

Can Canadians Take a Hint? The (In)Effectiveness of Party Labels as Information Shortcuts in Canada

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Studies of Canadian politics have begun to acknowledge a significant trend toward lower political information levels in Canada (Fournier, 2002; Gidengil et al., 2004; Howe, 2003). If this is so, how are Canadians determining their political preferences? In common conceptions of democratic governance, citizens elect representatives who reflect their policy preferences (for example, Ranney, 1962). Yet for electoral mandates to be meaningful, citizens must first have opinions on relevant political issues, which requires that citizens have some level of information. How can citizens overcome their information deficiencies? Or do they? Of the many suggestions that have been put forward for how Canadian citizens make decisions with limited information (for a review see Gidengil et al., 2004: ch. 4), the possibility of using party labels as information shortcuts has received little serious attention. The range of issues that comprise Canadian politics is vast and varies in complexity. In the 2006 election, for example, a diverse list of issues was raised, ranging from health care to income trusts to the national gun registry. While voters

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might find it relatively easy to form and express opinions on long-standing, non-technical issues, such as the gun registry, it is less obvious how under-informed citizens might develop opinions on issues that are new and/or obscure.

One possibility is that Canadians make use of party labels, and the ideological information they contain, as cues to develop their own opinions. This idea was promoted by Downs (1957) and has found significant support in the American context (Popkin, 1994). Party labels are purportedly one of the most useful heuristic aids because they are very accessible and “travel so well” across different decision domains (Huckfeldt et al., 1999). In the United States, it has been found that party labels help individuals to predict the issue positions of political candidates, determine and organize their own issue positions, and “correctly” select political leaders without possessing “encyclopedic” levels of information (for example, Downs, 1957; Huckfeldt et al., 1999; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Lodge and Hamill, 1986; Popkin, 1994; Sniderman et al., 1991). Yet, the effectiveness of heuristic aids in a multi-party system is less certain. As Sniderman puts it, speaking to the general ability of citizens to process information and make choices, “transplant Americans to a political order where ... the structure of political choice sets is either more complex or more obscure than here, and they [citizens] will have still more difficulty” (2000: 83–84). Sniderman’s point is that the nature of the choice set, determined in large part by the nature of the party system, is a crucial determinant of the limits of heuristic-based reasoning. In contexts where more than two parties compete, where parties fail to bundle issues in coherent ideological packages, and where at least some parties are relative newcomers, traditional heuristic aids such as party labels may be less useful.

The Canadian context, by exhibiting such characteristics, provides the perfect setting in which to examine these issues. Jenson has suggested that, in Canada, partisan identification should be viewed through the lens of party labels as information shortcuts (1976). But, despite this and other musings about the possibility of citizens using such cues (see Gidengil et al., 2004), there has yet to be a systematic investigation of whether party labels are effective in this manner. As we will discuss in the next section, an important line of scholarship examines party identification in Canada and its findings help shape our expectations. However, as far as we are aware, almost no research has investigated whether party labels are used as heuristic aids, helping Canadians form and express opinions on issues.¹ This paper addresses this gap in the literature, using survey data supplemented with data collected from an experimental study implemented in the spring of 2004. The experiment sought to test if and how party labels (Liberal, Conservative, NDP) are used as information cues in the development of a range of political opinions by a select group of Canadian citizens.

Abstract. This paper examines the usefulness of Canadian political party labels as information shortcuts. We supplement survey data analysis with the results of an experiment that tested whether knowing a party's position on an issue influenced opinion expression. We find that, contrary to findings in other countries, among our subject pool, Canadian political parties are not consistently useful as information cues. The Liberal party cue is hardly useful, and while the Conservative party cue can be effective, it appears to push partisans toward a more liberal stance on selected opinions. Only the NDP cue appears to influence opinions in the expected direction. These mixed findings run counter to foundational works on party labels as information shortcuts (mostly focused on US politics) and, instead, are consistent with previous scholarship on Canadian politics.

Résumé. Cet article examine l'utilité des étiquettes politiques des partis canadiens comme sources d'information sommaire. Nous analysons des données d'enquête ainsi que les résultats d'un sondage visant à déterminer si le fait de connaître la position d'un parti sur une question donnée influençait l'expression des opinions. Contrairement aux résultats obtenus dans d'autres pays, nous constatons chez les sujets observés que les étiquettes des partis politiques canadiens ne sont pas uniformément utiles comme sources d'information sommaire. L'étiquette du Parti libéral s'avère à peine utile, tandis que l'étiquette du Parti conservateur, peut-être plus efficace, semble inciter les partisans à une position plus libérale. Seule l'étiquette du NPD semble influencer les avis dans la direction prévue. Ces conclusions mixtes contredisent des travaux fondamentaux sur le même sujet (portant pour la plupart sur la politique aux États-Unis) et confirment plutôt les études antérieures sur la politique canadienne.

Extant Theoretical Perspectives

In an early study of the United States, Converse found that citizens' opinions on policy items were unrelated to each other, that people failed to respond to many pressing issues, and that opinions over time were inconsistent (1964). The implication of these and related findings was that the electorate was hardly capable of making reasonable political decisions. Other research, much of it coming later in time, challenged these claims by arguing that citizens can make reasonable choices with limited information if they rely on information shortcuts, or heuristics (for example, Downs, 1957; Hinich and Munger, 1994; McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1985, 1986; Neuman, 1986; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Popkin, 1994; Sniderman et al., 1991; but see Somin, 1998, for an argument to the contrary). One potential heuristic aid, universally found in competitive party systems, is the party label. Beginning with Downs (1957), it has been argued that one of the primary purposes of political parties is to provide an information shortcut for voters, to help them understand the issue positions and/or ideology of political actors.

The utility of party labels has been investigated in a variety of domains, primarily in the US context. In terms of voting, people rely on partisan cues in the voting booth (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Popkin, 1994; Rahn, 1993), especially in low information elections (Schaffner and Streb, 2002; Squire and Smith, 1988). As long as candidates hold issue positions consistent with those of their party, voters are likely to select the

“correct” candidate (in terms of the voters’ own preferences) if they are told the party of the candidate (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Rahn, 1993). Furthermore, party cues can help citizens to predict the issue positions of candidates and to place them on an ideological spectrum (for example, Conover and Feldman, 1989; Huckfeldt et al., 1999; Kahn, 1994; Koch, 2001; Lodge and Hamill, 1986; Rahn, 1993; Wright and Niemi, 1983), as well as assist citizens in determining and organizing their own political beliefs (Kam, 2005). Party cues can also increase coherence within belief systems (Tomz and Sniderman, 2004), which has become especially evident as the American parties have become more polarized over time (Layman and Carsey, 2002). Further, the presence of party cues can help citizens overcome framing effects (Druckman, 2001a).²

Some work outside of the US context has explored the influence of party cues in the context of European integration. Ray found that party positions influence opinions on EU integration, though these effects are conditioned by the salience of the issue, party unity, and consensus in the system, as well as individual level factors (2003). According to Hobolt, simple exposure to a party cue did not help Norwegian citizens make decisions on EU integration, though knowledge of the party’s position did provide a reliable substitute for detailed knowledge of the EU (2007).

While most of the above-referenced scholarship presents an optimistic account of the ability of party cues to help citizens with limited information make reasonable choices, other work questions whether party cues are helpful in all contexts.³ Downs, for example, suggests that party labels might not be terribly useful in two-party systems where parties have an incentive to be ambiguous with respect to most of their policy stances (1957). Lupia and McCubbins (1998) argue that cues are only useful to the extent that they convey credible information to the voter (that is, citizens perceive the speaker as knowledgeable and trustworthy). Other studies have shown that if candidates take stances that diverge greatly from their party’s platform, citizens may be less likely to make an optimal voting decision (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Rahn, 1993). In other words, extant research suggests that, in order for party labels to be useful, they must be meaningful—specifically, parties must have clear and consistent ideological reputations.⁴

While a party’s reputation might condition the usefulness of the cues it sends to citizens, it is also logical that the complexity of the decision to be made will play a role. If the issue is simple, voters may not need any of the information that a party cue can provide to develop an opinion. Carmines and Stimson argue that issues are easier the more they meet the following criteria: a) long on the political agenda; b) more symbolic than technical; and c) more concerned with policy ends than means (1980). Furthermore, people behave differently, with respect to vote choice, when deliberating over easy and hard issues. With easy issues,

individuals are more likely to be able to form opinions without party labels because the issues are long-standing and/or have been around for some time and are not difficult to comprehend. However, as issues increase in complexity and decrease in salience, citizens should rely more on labels in the formation and expression of their political preferences. Extant research, focused on the US case, has demonstrated that individuals, especially low sophisticates, rely on partisan cues when faced with novel, or hard, issues (Kam, 2005).

Even when issue complexity is considered, the literature discussed above clearly suggests that the value of party cues where party systems are in flux, attachments to parties are weak, and/or electoral institutions do not create incentives for candidates to co-ordinate on a reliable party label may be significantly limited. In the stable American context, where the parties have well-established, clearly defined “brand names,” most of these complications do not exist for the major parties.⁵ In fact, the effect of party labels as cues was found by Tomz and Sniderman to be almost identical to using the ideological labels of “liberal” and “conservative” (2004). Research into the Mexican context has found that party labels in that system perform at least some of the same heuristic functions as major American party labels, although there is variation in the effectiveness of party cues among the parties (Merolla et al., 2007). Whether this also holds for Canadian parties as well, however, is unknown.

What *is* known is that a significant amount of literature has investigated partisanship in the Canadian setting. While party identification is conceptually different from party labels as heuristic aids, extant research on partisanship provides important insight into the cue-providing role party labels might play.⁶ First, Canadian partisanship has long been acknowledged to differ in significant ways from American partisanship. Initial studies concluded that Canadian partisanship “travelled with the vote” (Meisel, 1973)—in other words, partisanship did not exhibit the “long-standing, psychological attachment” characteristic assumed of American partisanship (Campbell et al., 1960). Building on these findings, later work argues that Canadian partisanship is more unstable (Jenson, 1975; LeDuc et al., 1984) and flexible than in other countries and that flexible partisans are influenced by election campaigns differently than durable partisans (Clarke et al., 1980, 1984, 1991, 1996).⁷ Most recently, Green, Palmquist and Schickler find that partisan stability was much weaker when the Canadian system underwent a period of upheaval in the 1990s (2002; but for a contrary opinion about Canadian partisanship see Gidengil et al., 2006; Johnston et al., 1992). The implication of these findings for our purposes is that in the Canadian system citizens may be less inclined to turn to party labels as cues in the formation of opinions compared to systems where partisanship is more stable.

Second, regardless of whether partisanship is less stable in the Canadian context, it is nonetheless an important component of a Canadian's vote calculus. Nevitte, Blais, Gidengil and Nadeau, in their books on Canadian elections, find that partisanship exerts a strong influence on voting behaviour (Nevitte et al., 2000; Blais et al., 2002). In both studies, they find that the Liberal victories of 1997 and 2000 were largely due to the fact that the Liberal party had more partisans than any other political party at the time. As they summarize, "Their vote is not *predetermined* but they are certainly *predisposed* to vote for 'their' party." (Blais et al., 2002: 117, italics in original).⁸ Furthermore, research into the effects of campaigns indicates that partisanship can colour the reception of campaign information (Johnston et al., 1996). Thus, Canadian citizens may use partisanship and cues from parties to inform their preferences over issues. However, they may rely less on party cues than will citizens in systems with more stable partisanship.

One of the common explanations forwarded to explain the weaker partisanship of Canadians is that the political parties are not clearly defined ideologically. In terms of party cues, this could have implications for the amount of information provided by a party label. The brokerage tradition in Canada (see next section for more details), in which the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives (PCs) structured their political promises in order to broker the best possible coalition of electoral support, tends to sideline ideology and class issues for the more pragmatic concern of getting elected (Carty, 2006; Johnston et al., 1992; Stevenson, 1987). Some research also reports that Canadians have historically seen little difference among their party options (Kay, 1977; Scarrow, 1965; but see Nadeau and Blais, 1990). Of course, the recent changes to the party system, including the merging of the Alliance and PC parties in 2003, raise the question of whether the findings still hold. Only the Liberal party can still be called a true brokerage party, as the new Conservative party has a much clearer ideological background courtesy of its Reform and Alliance party roots (Nevitte et al., 2000).

Thus, the literature provides reason to expect that party cues might not be as useful, or used in the same way, in the Canadian context given the characteristics of the party system and the weaker attachments to parties among citizens. As such, expanding our understanding of party cues to the Canadian case is an important test of the generalizability of the usefulness of party labels as heuristics, a "fact" that has been demonstrated in the American context but not tested much beyond those borders. In so doing, we expand the geographical span of our understanding of party labels as heuristic aids northward, specifically with respect to the formation and expression of policy preferences in Canada. Furthermore, studying party cues in Canada also contributes to the literature on Canadian voting behaviour. While other heuristic aids have been evalu-

ated in the Canadian case (such as demographic characteristics, by Cutler, 2002), our research provides the first systematic test of the use of party cues in Canada.⁹

Hypotheses

The common wisdom about party cues, as discussed above, suggests that party cues should be helpful across the general realm of opinion expression and formation. More specifically, if parties provide information shortcuts to citizens, then knowing where a party stands on an issue should influence where one perceives oneself to stand on that issue. The use of party labels as heuristic aids for opinion formation and expression, however, may be moderated by partisanship.¹⁰ If an individual is a strong partisan of a particular party, he or she should be more likely to accept that cue (and thus express an opinion in that direction), while someone who is a partisan of an opposing party should be more likely to reject the direction of the cue and express a contrary opinion (Kam, 2005; Sniderman et al., 1991; Zaller, 1992). As we discussed in the previous section, the use of party cues in the formation and expression of opinions may vary across issues according to their level of complexity (Coan et al., 2008; Merolla et al., 2007). All else considered, party cues should be less useful (less needed) heuristic devices for “easy” issues and more useful for “hard” issues.

Finally, the effectiveness of party cues may vary across parties to the degree that the parties differ with respect to their ideological clarity. The Liberal party has traditionally been understood as the quintessential brokerage party, in part due to its attempts to sell itself to voters both in Quebec and the rest of the nation (Barry, 1975). In Canadian politics, a brokerage party has been defined as one that “lacked strong ideological foundations, shifted policy positions rather routinely and sought power by stitching together coalitions that crossed any divides” (Cross and Young, 2002: 860). In many ways, this is similar to the concept of a catch-all party, defined by ideological dispersion (see Grofman et al., 1999); by presenting a broad and sometimes ambiguous program, such parties attempt to capture the centre by playing both sides of the fence. As such, any messages they send to citizens may be deliberately less coherent than the messages of parties located to either the left or right. In contrast to the Liberals, the NDP has typically taken a clear liberal stance on issues, to the left of the Liberal party and in the form of more support for unions, immigrants, those on welfare, and recognition of Quebec, and less support for business (Henderson, 2005). Furthermore, the recent merging of the Alliance and PCs has led to a more coherent Conservative party (Bélanger and Stephenson, 2007), arguably more like its Alliance

predecessor in terms of ideological clarity (Henderson, 2005). Given the clearer ideological positions of the NDP and Conservative parties, their cues may have stronger effects than cues from the brokerage Liberal party.

Based on this discussion, we develop four hypotheses to test in this paper:

- (1) Party labels influence Canadians' opinions on political issues.
- (2) Partisan identifiers are more likely to report opinions in the same direction as a cue from their own party.
- (3) Party shortcuts will have stronger effects when the issues in question are more obtuse.
- (4) Related to the party's ideological clarity:
 - a. The NDP cue is stronger than the Liberal party cue.
 - b. The Conservative cue is stronger than the Liberal party cue.

Preliminary Evidence

Before presenting our experiment, we wanted to establish whether partisanship in Canada influences voters' attitudes and opinions on issues, and whether this relationship is stronger among the NDP and Conservative parties as compared to the Liberal party. Information shortcuts that indicate party positions on issues are not likely to have an effect if partisanship bears no relationship to a person's issue opinions; such a case would suggest that parties do not help structure issue opinions. Consequently, we turned to the 2004 Canadian Election Study (CES), which included several issue questions. We ran simple regressions on a host of opinion questions (see Table 1 for a list of questions and variable coding), which ranged in complexity. We included dummy variables in the models to indicate partisanship with each of the parties (the excluded category was no identification), and the control variables we used were age, gender, education, region (Ontario was the baseline) and Catholic.

As Table 1 shows, for all questions, at least two party identification variables were significant predictors of opinions. Conservative and NDP identifications were significant the most often—14 of 15 times. In each case, the direction of the effect was as expected. Individuals who identified with the Conservatives were more conservative on social and economic issues, and individuals who identified with the NDP were more liberal. Liberal identification was significant the least, for only 8 of 15 issues, followed closely by the Bloc Québécois (9 of 15).¹¹ This suggests that of the Canadian parties, the NDP and Conservative party have the most clearly aligned supporters—that is, these partisans appear to link their partisanship to their issue positions. These findings are consistent with our claim that these parties provide clearer ideological stances that help citizens develop their own issue positions. Relatedly, we expect that

TABLE 1
Issue Opinion Regressions

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Liberal PID	0.07* (0.04)	0.13*** (0.04)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)	0.13** (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)
Conservative PID	-0.18*** (0.04)	-0.19*** (0.05)	-0.21*** (0.04)	-0.19*** (0.04)	0.49*** (0.05)	-0.26*** (0.03)	0.33*** (0.04)
NDP PID	0.23*** (0.06)	0.34*** (0.06)	0.39*** (0.06)	0.30*** (0.05)	-0.28*** (0.07)	0.38*** (0.05)	-0.37*** (0.06)
BQ PID	0.61*** (0.07)	0.10 (0.07)	0.17** (0.06)	0.22*** (0.06)	-0.08 (0.07)	0.21*** (0.05)	-0.14* (0.06)
N	4227	4227	4227	4227	4227	4227	4227
R2	0.35	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.18	0.09

	8	9	10	11a	11b	11c	11d	11e
Liberal PID	0.05 (0.04)	0.07** (0.02)	-0.15*** (0.03)	-0.09 (0.05)	0.25*** (0.06)	-0.15** (0.05)	0.04 (0.06)	0.19** (0.06)
Conservative PID	-0.17*** (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.11** (0.04)	0.34*** (0.06)	-0.33*** (0.07)	-0.33*** (0.06)	-0.31*** (0.07)	-0.53*** (0.07)
NDP PID	0.27*** (0.06)	0.22*** (0.04)	-0.22*** (0.05)	-0.46*** (0.09)	0.12 (0.10)	0.37*** (0.09)	0.44*** (0.09)	0.25** (0.10)
BQ PID	0.18** (0.06)	0.02 (0.04)	-0.16** (0.06)	-0.09 (0.10)	0.17 (0.11)	0.22* (0.10)	0.36*** (0.11)	0.11 (0.11)
N	4227	4227	4227	4227	4227	4227	4227	4227
R2	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.09	0.09	0.07	0.11	0.12

*p ≤ 0.10 **p ≤ 0.10 ***p ≤ 0.001

Questions

1. How much do you think should be done for Quebec? (higher = more)
2. How much do you think should be done for racial minorities? (higher = more)
3. How much do you think should be done to reduce the gap between the rich and poor in Canada? (higher = more)
4. How much do you think should be done for women? (higher = more)
5. Do you think Canada's ties with the United States should be much closer, somewhat closer, about the same as now, more distant, or much more distant? (higher = closer)
6. Do you favour or oppose same-sex marriage, or do you have no opinion on this? (higher = favour)
7. Do you favour or oppose having some private hospitals in Canada? (higher = favour)
8. What is the best way to deal with young offenders who commit violent crime: give them tougher sentences, or spend more on rehabilitating them? (higher = rehabilitate)
9. Do you think Canada should admit more immigrants, fewer immigrants, or about the same as now? (higher = more)
10. Do you favour or oppose the death penalty for people convicted of murder? (higher = favour)
11. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strong disagree that...
 - a. The government should leave it entirely to the private sector to create jobs. (higher = agree)
 - b. Only the police and the military should be allowed to have guns. (higher = agree)
 - c. If people can't find work in the region where they live, they should move to be where the jobs are. (higher = disagree)
 - d. Society would be better off if more women stayed at home with their children. (higher = disagree)
 - e. The gun registry should be scrapped entirely. (higher = disagree)

citizens should be able to recognize the “brand” of these parties best and, therefore, better absorb and react to any signals sent by these parties. In short, in terms of party cues, these results support our argument that the NDP and Conservative party labels should be relatively more effective cues in the realm of opinion formation and expression (hypotheses 4a and 4b). Furthermore, that partisanship is significant at all suggests that party labels may in fact be useful information tools for opinion formation, and additional exploration into this issue is justified.

Experimental Design

In order to test fully the causal influence of party cues on opinion expression, and not just the relationship between issue stances and partisanship, we conducted an experimental study in the spring of 2004. The study participants were 196 students (45 per cent female, average age of 21) at a large public university in Ontario, recruited using flyers posted in common areas and class advertisements. Volunteers were compensated \$10 Canadian for their participation. Potential subjects were told they were going to take part in a study about political issues. Upon arriving at the room in which we conducted the study, subjects were randomly assigned to a control group or one of three treatment groups: Liberal, Conservative or NDP.¹² With respect to the sample as a whole, 56 per cent identified with the Liberals, 16 per cent identified with the Conservatives, and 16 per cent identified with the NDP. Difference of means tests conducted afterwards confirmed that the subjects were evenly distributed across the four conditions according to background factors such as age, gender, political sophistication and ideology.

After filling out a consent form, subjects were asked to complete a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. The first part of the survey included questions about basic demographics and political predispositions. The last part of the survey presented the subjects with the issue questions that lie at the core of our study. In terms of our decision criteria for which issues to include in the study, we selected four issues that cut across party lines and vary in complexity: legalizing same-sex marriage, reducing spending on social services, changing the Employment Insurance Act, and creating an Office of Ombudsman for Older Adult Justice. The issue questions are identified in Table 2 along with our ranking of the issues (from easy to hard) and the party positions on the issues.¹³

Each issue question was preceded by a statement that one of the parties supported or opposed the issue (the control group received a neutral cue: "Some politicians..."). After the prompt, each subject was asked for her own opinion on the issue. So, for example, one of the questions appeared as follows: "The Liberal party supports proposed changes to the federal definition of marriage to permit same-sex marriages. Would you say that you support or oppose this proposal?" After completing the survey, subjects were debriefed and compensated.

Our topic is particularly suited for experimental research because extant research leads us to have very specific hypotheses; to properly evaluate them, we need to be able to isolate the effect of each party label on opinion formation. As Lavine, Lodge, Polichak and Taber note, "experiments can provide a powerful methodological tool for addressing this type of inferential problem" (2002: 344). By exerting control over numerous aspects of the study design and implementation, researchers are able

TABLE 2
Issues and Policy Stances Used in Study

Type	Issue	Party Stances
Easy	Amend federal definition of marriage to allow same sex marriage	Conservative: Oppose (–) Liberal: Support (+) NDP: Support (+)
Easy Intermediate	Reduce spending on social services	Conservative: Support (–) Liberal: Oppose (+) NDP: Oppose (+)
Hard Intermediate	Change Employment Insurance Act (status for seasonal workers)	Conservative: Oppose (–) Liberal: Oppose (–) NDP: Support (+)
Hard	Support creation of Office of Ombudsman for Older Adult Justice	Conservative: Oppose (–) Liberal: Support (+) NDP: Support (+)

*The sign in parentheses reflects the anticipated effect once the variables are recoded such that higher values indicate more liberal responses. Further, these indicated directions refer to expected differences from the control group; they reflect the situation in which those receiving the cue are persuaded to adopt stances in accord with that party's stance (as compared to those in the control group).

to conduct systematic tests of the effect of a given stimulus. Within the realm of experimental research, the use of university students as subjects is a fairly common practice (for an analysis of subject types within and across various political science journal types, see Kam et al., 2007). The reason is obvious: students provide a readily available and relatively inexpensive subject pool.

A potential concern, which applies to any sample-based research, is external validity. In particular, to what extent are the study's conclusions likely to apply to other groups within the larger population? In our case, clearly, university students are not a representative sample of the population. However, relevant differences are fairly easy to identify and being aware of the principal differences between this subgroup and others within the larger population allows for reasoned conjecture regarding issues of generalizability. Most importantly, university students are better educated and typically more politically interested and aware than the average citizen. Indeed, our sample of university students is more educated than the average respondent in the 2004 CES (in that sample, the average level of education is less than a completed technical diploma) and our subjects tend to be drawn from a higher socioeconomic background. Because of these characteristics, students can provide a difficult test of an experiment (Funk, 1997). Due to their education, they may hold more solid and informed opinions (but see Sears, 1986) and thus could be more difficult to persuade than average citizens, whose moderate information

levels tend to leave them more susceptible to persuasion (Zaller, 1992). If true, the use of students provides a least likely case, such that we can be reasonably confident that the results we find would find be similar, if not greater, among the general population. In short, while we acknowledge limitations in the generalizations we can draw, our experimental design and subject pool can provide an indication of whether Canadian party labels have the potential to be used as information shortcuts in the way that party labels are used in the United States, and this is particularly the case if the characteristics of university students indeed make them *least likely* to turn to heuristics for opinion expression. However, as with any study based on a single set of observations, further research is required in order to explicitly test the generalizability of our results to any other segment of the Canadian population or time period.

Results

In order to evaluate our four hypotheses, we test whether those who received a party cue shifted their policy preferences compared to the control group, which did not receive a cue; whether partisanship conditions the direction in which the shift occurs; whether the usefulness of party cues varies according to the difficulty of the issue in question; and, whether some party cues are more effective than others. Our principal dependent variable is a respondent's opinion (strongly support, support, neither support nor oppose, oppose, strongly oppose) on a political issue. This five-point variable is coded such that higher values indicate a more liberal response.

Since our second hypothesis states that partisanship should moderate the influence of the party label as an information shortcut, we use multiple regression analyses and include as independent variables the treatment dummy variables (the control group serves as our baseline), dummy variables indicating the respondent's reported partisanship (the baseline category is comprised of those who do not identify with one of the three main parties), and interactions between the two. The use of the interaction terms between partisanship and the treatments enables us to look at the effect of each treatment separately for partisans and nonpartisans.¹⁴ Likelihood-ratio tests show that these interaction terms improve the fit of each of the three more difficult models (at $p < 0.10$).¹⁵ Given that the dependent variables are on an ordinal scale, we run ordered probit on each of the issue preference variables.

Table 3 presents the ordered probit results, for each issue. The presence of interaction terms complicates the interpretation of the effects. The coefficient and standard error reported for the treatment dummies are the effects for those who do not identify with the party represented

TABLE 3
Effectiveness of Party Cues in Opinion Expression, Ordered Probit Results

	Easy Issue: Same-Sex [^]	Easy Intermediate Issue: Services	Hard Intermediate Issue: EI	Hard Issue: Ombudsman
Liberal Treatment (T)	0.036 (0.309)	-0.771* (0.302)	0.227 (0.315)	0.279 (0.341)
Conservative T	-0.943* (0.249)	0.002 (0.254)	-0.325 (0.254)	-0.174 (0.267)
NDP T	-0.225 (0.234)	-0.946* (0.244)	-0.148 (0.247)	0.372 (0.260)
Liberal PID	-0.332 (0.290)	0.391 (0.283)	-0.007 (0.296)	0.030 (0.300)
Cons. PID	-0.884* (0.356)	-0.510 (0.340)	-0.704* (0.347)	-0.395 (0.392)
NDP PID	-0.054 (0.342)	0.701* (0.347)	-0.166 (0.362)	0.212 (0.376)
Liberal T * Lib. PID	-0.404 (0.386)	-0.211 (0.383)	-0.115 (0.408)	-0.003 (0.438)
Cons. T * Cons. PID	0.489 (0.474)	-0.679 (0.478)+	1.061 (0.484)	1.266 (0.524)
NDP T * NDP PID		-1.520 (0.555)	1.992 (0.599)+	1.189 (0.669)+
_cut1	-1.954 (0.312)	-1.993 (0.305)	-1.891 (0.321)	-1.996 (0.356)
_cut2	-1.289 (0.299)	-0.895 (0.282)	-0.797 (0.292)	-0.901 (0.299)
_cut3	-0.992 (0.296)	-0.560 (0.278)	0.067 (0.287)	0.601 (0.295)
_cut4	-0.433 (0.292)	0.431 (0.275)	1.556 (0.315)	2.114 (0.338)
N	195	192	172	161
Pseudo R ²	0.0475	0.1081	0.0496	0.0457
LR chi2 (8, 9)	27.08	61.74	23.60	17.27
Prob > chi2	0.0007	0.0000	0.0050	0.0446

*p ≤ 0.10 (two-tailed), +p ≤ 0.10 (one-tailed)

[^]6 observations are completely determined when we include the NDP PID*NDP treatment interaction. Therefore, we excluded the variable from the model for the same-sex marriage issue.

by the cue. This grouping incorporates those who identify with another party or with no party; thus, we are not certain whether the person will react against the cue or move in the direction of the cue (Table 2 gives the expected direction of the cue if people move in the direction of the party position). If a person holds an opposing partisan identity, he or she may resist the cue and his or her opinion may be swayed in the opposition direction. However, if the subject holds no partisan identity there is

both a chance of being swayed positively or negatively. Thus, we use two-tailed tests to evaluate this group. The coefficients on the interaction terms are not directly interpretable since we need to separately calculate the effects for identifiers and non-identifiers, though the p-value indicates whether there is a moderating relationship between partisanship and the treatment (Kam and Franzese, 2007).

Looking first at non-identifiers, it appears that they move in the direction of the Conservative cue on same-sex marriage (less supportive) and against the Liberal and NDP cues on services (the parties prefer to increase services). Turning to identifiers, because we have specific directional hypotheses, one-tailed tests are more appropriate; the significant p-values and appropriate direction indicate that there is a moderating relationship between partisanship and the cue for NDP supporters on the two more complex issues and for Conservative supporters on the easy intermediate issue.

Since ordered probit coefficients are not directly interpretable, and in order to calculate the effect for identifiers, we calculate first differences. In Figures 1–3, we present the change in the probability of falling into the most liberal category on each issue for identifiers with the party and non-identifiers. We indicate significance with solid bars and insignificance with striped bars. To refresh, we expect that partisans will rely more on cues for more complex issues and that these effects may be stronger for the NDP and Conservative parties.

Turning first to the Liberal party in Figure 1, we see that the pattern of effects is such that identifiers move against the cue for the first two issues and in the direction of the cue for the two hardest issues. Non-identifiers move against the cue once and three times in the direction of the cue—for the easiest and two most difficult issues. However, the only statistically significant effect is for non-identifiers on the services issues. Non-identifiers exposed to the Liberal cue are 21.1 percentage points less likely to fall into the most liberal category on this issue.¹⁶ For the most part, then, it appears that the Liberal party cue has no effect on the opinions of identifiers and almost none for non-identifiers of the party. These findings are in line with our expectations, given that the party does not present a clear ideological position to voters.

The effects for the Conservative party are presented in Figure 2. If subjects move in the direction of the party cue, then we should find that all of the bars fall in a negative direction (toward the most Conservative position). We find that this pattern obtains for non-identifiers, though the only statistically significant effect is for the easiest issue of same sex marriage. Here, non-identifiers exposed to the cue are 34.7 percentage points less likely to give the most liberal response. If we turn to identifiers, we see that they move in the direction of the cue for the two easier issues, but reject the cue for the two harder issues. However, the only

FIGURE 1
Change in the Probability of Giving the Most Liberal Response
Moving from the Control to the Liberal Party Cue, by Issue
(Shaded Effects are Insignificant)

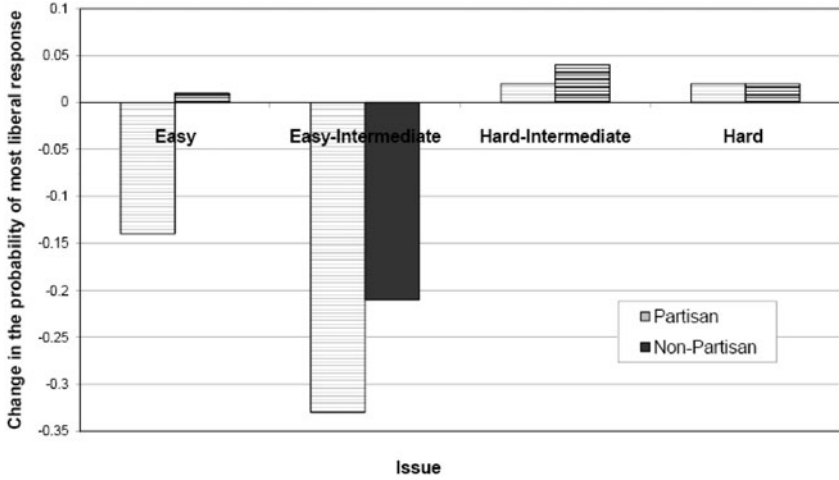
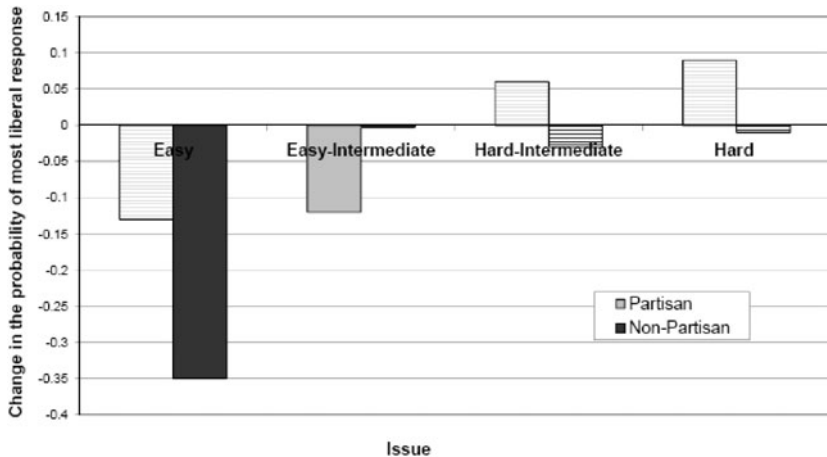


FIGURE 2
Change in the Probability of Giving the Most Liberal Response
Moving from the Control to the Conservative Party Cue, by Issue
(Shaded Effects are Insignificant)

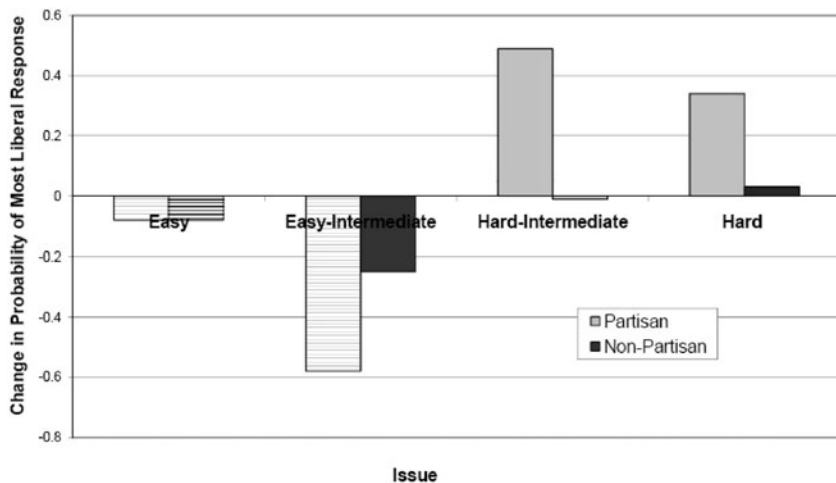


significant effect is for the services issue (according to one-tailed tests), where receiving the cue leads to a 12 percentage point decrease in the probability of giving the most liberal response.¹⁷ It is a bit surprising that Conservative partisans reacted to the cue for one of the easier issues and against it for the two more complex issues, for which we expected the cue to be most useful.

We finally turn to the NDP in Figure 3. If subjects move in the direction of this cue, then we should see all of the bars fall above zero. In general, it appears that identifiers and non-identifiers move against the cue for the two easiest issues, though the effect is only significant for non-identifiers on the service issue.¹⁸ Non-identifiers exposed to the NDP cue for this issue are 24.6 percentage points less likely to fall into the most liberal category. If we turn to the two hardest issues, it appears that the effects are null for non-identifiers. However, we see that NDP identifiers move in the direction of the cue, and both of these effects are statistically significant. These effects are also very substantial. Exposure to the NDP cue increases the probability of identifiers falling into the most liberal category by 48.8 percentage points for the hard-intermediate issue and by 33.8 percentage points for the hard issue. Thus, it appears that the NDP cue generally works as expected, moving identifiers in the direction of the cue for the more complex issues.

FIGURE 3

Change in the Probability of Giving the Most Liberal Response Moving from the Control to the NDP Party Cue, by Issue (Shaded Effects are Insignificant)



Discussion

The results of our experiment reveal that Canadian party labels vary in their influence on opinion expression, across parties and across issues. They also suggest that the theory of party labels as cues does not translate uniformly to the Canadian context, at least among our selected group of citizens. Our results do not provide strong support for our first hypothesis, in that party cues do not appear to be consistently useful information shortcuts for our sample of Canadians. However, as noted earlier, our student sample is more educated than average Canadians, and thus potentially among the least likely to need cues. That the party cues were used at all suggests that this issue is worthy of further study at the national level to test the generalizability of the results.

We find some support for the moderating role of partisanship (hypothesis 2), in that the identifiers with the NDP moved with the cue for two out of the four issues, while identifiers with the Conservative party moved with the cue for one of the issues. In addition, non-partisan identifiers only moved in the direction of the cue twice, for same-sex marriage and the Conservative party cue and the ombudsman issue and the NDP cue, and against the cue for the Liberals and NDP on the service issue. However, we do not find support for this hypothesis with respect to Liberal partisans or for the two more complex issues among the Conservative partisans. In fact, both sets of partisans appear to react against the direction of the cue for some of the issues. Thus, partisans do not accept cues blindly, but seem to be discriminating in terms of what information they accept and what information they not only reject but potentially react against.

With respect to the question of issue difficulty, the results provide limited support for hypothesis 3. Despite the literature that suggests party labels should be useful shortcuts for opinion formation on issues that are novel, or difficult, Canadian party labels do not appear to have these effects uniformly among our subjects. Only the NDP party label works as expected among identifiers for the two more complex issues.¹⁹ This is exactly what we would expect if those identifying with a party are those most likely to toe that party's line on more complex issues. In contrast, significant effects obtain for non-identifiers for the two easier issues. The Conservative cue is significant for the easiest issue, and subjects move with the cue, while the NDP and Liberal cues are significant for the service issue, and non-identifiers react against the cues. Thus, in this analysis the argument about complexity only holds for cues coming from one's own party, and then only for one party, the NDP.

These findings lead us to evaluate the last set of hypotheses, 4a and 4b. We expected the NDP and Conservative cues to be more effective in that these two parties express clearer ideological statements than the Lib-

erals.²⁰ We do find fairly strong support for hypothesis 4a in that the NDP cue is the only one that appears to work as expected, especially for partisans of the party. However, the Conservative party cue is not as effective as we suspected (4b). It is only significant twice, for non-identifiers on the easy issue and for identifiers on the easy-intermediate issue. In fact, it appears that partisans react against the cue for the more complex issues. One potential reason for the weaker results for the Conservatives is that at the time of the study it was a relatively new party. Thus, it could be that subjects were not as familiar with the new party, or that there was more variance in understandings of where the party stood on issues. As expected, the Liberal party cue is the weakest with only one significant effect among non-partisans, moving subjects against the cue. In short, of all the party labels, the Liberal label was mostly inconsequential as a cue, which makes sense in that the value of a brokerage party cue is, almost by definition of brokerage politics, questionable.²¹

Conclusion

The findings of this paper provide some important insight into how parties and context may affect the usefulness of party labels as information shortcuts. While we know the importance of partisan identification for Canadian voting behaviour, until now we knew little about the information that is contained in Canadian party labels and whether that information might influence opinion formation. We find that, of the political parties studied, the NDP treatment is the most influential in the conventional way. Despite the fact that the party is the least well-known in Canadian politics (Fournier, 2002), it is the party most likely to present a clear ideological program for voters. This feature may be responsible for the effectiveness of the NDP party cue that we find here. On the other hand, while the Liberal party is the best known party in Canadian politics, being the party that has formed the government most often, the party's success has often been traced to its ability to shun strong ideological stances and broker compromise among the various regions and demands of the country. Thus, we suggest the fact that the Liberal party label is not very effective in terms of opinion formation may be a reflection of the party's general lack of strong ideology and therefore informative role.

The results for the Conservative party cue are quite interesting. While the cue was only significant once among partisans according to one-tailed tests, if two-tailed tests are employed it influenced its own partisans *away* from the party position on the issues for which we expected the cue to be most useful (the two more complex ones). This is of specific interest because, at the time the data were collected, the party had been in existence for only four months (the merger between the long-

established PCs and the newer Canadian Alliance occurred in December 2003), had just completed its first leadership convention, and had yet to develop a clear policy program to persuade voters. Our subjects were also students, with an average age of 21, who are unlikely to have had much experience with the political parties or information to draw upon with respect to the Conservative party or its history. Furthermore, this study was conducted in Ontario, where Conservative supporters were more likely to come from a PC, rather than Alliance, background, and thus may have been troubled by indications that the new Conservative party was going to be more similar to the Alliance than the PC party (such as the election of the former Alliance leader, Stephen Harper, as the new party's leader). That being said, the one issue on which the Conservative party's stance was clearest was same-sex marriage, and we find that the Conservative cue, for that issue, had a significant effect for non-identifiers. Taken together, our findings suggest that, at least in Canada, party cues may vary in their influence according to the party's clarity or prominence in a particular policy issue area, but not necessarily by complexity.

What emerges from our analysis is a recognition that the usefulness of Canadian party cues varies greatly, both across parties and issues. This raises the possibility that some Canadian parties, such as the Liberal party, do not behave as expected by much of the literature on political parties as information shortcuts and this may be a reflection of the fact that they have not tried to make their labels stand for something independent of the issues of the day. Again, this echoes much of the extant Canadian literature that argues that brokerage parties are not strikingly different in terms of ideology, and that partisans are less loyal than in the United States. The NDP and Conservative party labels, however, do appear to have more meaning for Canadian voters. The results presented here indicate that party cues *do* play a role in Canadian politics, even among subjects who are arguably less likely to use the cues. However, further research is needed to fully tease out the effectiveness of party cues in Canadian politics. Theoretically, our findings point to a need to re-evaluate theories of party labels as heuristics in terms of the political context in which they are operating—existing theories may be appropriate only for political parties and/or systems that exhibit specific characteristics.

Notes

- 1 A partial exception is the study of leader cues and opinions over salient issues. Johnston et al. (1992) found positive effects for Liberal partisans regarding opinion on the Canada–US Free Trade Agreement and Clarke et al. (2004) found similar evidence with respect to voting in the 1955 Quebec sovereignty referendum.
- 2 Druckman (2001a) finds that when given a party position along with a frame, individuals form preferences based more on the party cue rather than a gains or losses frame. This is part of his general argument that credible sources can mitigate framing effects (see also Druckman, 2001b).

- 3 Kuklinski et al. (2000) further question the effectiveness of cues when people are provided with misinformation, an issue that lies outside the scope of our study.
- 4 In order for cues to be successful, citizens might also need more substantive information to link the party cue to their own goals and opinions (Hobolt, 2007; Somin, 1998).
- 5 See Coan et al. (2008) for a discussion of the situation for minor American parties.
- 6 Party identification refers to an attachment to a specific party, either a long-standing psychological predisposition in the conception advanced by the classic work, *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), a judgment based on a running tally of party promises and output in the conception advanced by Fiorina (1981), or some combination of these two. As heuristic aids, party labels might convey information to any citizen regardless of that person's partisanship or potentially (and as we examine later in the paper) conditional upon a person's partisanship.
- 7 Some scholars argue that this flexibility is partially caused by differences in party systems at the provincial and federal levels (Clarke and Stewart, 1987; Stewart and Clarke, 1998; Wattenberg, 1982).
- 8 Research also shows that Canadians seem to follow the proximity model of voting, in that they support the party that is closest to them on an issue, rather than for the party that takes the strongest (acceptable) stand in the direction they prefer (Blais et al., 2001; Johnston et al., 2000).
- 9 Clarke et al. (1980) discuss the implications of information for using party cues, but they do not attempt a thorough evaluation.
- 10 Johnston et al. (1996) found that partisanship coloured the reception of cues (such as from unions and the women's movement) during the Charlottetown Accord Referendum in 1992.
- 11 If we run the analyses separately for low and high sophisticates (dividing at the mean level of political information), the results are quite interesting. As might be expected, those with more political information are better able to use the cues provided by partisanship in their issue stances (other than Liberal partisanship, which was significant for seven issues at each level of information). Once again, NDP and Conservative partisanship emerged as most influential, 15 and 14 times, respectively, for those high in political information. We do not pursue this line of research due to the small sample size of our experiment, but we do think it is a fruitful avenue for future research.
- 12 The breakdown by condition for these subjects was as follows: Control ($n = 49$), Liberal ($n = 49$), Conservative ($n = 49$), and NDP ($n = 49$).
- 13 In order to confirm our categorization of these issues, from easy to hard, we consider how many respondents answered "don't know" to the questions. The responses match our expectations: only one respondent answered "don't know" for the easiest question, three for the spending on services question, 24 for the employment insurance question, and 35 for the issue of the Office of the Ombudsman for Older Adult Justice.
- 14 The party identification question was asked as follows: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Liberal, Conservative, NDP, BQ, or what?"
- 15 In the model for the simplest issue, we exclude the NDP PID * NDP Treatment interaction because six observations are completely determined. When we exclude this variable, the likelihood ratio test indicates that the model with interactions is no longer significantly better than the model without the interactions.
- 16 If two-tailed tests are used for identifiers, then we find a statistically significant effect of identifiers moving against the Liberal cue on this issue.
- 17 If two-tailed tests are used for identifiers, then we find significant effects for the two hardest issues, indicating that Conservatives who received the cue reacted against it.
- 18 If two-tailed tests are used for identifiers, then we find significant effects for identifiers on this issue, indicating that NDP identifiers reacted against the cue.

- 19 We should also note that we tested to make sure that subjects were not just learning to answer the harder questions. Presentation of issues from easy to hard or hard to easy was randomized in the study. If people were learning to use the cues, then we should find more significant effects for the easier issues among those who received the hard to easy presentation. We did not find this to be the case.
- 20 It is clear that both the NDP and Conservative party labels held more meaning for the subjects in our study. When we asked the subjects to place the parties on a seven-point scale, the variance was lowest for responses for the Conservative party (which was placed at 5.52 on the scale). We also asked respondents how sure they were of their responses; for both the NDP and Conservative party, the respondents were relatively more certain than when asked about their responses about the Liberal party.
- 21 This characterization of the Liberal party is predicated on the understanding that it is the oldest brokerage party in the Canadian party system. As well, at the time the study was conducted (just after the merger of the PC and Alliance parties), it was unclear if there were any other brokerage parties in the system, as it was unknown exactly what type of party the new Conservative party would be. While the PC party was a brokerage party, the Alliance had maintained a clearly regional support base.

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