrow sets of bipolar subsys-

tems, where certain parties compete on one dimension, while others compete on another dimension. Accordingly, each dimension will be associated with particular patterns of party conflict. This way, conflict between specific parties signals which value dimension is at stake.

This structure of Western European multiparty systems leads us to expect that exposure to distinct patterns of party conflict will facilitate consistency between specific opinions and deeper, longstanding values, but citizens will benefit from party positions only to the extent that the parties are associated primarily with the value dimension in question. Basically, we expect that the reputations of competing parties will enable citizens to use the parties' positions on a given issue as focal points for choosing sides that are consistent with their relevant political values. Given this, we formulate the following four hypotheses about the effects of exposure to party positions in two-dimensional systems:

H1: On economic issues, exposure to conflict between parties with left- and right-wing economic value reputations, respectively, should increase the consistency between citizens' economic values and policy opinion.

H2: On economic issues, exposure to conflict between parties with left- and right-wing *cultural* value reputations, respectively, should *not* increase the consistency between citizens' economic values and policy opinion.

H3: On cultural issues, exposure to conflict between parties with left- and right-wing cultural value reputations, respectively, should increase the consistency between citizens' cultural values and policy opinion.

H4: On cultural issues, exposure to conflict between parties with left- and right-wing *economic* value reputations, respectively, should *not* increase the consistency between citizens' cultural values and policy opinion.

## Experimental Design and Data

To investigate our hypotheses, we analyze two experiments embedded in a nationally representative survey fielded in Denmark, a multiparty proportional representation parliamentary system. Denmark is among the countries, if not *the* country, in Europe where the cultural conflict dimension first crystallized. Already during the 1980s the new conflict dimension had a major impact on party choice, of equal magnitude as the economic left-right dimension (Knutson 1995, p. 80; Knutson and Kumlin 2005, p. 156). Because both dimensions are now well-established, rather stable, and widely recognized by voters (Stubbager 2006), Denmark is an excellent case for studying how party positions influence value consistency in a two-dimensional multiparty context.

We examine the effects of party positions on opinion-value consistency in two question-wording experiments that were designed specifically to cover both the economic and cultural conflict dimensions and to involve parties with value reputations relating primarily to one or the other dimension. In

each experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three different versions of the same opinion question. In the first experimental condition, respondents were presented with two positions on the issue, labeled “Some parties say...” and “Other parties say...,” respectively, and asked for their policy opinion. This version constitutes the control group. In the two treatment groups, the policy positions were labeled by two opposing parties, either with economic or cultural value reputations, respectively. Below, we describe these experiments in detail.

#### ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL POLITICAL VALUES

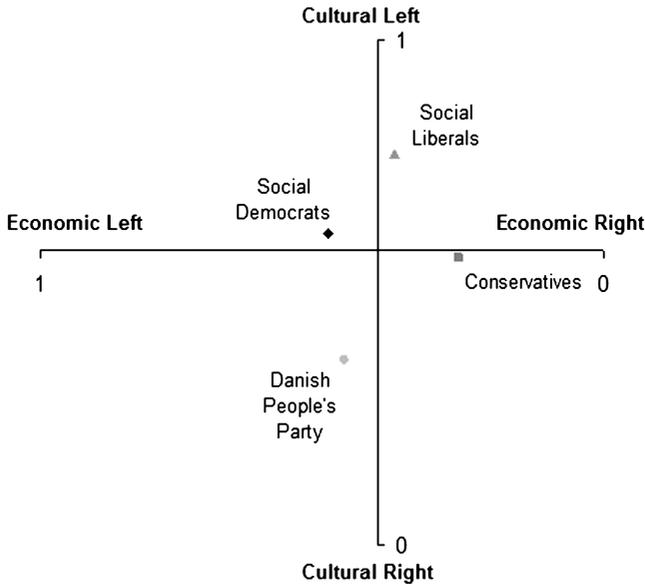
If party competition influences consistency in public opinion, the effect of the respondents’ political values on policy opinions should be conditioned by the experimental labeling of the policy positions. Hence, we first of all need measures of the respondents’ political values. In our study, we tap the two value dimensions with standard Likert-type batteries to construct a three-item additive index of Economic Political Values ( $\alpha = 0.45$ ) and a five-item index of Cultural Political Values ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ). Question wordings are in the Appendix. On both scales, higher values indicate a more left-wing position. As expected, the two dimensions are unrelated (Pearson’s  $r = -0.04$ ).

#### ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL PARTY REPUTATIONS

We focus our experimental stimulus on four parties.<sup>7</sup> The Social Democrats traditionally represented the working class, and the Conservatives defended the interests of the bourgeoisie. Today, these parties still attempt to harvest electoral success through a focus on economic issues; the Social Democrats advance a pro-welfare agenda, while the Conservatives focus on lower taxes. In contrast, the electoral success of the Danish People’s Party is consistently tied to its anti-immigration agenda, and at the other end of this cultural conflict dimension, the Social Liberals attract voters by advocating multicultural policies (Andersen 2007; Stubager 2006).

To validate the value reputations of these four parties, figure 1 displays the mean economic and cultural values of the voters from each party. To facilitate comparison with the median voter, the axes cross each other at the mean positions of the total sample. As expected, the Social Democratic and Conservative voters are very close to the median voter (and each other) on the cultural value dimension, but highly antagonistic on the economic value dimension. Conversely, voters of the Danish People’s Party and the Social Liberals are close on the economic dimension, but opposed to each other on the cultural dimension.

7. At the time of our study, eight parties held seats in the Danish parliament.



**Figure 1. Positions of Voters of Four Parties.** Party positions reflect voters' mean position on Economic and Cultural Political Values, as measured by indexes described in text. Question wordings are in the Appendix. The axes cross each other at the mean positions of the total sample.

These political positions of the parties and their electoral strategies necessarily give rise to distinct patterns of party competition and value reputations. The Social Liberals and Danish People's Party inevitably clash over issues relating to the cultural dimension, while the Social Democrats and Conservatives conflict over economic issues.

In the experiments, the two treatment conditions expose the respondents either to the policy positions of the Danish People's Party and Social Liberals or to the policy positions of the Conservatives and Social Democrats. Given our hypotheses, we expect exposure to conflict between the Danish People's Party and Social Liberals to enable citizens to use the parties' positions as focal points for choosing sides consistent with their cultural political values on a cultural issue. Similarly, exposure to conflict between the Conservatives and Social Democrats should ease citizens' task of choosing a side consistent with their economic political values on an economic issue.

#### ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL ISSUES

We conducted two experiments, each focusing on either an economic or a cultural issue. The economic issue referred to tax cuts, whereas the cultural

issue referred to rehabilitation of criminals. To increase realism of the study, proposals were taken from actual policy discourse, and party positions reflected the actual policies of the parties. Specifically, the questions read:

*Tax cut issue:* “[Some parties/The Social Democrats/The Danish People’s Party] say that potential tax cuts should primarily benefit low-paid citizens. [Other parties/The Conservatives/The Social Liberals] say that potential tax cuts should primarily benefit the well paid. What is your opinion? Should potential tax cuts primarily benefit the low paid or the well paid?”

*Criminal justice issue:* “[Some parties/The Social Democrats/The Social Liberals] say that more money should be earmarked to educational programs for the inmates in the prisons. [Other parties/The Conservatives/The Danish People’s Party] say that enough money has been spent on inmates. What is your opinion? Should more educational programs be funded or has enough money been spent?”<sup>8</sup>

We expected citizens’ opinions on the rehabilitation of criminals to be guided by their cultural political values and opinions on tax cuts to be guided by economic political values. These assumptions are validated by the strong correlation, in the control group, of opinion toward rehabilitation of criminals with cultural values ( $r = .37, p < .001$ , one-sided), but not with economic values ( $r = .01$ ); conversely, opinion toward tax cuts correlated strongly with economic values ( $r = .37, p < .001$ , one-sided), but not with cultural values ( $r = .01$ ). On these grounds, we conceptualize the level of consistency on the criminal justice issue as the degree of association between the policy opinions and cultural political values; on the tax cut issue, opinion-value consistency is conceptualized as the degree of association between policy opinion and economic political values.

## Participants and Data Collection

The experiments were embedded in a national survey fielded in Denmark between February 1 and April 29, 2006. The survey was conducted in the form of computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) with a random sample of 1,919 Danish citizens aged 18–70 years drawn from the Central Office of Civil Registration, which has the records for all Danish citizens. The minimum response rate was 67 percent (AAPOR RR1), and the respondent-level cooperation rate was 83 percent (AAPOR COOR3). The sample is approximately representative of the target population on gender, age, and region. Over the course of the interview, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three

8. On both questions, responses were measured on four-point Likert scales with the possibility of answering “Don’t know.” In the analyses, “Don’t know” answers have been included as a separate middle category on the response scale, indicating that the respondent supports neither option.

conditions (economic parties; cultural parties; control group), and the order of the two issues was randomized.<sup>9</sup>

## Results

The question we seek to answer is whether conflict between political parties helps citizens to connect their deeper values with their specific policy opinions. We have proposed that citizens will be better able to achieve such consistency when an issue is framed in terms of the positions of competing political parties. Specifically, we expect this effect to be contingent on the reputations of the competing parties such that parties with cultural value reputations will help citizens connect their cultural values to opinions on cultural issues, while parties with economic value reputations will help citizens connect their economic values to opinions on economic issues.

On the economic issue, these propositions imply that the effect of people's economic values on their policy opinion on the economic issue should be significantly higher when they are exposed to the policy positions of the two economic parties, the Conservatives and the Social Democrats, as compared to when they receive no party information (H1). In reverse, there should be no increase when the respondents are exposed to the policy positions of the two cultural parties, the Danish People's Party and the Social Liberals (H2). Similarly, on the cultural issue, we expect the effect of the people's cultural values on opinion to be significantly larger when they are exposed to the policy positions of the two cultural parties (H3), but not when they are exposed to the policy positions of the two economic parties (H4), as compared to the control group without parties.

To test whether the effect of the relevant value dimension on the respondents' policy opinions is significantly higher in the relevant treatment condition, on each of the issues, we regress policy opinion on the relevant value scale, a dummy variable for each of the two experimental treatments, and the interactions between value and treatment. The interaction term tests whether the effect of values on opinion is significantly different in the relevant party condition as compared to the control condition. In other words, if the interaction term is positive and significant, it will support our expectation that respondents are able to more firmly connect their values to the policy issue in the relevant condition.

The regression analyses appear in table 1. We first consider the economic issue. In model 1, opinion on tax cuts is regressed on the two experimental treatment groups (i.e., the control group without parties is the reference

9. Analyses reveal that the random assignment was successful. Hence, we find no significant differences between the experimental groups with regard to gender, age, education, employment in the private vs. public sector, political interest, political knowledge, or vote choice. For this reason we do not include demographic controls in our analyses.

**Table 1. OLS Regression Coefficients of the Effects of Party Positions on Value Consistency in Opinion** (standard errors in parentheses)

	<b>Economic issue Model 1 n = 1,872</b>	<b>Cultural issue Model 2 n = 1,891</b>
Intercept	.62*** (.02)	.14*** (.04)
Economic parties condition	-.10*** (.03)	-.04 (.05)
Cultural parties condition	-.04 (.03)	-.12* (.05)
Economic political values	.40*** (.04)	-
Economic values × economic parties	.13* (.06)	-
Economic values × cultural parties	.001 (.06)	-
Cultural political values	-	.61*** (.06)
Cultural values × economic parties	-	.07 (.08)
Cultural values × cultural parties	-	.22** (.09)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.15	.18

NOTE.—Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Dependent variables are support for tax reductions for the poor (economic issue) or educational programs for the inmates (cultural issue), respectively. Reference group for the treatment effects (i.e., the economic parties and cultural parties conditions, respectively) is the control group without party information. \* *p* < .05; \*\* *p* < .01; \*\*\* *p* < .001; all tests are one-sided.

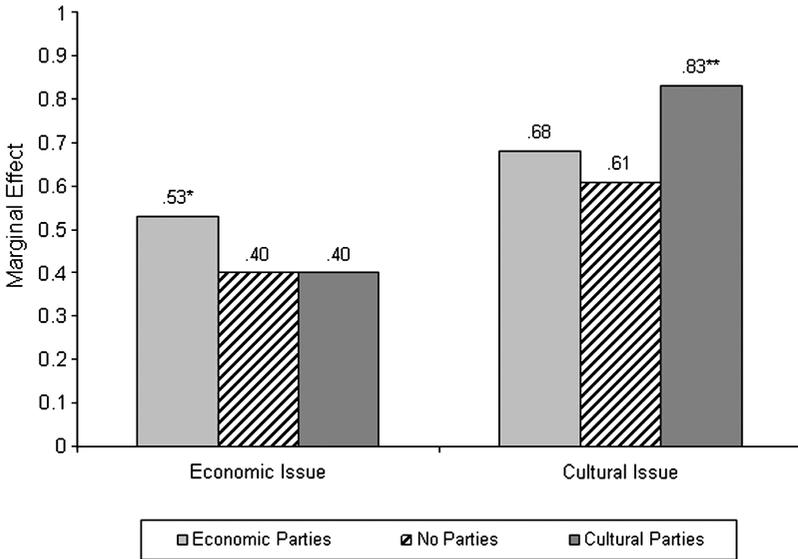
group), general economic values, and interactions between economic values and the treatment groups. Hence, the dependent variable is support for reducing taxes for the poor relative to the wealthy. If respondents use their economic values to guide their opinion, we should expect the economic left to be more supportive than the economic right of this policy, i.e., we should find a positive correlation between the economic values scale and the policy opinion. The first important observation in model 1 is that in the control condition, i.e., when respondents are not exposed to any information about the positions of specific parties, we find a positive effect of economic values and it is of a considerable magnitude. This is revealed by the effect of the respondents' economic values on tax cut opinion (because the control group serves as the statistical reference group). Given the coding of the variables, the coefficient of .40 implies that a change from 0 (most right-wing economic

values) to 1 (most left-wing economic values) moves the policy opinion as much as 40 percent of the full scale toward supporting tax cuts for the poor.

The question, then, is whether exposure to party positions on the tax cut issue helps the respondents strengthen this link between their values and policy opinion. This is tested by the interaction terms in model 1. As can be seen, there is indeed a positive and significant interaction between the respondents' economic values and the treatment condition with exposure to the positions of the two economic parties. Consistent with H1, respondents are better able to connect their economic values to an economic issue when exposed to party competition between parties with economic value reputations. The coefficient of this interaction effect is .13. This implies that the effect of economic values increases by about one-third compared to the control condition (compare  $.40$  to  $.40 + .13 = .53$ ). In other words, the increase in consistency between values and opinions when exposed to party competition is quite substantial. Importantly, the interaction effect between economic values and the cultural parties condition is insignificant. Hence, the respondents do not become better at connecting their economic values to their opinion toward tax cuts when informed about the positions of two parties with cultural—rather than economic—value reputations. This supports H2. These results are illustrated in the left half of figure 2. The bars indicate the marginal effects of economic values on opinion in each of the three conditions, and they clearly show that only information about the positions of parties with economic value reputations helps citizens in connecting their economic values and opinions on the economic issue.

What happens on the cultural issue of rehabilitation? According to hypotheses H3 and H4, we expect increased consistency between cultural political values and issue opinions when respondents are exposed to competition between the two parties with cultural value reputations, but not when they are exposed to competition between the parties with economic value reputations. These hypotheses are tested in model 2 in table 1, where respondents' opinions on the rehabilitation issue are regressed on the two experimental treatment groups, general cultural values, and interactions between cultural values and the treatments. The issue relates to whether the state should spend more money on providing criminals with educational programs. If cultural values guide opinions on this issue, we should expect the cultural left to be more supportive of this policy than the cultural right and, hence, we should find a positive effect of cultural values on policy opinion. Again, the first important observation is the effect of the cultural values in the experimental condition without party information. With a positive coefficient of .61, cultural values have a strong effect in the expected direction on the policy opinions in this control condition.

Does this effect change when respondents are exposed to information about party positions? It does, but only when the parties have cultural value reputations. Hence, we find a positive and significant interaction term be-



**Figure 2. Marginal Effect of Relevant Political Values on Issue Opinions for Each Experimental Condition.** Marginal effects calculated from table 1. Marginal effects are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. All variables vary between 0 and 1. Asterisks indicate whether the marginal effect is significantly different from the effect in the control group (i.e., the condition with no parties). \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; all tests are one-sided.

tween the respondents’ cultural values and exposure to the positions of the two cultural parties. Again, the increased effect is far from trivial. In the condition with cultural parties, the total effect of cultural values on policy opinion is  $.61 + .22 = .83$  and, hence, the effect increases by more than one-third compared to the condition without party information (where the effect is  $.61$ ). This finding supports H3. Conversely, the interaction term between cultural values and the economic parties is insignificant and thus supports H4. Hence, the respondents are not better at connecting their cultural values to policy opinions when the issue is framed in terms of parties with economic value reputations. These findings are illustrated in the right half of figure 2. Consistent with the conclusions above, we find a significant increase in consistency only between cultural values and policy opinion, when the issue is framed by the positions of two parties with cultural value reputations, and not when respondents are presented with conflict among parties with economic value reputations.

Thus, across the two issues we clearly see that the opinions are more constrained by political values (i.e., the marginal effects of the values are higher) when an issue is framed in terms of parties with value reputations that match

the issue.<sup>10</sup> These highly specific effects are important. It is not information about parties *per se* that increases value consistency. Rather, it is the fit between the value reputations of the parties and the issue in question that helps citizens see the connection to their deeper values. Hence, these results provide strong support for our argument that conflict between specific parties *frames* an issue in such a way that it encourages citizens to think about the issue in terms of the values associated with the parties.<sup>11</sup>

However, how can we know that these increases in value consistency are not merely the result of citizens simply following the position of their liked party and thereby—by coincidence—that they end up forming opinions that are more consistent with their longstanding values? In other words, the significant interaction effects could be spurious—simply reflecting that citizens follow the position taken by their liked party, without involving any attempts to connect their general values to the specific policy in question. Our argument that political parties help citizens take the side of an issue that is most consistent with their general political values does not preclude that simple cue-taking is also driving policy preferences, but we must be able to rule out that the increase in value consistency is a function of such simple cue-taking. We therefore also measured respondents' party sympathies on scales ranging from 0 ("Dislike the party strongly") through 10 ("Like the party strongly") (see question wordings in the Appendix). This measure enables us to control for the alternative cue-taking explanation of our analyses.

Accordingly, we extended the analyses in table 1 by controlling for party sympathy. These analyses are displayed in table 2. In model 1, we reanalyze the interactive effects of economic values and experimental conditions on policy opinions on the economic issue. We control for the sympathies toward the two economic parties (i.e., the Conservatives and Social Democrats) and the interactions with the relevant treatment condition. Party sympathies correlate with opinion, but crucially, the predicted interaction between exposure to the positions of the parties and economic political values is robust to the inclusion of these terms. In model 2, we perform a similar control in relation to the

10. To examine this effect in more detail, we have analyzed the effects of including the non-applicable value in the models. Hence, in the model for opinion on the economic issue, we have added the Cultural Political Value scale together with the full set of interactions. Similarly, in the model for opinion on the cultural issue, we have added the Economic Political Value scale together with the full set of interactions. None of these interactions are significant, whereas the significance of the interactions reported in table 1 is robust to these inclusions. These results underscore the specificity of the effect and suggest that voters consider both the value reputations of the parties and the applicability of a value when forming opinions.

11. Interestingly, additional analyses suggest that this effect is not dependent on political knowledge. Hence, we find no significant three-way interaction effects between the relevant party condition, the relevant political value, and the political knowledge of the respondents. Thus, seemingly, voters are not required to be highly politically engaged in order to benefit from information about party positions.

**Table 2. OLS Regression Coefficients of the Effects of Party Positions on Value Consistency in Opinion, Controlling for Effects of Party Sympathy (standard errors in parentheses)**

	Economic issue Model 1 <i>n</i> = 1,769	Cultural issue Model 2 <i>n</i> = 1,768
Intercept	.70*** (.04)	.25*** (.06)
Economic parties condition	-.14* (.07)	-.04 (.06)
Cultural parties condition	-.04 (.03)	-.07 (.09)
Economic political values	.31*** (.04)	-
Economic values × economic parties	.11* (.06)	-
Economic values × cultural parties	-.01 (.06)	-
Cultural political values	-	.43*** (.07)
Cultural values × economic parties	-	.07 (.09)
Cultural values × cultural parties	-	.18* (.11)
Sympathy for Social Democrats	.22*** (.04)	-
Sympathy Soc Dem × economic parties	.10 (.07)	-
Sympathy for Conservatives	-.30*** (.04)	-
Sympathy Cons × economic parties	-.02 (.07)	-
Sympathy for Social Liberals	-	.10* (.05)
Sympathy Soc Lib × cultural parties	-	.01 (.09)
Sympathy for Danish People’s Party	-	-.14** (.04)
Sympathy Danish PP × cultural parties	-	-.07 (.07)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.22	.19

NOTE.—Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Dependent variables are support for tax reductions for the poor (economic issue) or educational programs for the inmates (cultural issue), respectively. Reference group for the treatment effects is the control group without party information. \* *p* < .05; \*\* *p* < .01; \*\*\* *p* < .001; all tests are one-sided.

cultural issue. Hence, we control for interactions between the experimental manipulation and sympathies for the Social Liberals and Danish People's Party. Sympathies correlate with opinion, but again, the expected interaction between exposure to the positions of the parties and cultural values remains significant. Hence, the increased vertical constraint in the relevant treatment conditions does not reflect that citizens simply follow the position taken by the party they like. Rather, people seem to be directly motivated to form an opinion that is consistent with their political values and, in this respect, citizens use information about party positions when inferring which value is relevant to the specific policy.

## Conclusions

For over fifty years, political researchers have suggested that party competition might play a vital role in helping citizens take sides on policy issues in a way that is consistent with their deeper values. With the present study, this intuition has now been supported by data. Hence, in the current study, we have experimentally demonstrated that citizens use information about the structure of party competition on a given issue to achieve increased value consistency.

Theoretically, we have nuanced the classic intuition in two ways. First, we have explicitly linked research on political parties with research on framing effects. Specifically, our basic argument is that information about party competition *frames* issues such that the citizens are better able to see the connection between their values and the issue. Second, we have argued that a key aspect in this framing process is the structure of party competition and the corresponding value reputations of the parties. By studying the effects of information about party competition in a two-dimensional political environment, we could validate this second insight. Thus, we found that only parties highly profiled on the value dimension in question facilitated consistency between this dimension and policy opinions. That is, only the Social Democrats and Conservatives were able to increase the consistency between economic values and opinion on an economic issue, whereas only the Danish People's Party and Social Liberals increased the consistency between cultural values and opinion on the cultural issue. Hence, because parties have reputations for defending certain values, the structure of party conflict on an issue signals to citizens what political conflict dimension is currently at stake on the issue. In this way, party conflict frames the issue by emphasizing one value dimension rather than another—in our case, framing the issue in terms of cultural or economic values—and thereby directs people to rely more on their general cultural or economic values when forming an opinion on the issue.

Importantly, these effects were not driven by mere cue-taking in which citizens are just taking the same position as the party they like; controlling for individuals' sympathy with the parties in question did not affect these find-

ings. In this way, we also move beyond much current framing research. Hence, in the context of our study, the framing effects cannot be viewed simply as instances of elite manipulation. Rather, the framing effects we have observed should make citizens less susceptible to elite manipulation. Hence, citizens are helped to form opinions that more accurately reflect their values than would have been the case absent the framing effect.

In sum, our findings suggest that the political parties help citizens take sides on political issues in ways consistent with their deeper values. Thus, we have empirically demonstrated the existence of an important link between individual-level processes and the political environment. Perhaps lack of consistency in public opinion, therefore, is to blame not only for citizens lacking interest in politics, but also for parties failing to explicitly provide citizens with ideological labels on the positions and statements in policy debate.

## **Appendix: Question Wordings**

### ECONOMIC POLITICAL VALUES

“The government has too little control over industry,” “High incomes should be taxed more heavily than today,” “In politics one should aim at providing the same economic conditions for everyone, regardless of education and employment.”

### CULTURAL POLITICAL VALUES

“Crimes of violence should be punished harsher than today,” “Criminality is better prevented by prevention and counseling than by harsh punishment,” “Economic growth has to be secured by expanding the industry, even if it conflicts with protection of the environment,” “Immigration poses a threat to our national culture,” “If there is a lack of jobs, the employer should hire Danes at the expense of immigrants.”

Responses to items in the Economic and Cultural Political Values scales were measured on five-point scales, with response categories labeled “Agree completely,” “Agree somewhat,” “Neither/nor,” “Disagree somewhat,” and “Disagree completely”; “Don’t know” responses were also recorded.

### PARTY SYMPATHY

“Now I would like to hear what you think about the individual political parties. After I have read aloud the name of each party, I would like you to place the party on a scale from 0 to 10, 0 indicating that you dislike the party strongly, and 10 indicating that you think very highly of the party. If I name a party that you are not familiar with or feel that you do not know enough about, just say so. The first party is the Social Democrats. Where will you

place the Social Democrats on a scale from 0 to 10?" Other parties asked: the Social Liberals, the Conservatives, the Socialist People's Party, the Danish People's Party, the Liberals, and the Red-Green Alliance.

## References

- Althaus, Scott, and Young Mie Kim. 2006. "Priming Effects in Complex Information Environments: Reassessing the Impact of News Discourse on Presidential Approval." *Journal of Politics* 68:960–76.
- Andersen, Jørgen Goul. 1961. "Samfundskonflikter, partier i bevægelse og vælgere med omtanke: Rids af en generel teoretisk ramme." In *Det nye politiske landskab. Folketingsvalget 2005 i perspektiv*, eds Andersen Jørgen Goul, Andersen Johannes, Borre Olle, Hansen Kasper Møller and Nielsen Hans Jørgen, pp. 11–55. Århus, Denmark: Academica.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley.
- Campbell, Angus, and Henry Valen. 1961. "Party Identification in Norway and the United States." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 25:505–25.
- Carmines, Edward G., and James H. Kuklinski. 1990. "Incentives, Opportunities, and the Logic of Public Opinion in American Political Representation." In *Information and Democratic Processes*, pp. 240–68. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Carsey, Thomas M., and Geoffrey C. Layman. 2006. "Changing Sides or Changing Minds? Party Identification and Policy Preferences in the American Electorate." *American Journal of Political Science* 50:464–77.
- Chong, Dennis, and James N. Druckman. 2007a. "Framing Public Opinion in Competitive Democracies." *American Political Science Review* 101:637–55.
- . 2007b. "Framing Theory." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10:103–26.
- Converse, Philip E. 1964. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." In *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. Apter David, pp. 206–61. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Druckman, James N., and Kjersten R. Nelson. 2003. "Framing and Deliberation: How Citizens' Conversations Limit Elite Influence." *American Journal of Political Science* 47:729–45.
- Feldman, Stanley. 2003. "Values, Ideology, and the Structure of Political Attitudes." In *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, eds David O. Sears, Huddy Leonie and Robert Jervis, pp. 477–508. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Flanagan, Scott C. 1987. "Value Change in Industrial Societies." *American Political Science Review* 81:1303–19.
- Fuchs, Dieter, and Klingemann Hans-Dieter. 1989. "The Left-Right Schema." In *Continuities in Political Action: A Longitudinal Study of Political Orientations in Three Western Democracies*, eds M. Kent Jennings, M. Kent Jennings and Jan W. van Deth, pp. 203–34. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Gilens, Martin, and Murakawa Naomi. 2002. "Elite Cues and Political Decision-Making." In *Research in Micropolitics* Vol. 6. Amsterdam: JAI, Political Decision-Making, Deliberation and Participation.
- Green-Pedersen, Christoffer. 2005. "Folketinget under fortsat forandring." *Politica* 37:394–410.
- Hetherington, Marc J. 2009. "Review Article: Putting Polarization in Perspective." *British Journal of Political Science* 39:413–48.
- Hurwitz, Jon, and Mark Peffley. 1987. "How Are Foreign Policy Attitudes Structured? A Hierarchical Model." *American Political Science Review* 81:1099–120.
- Ivaresflaten, Elisabeth. 2005. "The Vulnerable Populist Right Parties: No Economic Realignment Fueling Their Electoral Success." *European Journal of Political Research* 44:465–92.
- Iyengar, Shanto, and Donald R. Kinder. 1987. *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Jacoby, William G. 1988. "The Impact of Party Identification on Issue Attitudes." *American Journal of Political Science* 32:643–61.
- Kam, Cindy D. 2005. "Who Toes the Party Line? Cues, Values, and Individual Differences." *Political Behavior* 27:163–82.
- Key, V. O.Jr. 1966. *The Responsible Electorate*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Kinder, Donald R. 1983. "Diversity and Complexity in American Public Opinion." In *The State of the Discipline*, ed. Finifter Ada, pp. 389–425. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.
- . 2006. "Belief Systems Today." *Critical Review* 18:197–216.
- Knutsen, Oddbjørn. 1995. "Value Orientations, Political Conflicts and Left-Right Identification: A Comparative Study." *European Journal of Political Research* 28:63–93.
- Knutsen, Oddbjørn, and Kumlin Staffan. 2005. "Value Orientations and Party Choice." In *The European Voter*, ed. Thomassen Jacques, pp. 125–66. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kriesi, Hanspeter, Edgar Grande, Romain Lachat, Martin Dolezal, Simon Bornschie, and Timotheos Frey. 2006. "Globalization and the Transformation of the National Political Space: Six European Countries Compared." *European Journal of Political Research* 45:921–56.
- Levendusky, Matthew. 2009. *The Partisan Sort: The Rise of Liberal Democrats and Conservative Republicans*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S., William G. Jascoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert F. Weisberg. 2008. *The American Voter Revisited*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Mondak, Jeffery J. 1993. "Source Cues and Policy Approval: The Cognitive Dynamics of Public Support for the Reagan Agenda." *American Journal of Political Science* 37:186–212.
- Nie, Norman H., and Kristi Andersen. 1974. "Mass Belief Systems Revisited: Political Change and Attitude Structure." *Journal of Politics* 36:540–91.
- Nie, Norman H., Sidney Verba, and John R. Petrocik. 1976. *The Changing American Voter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Niemi, Richard G., and Anders Westholm. 1984. "Issues, Parties and Attitudinal Stability: A Comparative Study of Sweden and the United States." *Electoral Studies* 3:63–83.
- Petrocik, John R. 1996. "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study." *American Journal of Political Science* 40:825–50.
- Pollock, Philip H., Stuart A. Lilie, and M. Elliot Vittes. 1993. "Hard Issues, Core Values and Vertical Constraint: The Case of Nuclear Power." *British Journal of Political Science* 23:29–50.
- Shen, Fuyuan, and Heidi H. Edwards. 2005. "Economic Individualism, Humanitarianism, and Welfare Reform." *Journal of Communication* 55:795–809.
- Slothuus, Rune. Forthcoming. "When Can Political Parties Lead Public Opinion? Evidence from a Natural Experiment." *Political Communication*.
- Slothuus, Rune, and Claes de Vreese. Forthcoming. "Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Issue Framing Effects." *Journal of Politics*.
- Sniderman, Paul M. 1993. "The New Look in Public Opinion Research." In *The State of the Discipline II*, ed. Finifter Ada. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.
- . 2000. "Taking Sides: A Fixed Choice Theory of Political Reasoning." In *Elements of Reason: Cognition, Choice, and the Bound of Rationality*, eds. Lupia Arthur, Mathew D. McCubbins and Samuel L. Popkin, pp. 67–84. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sniderman, Paul M., Richard A. Brody, and Philip E. Tetlock. 1991. *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sniderman, Paul M., and Bullock John. 2004. "A Consistency Theory of Public Opinion and Political Choice: The Hypothesis of Menu Dependency." In *Studies in Public Opinion: Attitudes, Nonattitudes, Measurement Error, and Change*, eds. Willem E. Saris and Paul M. Sniderman, pp. 337–57. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Sniderman, Paul M., and Sean M. Theriault. 2004. "The Structure of Political Argument and the Logic of Issue Framing." In *Studies in Public Opinion: Attitudes, Nonattitudes, Measurement Error, and Change*, eds. Willem E. Saris and Paul M. Sniderman, pp. 134–65. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Stoker, Laura, and M. Kent Jennings. 2008. "Of Time and the Development of Partisan Polarization." *American Journal of Political Science* 52:619–35.
- Stubager, Rune. 2006. *The Education Cleavage: New Politics in Denmark*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Århus: Politica.
- Sullivan, John L., James E. Piereson, and George E. Marcus. 1978. "Ideological Constraint in the Mass Public: A Methodological Critique and Some New Findings." *American Journal of Political Science* 22:234–49.
- Togeby, Lise. 2007. "The Context of Priming." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30:345–76.
- Walgrave, Stefaan, and Knut de Swert. 2007. "Where Does Issue Ownership Come From? From the Party or from the Media? Issue-Party Identifications in Belgium, 1991–2005." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12:37–67.
- Zaller, John R. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.