

Projection in the Face of Centrism: Voter Inferences About Candidates' Party Affiliation in Low-Information Contexts

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When are voters more likely to project their own political position onto a candidate for office? We investigate this question by examining the assumed partisanship of a (self-declared) centrist politician, using data from a survey experiment fielded in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In doing so, we build on the social categorization model as well as recent U.S.-focused political science research on projection and ingroup/outgroup racial divides—extending our analysis to incorporate racial and class similarities/differences across three countries where these divides likely vary in salience. We thus seek: (1) to contribute to research on the inferences citizens draw in nonpartisan elections and low-information contexts generally and (2) to highlight some potential methodological complications of using partisanship-less candidates in vignette experiments. Results suggest that even in the face of a self-declared centrist, voters from across the political spectrum tended to assume shared partisanship in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Examining projection by ingroup/outgroup divisions indicated that class appears to shape projection across all three countries, but that the racial divide only mattered in the United States. Finally, we also find evidence of counterprojection toward outgroup members—but once again only in the American context.

KEY WORDS: partisanship, social class, ethnicity, ingroup/outgroup, vignette experiments

Heuristics are a valuable way for ordinary citizens to fill in gaps in their knowledge about candidates for office (e.g., Bartels, 1996; Popkin, 1994)—and a politician's party label offers what is arguably the highest impact heuristic (e.g., Dancy & Sheagley, 2013; Goggin et al., 2019).

But what happens when partisanship information is either absent (e.g., in lower-level “nonpartisan” elections) or obscured (e.g., by politicians cultivating vagueness)? Indeed, candidates for office have strong incentives to adopt ambiguous—“neither left nor right”—stances, especially since voters tend to project their own policy positions onto ambiguously positioned politicians (Page, 1976; Piston et al., 2018; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2009). Studying this question is thus crucial to understanding candidate assessments in low-information contexts, where citizens may be more prone to drawing inferences (e.g., Atkeson & Hamel, 2020; Badas & Stauffer, 2019; Peterson, 2017).

The simplest explanation, of course, would be that voters assume that ambiguously centrist politicians are affiliated with the (most) centrist party, but we investigate the possibility that other

information about the candidate, such as the politician's class and ethnic background, may shape assumed partisan links (see Lerman & Sadin, 2016). While past work has typically focused on stereotype-derived inferences (e.g., McDermott, 1998; Visalvanich, 2017), we explore the impact of shared or contrasting background characteristics on projection—that is, an “inferential act of ascribing one's own specific attributes to resolve something previously unknown about the target groups” (Ames, 2004, p. 574). We thus examine whether and how voters use projection to draw inferences about a candidate's partisanship; the contexts under which it is more or less likely to occur; and the relevance of alternative inferences driven by counter-projection (e.g., Denning & Hodges, 2022; Nicolas et al., 2017; Robbins & Krueger, 2005).

Doing so allows us to make empirical and methodological contributions. Empirically, nonpartisan elections are a common feature of lower-level politics, with candidates running either with no affiliation or with vague “slate” labels that are disconnected from broader party politics (e.g., Bonneau & Cann, 2015; Cutler & Matthews, 2005). Studying inferences about party labels can thus help us to better understand voter assumptions about candidate affiliations in nonpartisan elections or contests where partisan links are otherwise unclear. Methodologically, excluding partisan labels from candidate profiles is a widespread practice in experimental vignettes (cf. Carnes & Sadin, 2014; Kirkland & Coppock, 2018; Weaver, 2012). It is unclear, however, whether and under what circumstances the removal of information on partisan affiliation might introduce variation in the assumptions respondents are making about the candidate's likely partisanship.

To shed light on these issues, we conducted a vignette survey experiment in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The experiment, fielded by Qualtrics LLC using quota sampling to reflect census demographics, varies the race (White/Asian) and class (higher/lower) background of a self-described centrist candidate for office. Across the treatment groups, the candidate was presented without a party label, and respondents were then asked to record assumptions about partisanship that they might have made. This allows us to investigate projection patterns across three countries where race and class are liable to have varying political salience (see e.g., Kevins, 2021; Medeiros & Noël, 2014). We thus expand on existing research on projection onto politicians (e.g., Conover & Feldman, 1982; Fulton & Gershon, 2018; Lerman & Sadin, 2016; Piston et al., 2018), looking beyond the United States and the potential divide between projection onto White and racialized candidates for office.

Results suggest that projection is widespread and is not dependent on party affiliation. Ingroup/outgroup class divisions, in turn, consistently matter across the three countries in our sample, but we only find evidence of racial differentiation in the United States. More broadly, a larger number of overlapping characteristics is associated with greater projection, although once again with some modest cross-country differences across different group markers. As for outgroup members, we find limited evidence of counter-projection: Only in the United States do respondents appear to have engaged in counter-projection, and only on the basis of class.

Background

Between the quest to attract median-voters and a strategic desire to “blur” their issue positions, politicians often have strong incentives to self-define as neither left nor right (e.g., Koedam, 2021; Massetti & Schakel, 2015). But how do voters and respondents react to this sort of positioning when party affiliation is either missing or not applicable? To answer this question, we focus on the potential link between vague centrist positioning, projection, and assumed partisanship.

The use of a partisanship heuristic is a well-established feature of political behavior: A long line of studies highlights the various assumptions that voters make about politicians based on party labels (e.g., Coan et al., 2008; Dancy & Sheagley, 2013; Popkin, 1994). Yet the extent and scope of partisanship's impact suggests that even in the absence of any party labels, it may nevertheless be

playing a role; existing research suggests, for example, that voters may make (stereotype conforming) assumptions about the social and demographic characteristics of partisans from other parties (cf. Ahler & Sood, 2018; Claassen et al., 2021; Orr & Huber, 2021).

Understanding how these dynamics play out when individuals are presented with an affiliation-less candidate is doubly important. First, these assumptions may affect a large number of democratic contests—with municipal, school board, and judicial elections frequently contested with either no party labels or ambiguous slate groupings (e.g., “Vision Montreal”) that are typically short lived and detached from broader party politics (e.g., Bonneau & Cann, 2015; Bullock III, 1984; Pomper, 1966). Projection seems especially likely to matter wherever candidates tend, for strategic reasons, to use politically ambiguous, blandly positive statements—a prominent strategy that voters generally reward (see e.g., Conover & Feldman, 1982; Koedam, 2021; Piston et al., 2018; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2009). In the event that characteristics such as race and class shape assumptions about partisanship, then, politicians from certain backgrounds may be systematically advantaged or disadvantaged among certain voter groups for reasons that stretch beyond our current understanding.

Second, assumptions about partisanship may also complicate experimental research that excludes party affiliations (often to avoid crowding out the effects of other group markers): Some researchers leave party labels out in initial/early waves of their experiments (e.g., Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Carnes & Sadin, 2014); others include them only in a subset of experimental treatments (e.g., Kirkland & Coppock, 2018; Squire & Smith, 1988), while still others exclude party labels entirely from some or all of their experimental setups (e.g., McDermott, 1998; Sances, 2018; Visalvanich, 2017; Weaver, 2012). Yet if respondents use background characteristics to draw assumptions about candidate partisanship, even small, seemingly irrelevant changes to vignette wordings may have important effects on the experimental results. What is more, removing partisan affiliation from a subset of vignettes, for example, may shift baseline reactions in unanticipated ways—with particularly complex consequences if projection patterns differ across group markers and country contexts.

Baseline Theory

It is unclear, however, how any such inferences might play out in practice. Our starting point is an extensive body of work in social psychology that finds that shared group memberships generate “projection”—that is, inferring more similarity than would otherwise be justified (e.g., Clement & Krueger, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As Robbins and Krueger (2005) explain, “[t]he functional importance of social projection lies in the fact that it offers a readily available, though egocentric, window into the social world. Using their own dispositions or preferences as data, people can make quick predictions of what others are like or what they are likely to do” (p. 32). As a consequence, ingroup/outgroup divisions may be crucial: On the basis of this social categorization model (see e.g., Clement & Krueger, 2002), we would expect voters to assume shared/contrasting partisanship based on other shared/contrasting characteristics. Mixed results in this literature (see Nicolas et al., 2017), however, underscore two key questions that our study sets out to address.

First, do voters project their own characteristics onto partly similar, or even dissimilar, candidates for office—or is projection reserved only for clear ingroup members? Existing research suggests an array of potentially relevant theories on this question, often with conflicting expectations. Voters might, for instance, simply project less with outgroup members than ingroup ones (e.g., Robbins & Krueger, 2005)—or, alternatively, engage in “counter-projection” that sees outgroup members more likely to be treated as opposing partisans (e.g., Denning & Hodges, 2022). Partial ingroup members, for example, who share one key characteristic but not another, may be treated either as full ingroup

members or full outgroup members (see e.g., Crisp & Hewstone, 2007). A combination of different shared characteristics, in turn, may work together in an “additive” (e.g., Singh et al., 1997) or “algebraic” manner (e.g., Hewstone et al., 1993).

Second and relatedly, if individuals treat ingroup/outgroup members differently when drawing assumptions about them, what form and degree of “ingroupness” is required to trigger differential treatment? Various studies suggest that the salience of markers in a given situation is likely to be crucial, with not all potential categories activated all of the time (as per the self-categorization theory; e.g., Crisp & Hewstone, 2007; Turner et al., 1987). Yet in the face of multiple conflicting and aligning characteristics, it is unclear whether individuals are able to factor in an array of different markers, or if they simply abandon the use of heuristics altogether (cf. Grigoryan, 2020; Hall & Crisp, 2005).

Theory Application

Research in social psychology thus suggests that voters may well make assumptions about candidate partisanship when that information is unavailable, although the likely scope of projection remains underspecified. Research in political science also provides some evidence of these dynamics, at least in American politics (see Fulton & Gershon, 2018; Lerman & Sadin, 2016; Piston et al., 2018)—yet the relationship between shared partisanship and assumed similarity is a subject of contention (Dancey & Sheagley, 2018; Goggin et al., 2019; Simas, 2018). We draw on insights from this literature to examine the prevalence of projection both across country contexts and across individual-level scope conditions.

Our three-case comparison, examining results across Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, benefits from two key axes of variations: party system features and group salience.

First, while our cases all have single-member plurality electoral systems, the case set is marked by important variation in the party constellation. In contrast to the United States’ classical two-party system, Canada and the United Kingdom share a looser two-and-a-half party format: in Canada, the Conservative Party of Canada (center-right) and Liberal Party of Canada (center) are flanked to their left by the smaller New Democratic Party (center-left)¹; while in the United Kingdom, the Conservative and Unionist Party (center-right) and Labour Party (center-left) are positioned on opposite ends of the smaller Liberal Democrats (center). Comparing these three countries thus allows us to get a sense of how projection patterns might be affected by party placement, the effective number of parties, and perhaps even polarization (see Kevins & Soroka, 2018, for a discussion). At the same time, the comparison also incorporates likely variation in assumptions about the social and demographic characteristics of partisans from different parties (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Claassen et al., 2021): Although comparative research on this is lacking, it seems reasonable to assume that cross-national variation in party-ethnic group-support patterns (see, e.g., Bird et al., 2010) would be visible to voters and have knock-on effects on assumption patterns.

Second, our case selection allows us to examine the extent to which projection might be affected by country context. Key here is variation in the salience of race and class—both broadly vis-à-vis terms of societal cleavages and narrowly vis-à-vis partisan divisions and stereotypes (e.g., Bélanger & Eagles, 2006; Lipset, 1990; O’Grady, 2019). Existing research suggests that across our three cases, class is likely to be more salient in the United Kingdom than in Canada and the United States, as class consciousness and the class-party link in North America tends to be more muted (cf. Bélanger & Eagles, 2006; Evans & Tilley, 2017; Lipset, 1990). Racial

¹Here and below, we exclude Quebec from the analysis due to its distinct political context and party system (see e.g., Johnston, 2017)—focusing instead on what is commonly labeled the “Rest of Canada.” Note that examining the “Rest of Canada” separately from Quebec is common practice in the literature (e.g., Medeiros & Noël, 2014).

divisions, in turn, are likely to be more prominent in the United States and United Kingdom than in Canada (e.g., Ariely, 2012; Harell et al., 2016)—arguably reflecting the firmer anchoring of multiculturalism in (anglophone) Canadian identity (e.g., Winter, 2007); indeed, past work suggests that Canadian politics, uniquely among our cases, is marked by neither a tendency among White voters to vote for the right nor a tendency among ethnic minority voters to vote for the left (see Medeiros & Noël, 2014).

We thus set out to assess the ubiquity of projection across our cases, while remaining agnostic on the exact party-system features or salience levels required to find evidence—however modest—of projection. Our baseline individual-level hypothesis, in turn, builds from research on the broader prevalence of projection (cf. Nicolas et al., 2017; Robbins & Krueger, 2005): Namely, that in the absence of clear party labels, voters engage in projection and assume a greater degree of similarity than is necessarily warranted by available information. This suggests that respondents will be more likely to assume that an unlabeled, unaffiliated candidate is a copartisan rather than a member of an opposing party. What is more, insofar as projection is not simply an artifact of a given candidate's policy positions, we should find evidence of it across a range of different partisan groups.

H1: Respondents will be more likely to assume that the unlabeled candidate is a copartisan, regardless of the respondents' party affiliation.

Next, we investigate whether respondents are more likely to project to ingroup members than outgroup ones, as per the social categorization model (cf., Clement & Krueger, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In doing so, we pay particular attention to class and race, which we vary in the experimental vignettes. Although numerous divisions (e.g., gender, religion) may play similar roles, this focus allows us to leverage cross-country variation in cleavage salience (see above) while also tapping into a well-developed literature on candidate effects (e.g., Carnes & Sadin, 2014; Kirkland & Coppock, 2018; McDermott, 1998).

To do so, we compare individual respondent profiles with those of the (randomized) candidate that they read about, based on self-declared class status and ethnicity—with the later divided into White and racialized minority respondents. This binary approach has two key benefits. On the one hand, it reflects past research on linked fate across ethno-racial minorities (e.g., Chan & Jasso, 2021; Gershon et al., 2019), which suggests that members of these groups may experience a sense of commonality across racialized groups that transcends specific ethnic or racial markers. On the other, using a broader White/non-White division allows us to maintain reasonable sample sizes across the groups—although we also perform follow-up analyses to explore the consequences of this approach (see the “Robustness Checks” section below).

We examine race and class effects alongside the various other potential characteristics referenced in the candidate's profile—namely, age, gender, family immigration background, ideological self-placement (i.e., centrist/noncentrist), and schooling background (i.e., public/private). Existing research has highlighted that voters in nonpartisan election contexts tend to seek out such information and draw heuristic cues from them (e.g., Bernhard & Freeder, 2020; Cutler & Matthews, 2005). We push these arguments further by hypothesizing that this background information may also shape projection. Several important nuances are worth underscoring here: We do not expect that a full overlap in group characteristics will be required to find evidence of projection, and we anticipate that the effects of race and class will not entirely crowd out the potential effect of overlapping characteristics more broadly (e.g., age, gender, etc.). Our expectations thus align with past work suggesting that voter assessments of politicians are broadly impacted by the number of overlapping characteristics—with voters more likely to react positively to politicians similar to themselves (Cutler, 2002).

H2a: Higher-class (lower-class) respondents will be more likely to assume that the unlabeled candidate is a copartisan when the candidate is also of a higher-class (lower-class) background. *H2b*: Non-White (White) respondents will be more likely to assume that the unlabeled candidate is a copartisan when the candidate is also non-White (White). *H3*: As the number of overlapping characteristics increases, so too will the likelihood that respondents assume that the unlabeled candidate is a copartisan.

Finally, we also assess the behavior of respondents who do *not* share key markers with the candidate. On the whole, the baseline response to outgroup candidates is unclear from previous studies: While people might simply project less onto outgroup members than ingroup ones, past work in experimental psychology suggests that counter-projection may be more common (cf., Denning & Hodges, 2022; Foroni et al., 2010). If this is indeed the case, then respondents would project opposing partisanship onto outgroup members. *H4*: Respondents will be more likely to engage in counter-projection when the candidate is an outgroup member than when the candidate is an ingroup member, applying a contrasting partisanship to the candidate.

Data and Experimental Design

To assess these hypotheses, we fielded a two-by-two factorial vignette experiment in Canada ($n = 1,352$), the United Kingdom ($n = 1,403$), and the United States ($n = 2,236$). Survey data was collected by Qualtrics via their Internet panels, with respondents quota sampled based on gender and age brackets to reflect census population demographics (see Keivins, 2021, for further discussion). Table S1.1 in the online supporting information provides full details on the sample.

In the experiment, each respondent was randomly presented with one of four candidate profiles. The politician, named John, was described as male, 40 years old, and a self-defined centrist in all versions, whereas his social background—race/ethnicity (family immigrated from Korea or Ireland) and social class (higher or lower social class, implied by education and the parents' occupation)—varied. For example, the description in the U.K. survey reads:

John Kim [White treatment: Kavanagh] is 40 years old and was born and raised in the UK, though his parents immigrated to the country from South Korea [White treatment: Ireland]. John's father was a factory worker [Higher-class treatment: an orthopaedic surgeon], and his parents sent him to state [Higher-class treatment: private], schools as a child and teen. John is proud of his Korean [White treatment: Irish] roots, but he considers himself British to the core, and he wants to make a real contribution to his country through public service. A self-defined "complete centrist," John's political stances have been widely described as squarely in the middle of the ideological spectrum, both on social and economic issues.

Several important points on the vignette design are worth noting here. First, we provide respondents with basic background characteristics—as might be presented in a pamphlet, online profile, or local newspaper article—alongside an ambiguous political profile; we thus attempt to reflect a relatively common scenario at low-level elections, while also echoing a long line of empirical research focused on the impact of background characteristics in nonpartisan contests (e.g., Bernhard & Freeder, 2020; Cutler & Matthews, 2005; Squire & Smith, 1988). Second, we use family background to get at class origins in a way that allows us to recreate real-world campaign tactics (see Carnes & Sadin, 2014) but without foregrounding potentially confounding considerations around candidate

income or occupation (see e.g., Atkeson & Hamel, 2020; Pedersen et al., 2019). Third, we gave the non-White candidate an East Asian background in an attempt to minimize the potential effect of racial animosity and related cross-country variation, with East Asians in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States more likely to be viewed more positively than other ethnic groups (e.g., Harell et al., 2016; Maddux et al., 2008).

After reading this vignette, respondents then answered a series of questions about the candidate. Our key dependent variable in the analysis is based on a question asking about the party respondents think the politician “is most likely to run as a candidate for,” which included response options for the major national parties, the Green Party, “Other parties,” and “Do not Know.”

Responses, with parties from left to right in each country (for ease of interpretation) and the percentage of respondents choosing that option in parentheses, were as follows: in Canada, the NDP (23%), the Liberal Party (27%), and the Conservative Party (24%); in the United Kingdom, the Labour Party (25%), the Liberal Democrats (28%), and the Conservative Party (22%); and in the United States, the Democratic Party (33%) and the Republican Party (24%). These basic divisions point to two key takeaways. First, the proportion of respondents who stated that the candidate was likely to be affiliated with a centrist party—the Liberal Party in Canada and the Liberal Democrats in the United Kingdom—was only marginally higher than for other major parties (3 to 5 percentage points). Second, a higher percentage of American respondents replied “Do not Know” when asked about John’s party affiliation (30%)—likely because in contrast to Canada and the United Kingdom, there is no clear centrist option among the major parties.

We then recorded the perceived social class of the candidate, which serves both as a manipulation check and an indicator of comparative class status: Canadian and British respondents were asked “Would you describe John as... Working class; Middle class; Upper-middle class; Upper class; Don’t know”; while for the U.S. sample, two survey items asked respondents whether they would define the candidate as working class (Yes; No; Don’t know) and where they would locate him in the class hierarchy (Lower class; Lower-middle class; Middle class; Upper-middle class; Upper class; Do not know). Follow-up analysis confirmed that in all three countries, (1) the class treatments affected perceived class in the expected direction, and (2) the race treatments had no effect on perceived class.

At the end of the survey, respondents were then asked a series of questions about their own demographic profile, allowing us to assess their broad similarity to the candidate they read about in the experiment. This included items on respondents’ class status, age, gender, family immigration background, ideological self-placement, schooling background, and ethnicity. The survey also included questions on partisanship that allow us to assess projection patterns. Reflecting past research (see Boonen, 2017; van der Eijk et al., 2006), we use items on “propensity to vote” (PTV) in the multi-party systems (i.e., Canada and the United Kingdom) and the standard American National Election Survey (ANES) partisan identification (PID) in the bipartisan system (i.e., the United States). The PTV battery asked respondents “There are a number of political parties in [Canada/the UK], each of which would like to get your vote. How probable is it that you will ever vote for each of the following parties in [Canadian federal/general] elections?” and then listed the parties alongside a 0 (“not at all probable”) to 10 (“very probable”) answer scale. The PID items, in turn, used the standard branching format from the ANES, distinguishing between strong partisans, weak partisans, “leaners,” and independents.

Treatment Effects

Before assessing our hypotheses, we begin by investigating the extent to which candidate class and racial markers shaped perceived party affiliation independently. Doing so provides us with insights into the prevalence of stereotyping—that is, inferences about partisanship derived solely

from the candidate’s class/race—as opposed to projection—that is, inferences about partisanship derived from an *overlap* between the class/race of the voter and the candidate. Stereotyping might either be a generalized phenomenon (e.g., Coffé & Theiss-Morse, 2016; McDermott, 1998), with voters assuming partisanship based on candidate characteristics, or a practice limited to voters reacting to outgroup candidates (e.g., Lerman & Sadin, 2016; Piston et al., 2018). And while most existing research on the topic is focused on the United States, it seems reasonable to expect that lower-class and non-White candidate may be thought to be more left-wing across all three of our countries.

We therefore ran a series of *t*-tests to examine how different treatment groups responded to the question about the candidate’s likely partisanship. In these tests, the dependent variable is a dichotomous variable that indicates whether a respondent perceives the candidate to be affiliated with a given party. The samples include all respondents (including those who selected “Other parties” and “Do not Know”).

Figure 1 illustrates the group means, broken down by the candidate’s social class (top panel) and ethnic background (bottom panel) in the vignette. Note that all figures, here and below, include 83% confidence intervals, such that nonoverlapping confidence intervals indicate differences that are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level for a two-tailed test (see Bolsen & Thornton, 2014).

Findings suggest that in the United States, both the race and class treatments push respondents to perceive the candidate’s party in a stereotypical way: Respondents, for example, who read about either a White candidate or a higher class one, were more likely to assume he was Republican—although when it comes to the link between class and Democratic affiliation, this effect only nears significance ($p < .10$). In Canada, however, only ethnicity appears to matter,

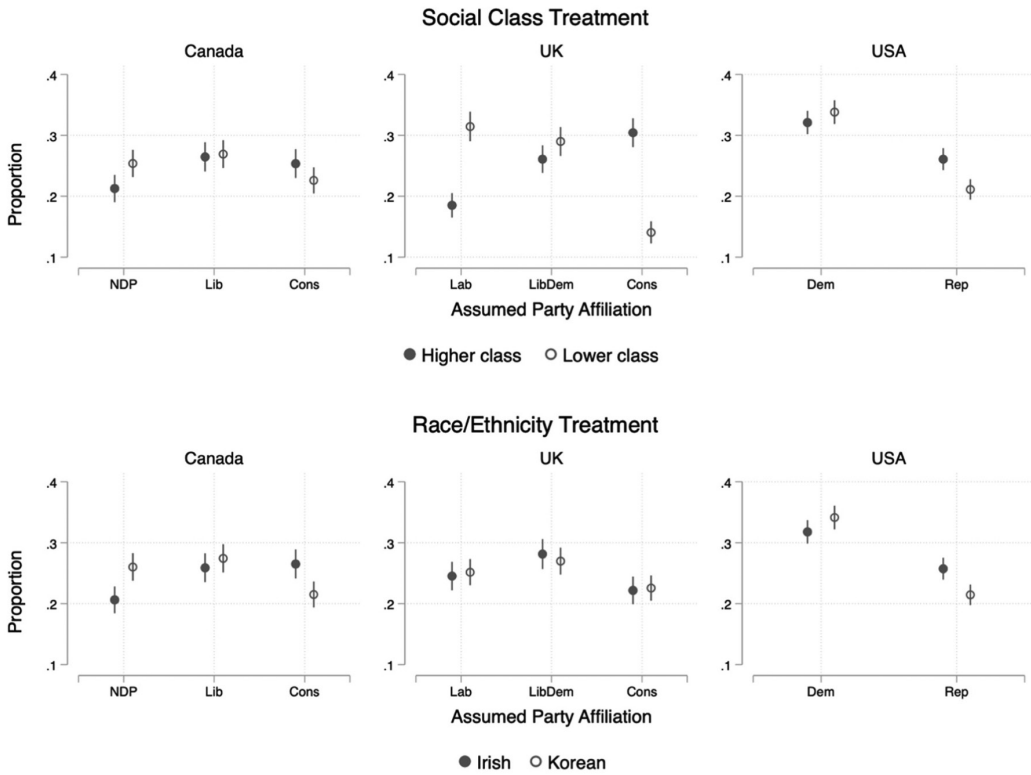


Figure 1. Assumed party affiliation of candidate, by treatment group. Bars indicate 83% confidence intervals.

and only with the parties on the left and right of the (centrist) Liberals: Respondents presented with the Korean candidate were more likely to assume an NDP affiliation ($p < .05$), and those presented with the Irish candidate were more likely to assume a Conservative affiliation ($p < .05$). In the United Kingdom, only the candidates' class matters—and once again only with parties to the left and right of the (centrist) Liberal Democrats: Respondents presented with the lower-social-class treatment were more likely to assume the candidate was Labour affiliated ($p < .01$), and those who saw the higher-social-class treatment were more likely to assume the candidate was Conservative ($p < .01$).

Finally, we conducted additional analysis to assess the potential connection between treatment groups and projection (i.e., assigning the candidate one's own party label). Results confirm that none of the treatment groups have a direct effect on projection frequency, suggesting that our main dependent variable is not affected by any particular mix of class and racial treatment markers.

Main Analysis

Our key variable of interest is the perceived party affiliation of the candidate. As highlighted above, about three-quarter of Canadian and British respondents chose one of the three major parties in their country when asked about potential party affiliation, while less than a fifth responding “Do not Know” (16% and 18%, respectively). In the United States, by contrast, just over half of respondents opted for a major party affiliation (56%) and a higher percentage of respondents replied “Do not Know” (30%).

In the main analysis, we focus only on respondents who identified with one of the two (in the United States) or three (in Canada and the United Kingdom) major parties, excluding Green and regional parties (e.g., Plaid Cymru). For Canada and the United Kingdom, we exclude straight-liners for the propensity to vote questions (i.e., those who selected the same response to all parties) and those who gave the highest probability to more than one party. For the United States, we analyze self-identified Democrats and Republicans, including strong identifiers and leaners, but exclude “true” Independents (since projection is impossible to assess for this group). The censored dataset thus includes 993 Canadians, 1,060 Britons, and 1,845 Americans. Tables S2.1 and S2.2 in the online supporting information provides full descriptive characteristics for the key variables in our analysis.

We begin by noting the frequency with which respondents declared that the candidate was a copartisan. Comparing the candidate's perceived party affiliation to the respondents' own party of

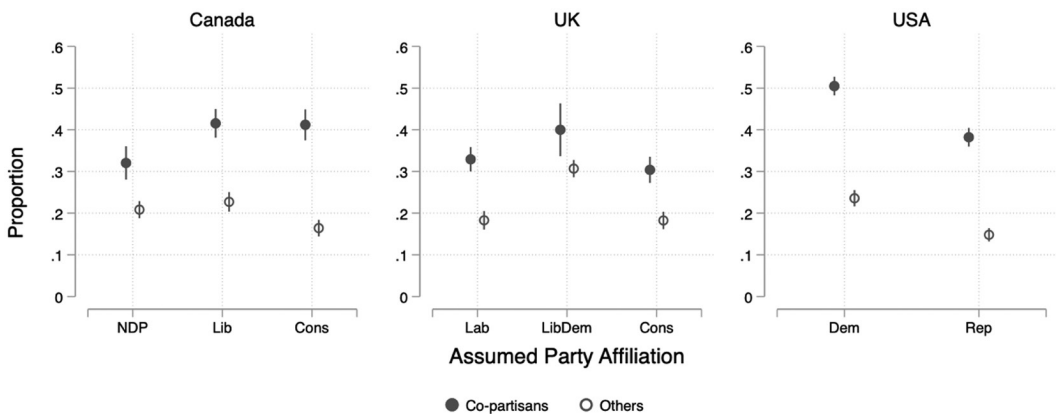


Figure 2. Assumed party affiliation of candidate, by partisanship status. Bars indicate 83% confidence intervals.

support, the proportion of respondents who considered the candidate to be a copartisan was 38.6% in Canada, 31.1% in the United Kingdom, and 44.4% in the United States. But are some individuals more likely than others to project their own partisanship onto the candidate?

We test our first hypothesis by investigating whether a respondent's party affiliation matters. One would clearly expect Canadian Liberals, for example, to assume shared partisanship with the candidate—but are NDP and Conservative partisans also doing so? A series of difference-of-means tests show that across party groups and varying country contexts, respondents did indeed broadly assume the candidate was a copartisan.

Figure 2 illustrates the results across copartisans and opposing ones. The x -axis denotes the assumed partisanship of the candidate, and the point estimates indicate the proportion of respondents who associated the candidate with a given party (i.e., group means) among respondents who identified with the assumed party (filled circle) and respondents who did not (hollow circle). For example, 50% of Democrats considered the candidate to also be a Democrat, whereas only 20% of non-Democrats felt the same (a similar tendency is found among Republicans). Differences for all countries and party configurations are significant to at least the $p < .05$ level. Results thus support Hypothesis 1: Respondents were more likely to assume the unlabeled candidate was a copartisan, regardless of their own particular party affiliation.

Our next task is to explore the relevance of overlapping characteristics on projection, investigating: (1) whether respondents who share key group-membership characteristics with the candidate, either in terms of social class (H2a) or ethnicity (H2b), are more likely than those who do not to engage in projection; and (2) whether respondents who share more markers with the candidate (i.e., have a higher level of similarity) are more likely to engage in projection (H3).

We address these questions in two stages, respectively. For the first, we generated a series of binary variables that capture whether a respondent shares a characteristic with the candidate. For ethnicity, we identify a respondent as ingroup if the respondent is White (non-White) and read the description of the Irish candidate (Korean candidate). For class, we compared the respondent's self-defined class to the respondent's perception of the candidate's social class.² We then control for other overlapping characteristics as well, taking into account: age (similar: 35–44 age bracket); gender (similar: male); family immigration background (similar: immigrant background); public/private schooling (similar: overlaps with vignette); and ideology (similar: placed themselves in the center of the left–right spectrum (Canada and the United Kingdom) or the liberal-conservative one (United States)). Then, for the second stage of the analysis, we created a continuous “similarity score” by adding up the seven binary variables described above, summing the number of shared characteristics.

In both instances, we then ran a logistic regression model for each country where the outcome variable is a binary variable indicating whether a respondent assumes the candidate is a copartisan.

To illustrate the substantive effect of overlapping racial and class backgrounds (see Models 1–3 in Table S3.1 in the online supporting information), we calculated the predicted probability of projection in four scenarios: (1) when the respondent's racial and class groupings did not overlap with the candidate's; (2) when the respondent and candidate shared the same White/non-White categorization, but not the same class; (3) when the respondent and candidate shared the same class, but not the White/non-White categorization; and (4) when the respondent and candidate shared the same White/non-White categorization *and* social class.

Figure 3 illustrates these predicted probabilities. In all three countries, the likelihood of perceiving the candidate to be a copartisan is lowest when key markers do not overlap. Relative to

²These were then recoded into lower-, middle-, and upper-class categories. Lower class includes the category “working class” in the United Kingdom and Canada and “lower” and “lower-middle” class in the U.S. survey. Upper class includes the “upper-middle” and “upper” class categories across all three surveys.

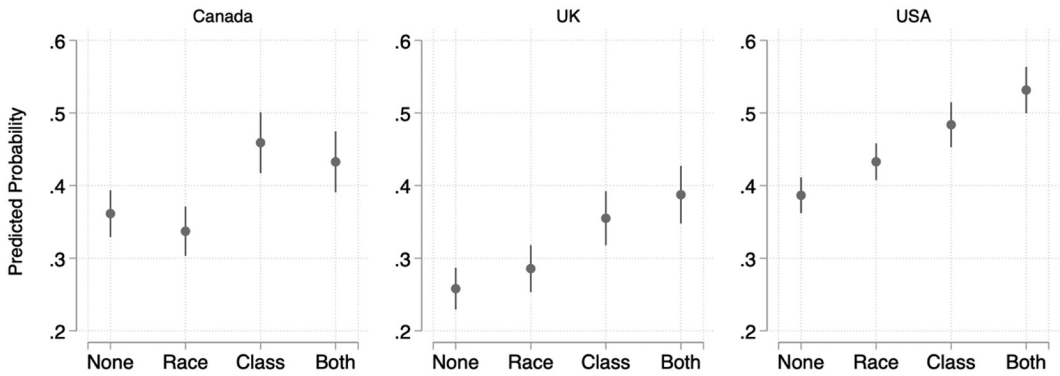


Figure 3. Predicted probability of projection by matching characteristics between respondents' and the candidate's race/ethnicity and social class. Bars indicate 83% confidence intervals.

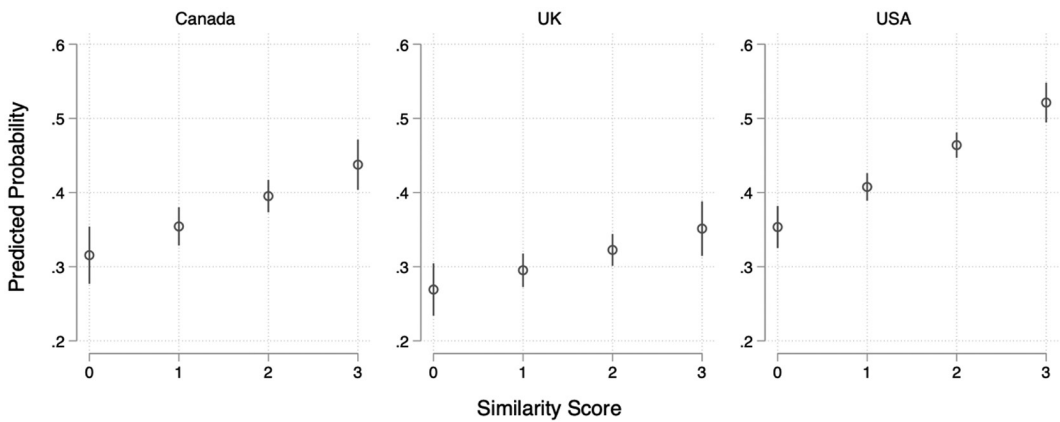


Figure 4. Predicted probability of projection by similarity score. Bars indicate 83% confidence intervals.

the no-overlap baseline, a shared racial marker increases projection in the United States, but not in Canada or the United Kingdom—while shared social class, by contrast, increases projection across all three of our cases. (Sharing both key characteristics, in turn, is statistically indistinguishable from sharing class alone.) Results thus support Hypothesis 2a (on class) across a range of different saliency contexts, whereas we find mixed evidence regarding Hypothesis 2b (on ethnicity), with support for the hypothesis only present in the United States—arguably due to a higher degree of racial salience compared to Canada and the United Kingdom.

Similarly, our second modeling approach (see Models 4–6 in Table S3.1 in the online supporting information) found that an increase in the number of shared characteristics was associated with a higher likelihood of projection, although in this instance the United Kingdom effect only nears statistical significance ($p < .10$). Figure 4 demonstrates this relationship using predicted probabilities, illustrated at a representative range (from 0 to 3) of shared characteristics.³ Relative to the scenario where a respondent shares no background characteristics with the

³These cases represent observations at the 10th (0), 25th (1), 70th (2), and 90th (3) percentiles. Note also that the similarity score never surpasses 5 in our data (although the theoretical bound is 7).

candidate, two or more shared characteristics increases the probability of projection. Having three shared characteristics in the United States, for example, increases the probability by .168 on average. We thus conclude that Hypothesis 3 is broadly supported by our analysis, although with weaker evidence in the case of the United Kingdom.

Finally, up to now we have concentrated on the impact of respondents sharing key characteristics with the candidate—but what happens when characteristics contrast? While it may be the case that respondents simply project less onto outgroup members than ingroup ones, past work suggests that respondents may instead engage in counter-projection (H4).

We code instances of counter-projection as occurring when either: (1) A respondent with a left-wing party affiliation (i.e., NDP, Labour, Democrat) assigns the candidate a right-wing party affiliation (i.e., Conservative, Republican) or (2) a respondent with a right-wing party affiliation (i.e., Conservative, Republican) assigns the candidate a left-wing party affiliation (i.e., NDP, Labour, Democrat). Note that Liberal and Liberal Democrat-affiliated respondents are necessarily excluded from this analysis, since in light of the candidate's self-described centrism, it would be impossible to distinguish counter-projection from the "correct" assignment of a centrist party label. As such, the counter-projection analysis only includes respondents who support Labour and Conservatives in the United Kingdom, the NDP and Conservatives in Canada, and Republican and Democratic party identifiers in the United States.

Overall, we find that 18% of Canadian respondents, 16% of Britons, and 19% of Americans assumed the candidate was a (noncentrist) opposing partisan. As the regression results (see Table S3.2 in the online supporting information) suggest, however, there is no indication that Canadian or British respondents were more likely to counter-project when the candidate was in the outgroup (whether on ethnic or class lines). In the United States, by contrast, we do find evidence of counter-projection based on (dissimilar) class status. Importantly, these results are robust (across all three countries) to excluding cases where counter-projection and stereotyping overlap (e.g., Republicans assuming that lower-class candidates are Democrats, or Democrats assuming that higher-class candidates are Republicans).⁴ Findings thus offer only partial support for Hypothesis 4, with evidence of counter-projection only in the United States and only with regard to (conflicting) class backgrounds.

Robustness Checks

We confirmed the robustness of our main results with a series of additional analyses, investigating the potential impact of: (1) the specific subsample of the dataset that we analyze; (2) the modeling approach; (3) the binary White/non-White racial categorization; and (4) the strength of partisan identities.

First, we assessed the consequences of our approach to censoring the data. To do so, we reran the analysis with noncensored data, that is, including straight-liners in Canada and the United Kingdom (who we cannot identify with a single closest party and thus instead have multiple partisanship), other party identifiers (in Canada and the United Kingdom), and leaners (in the United States). Although the Figure 2 difference among Liberal Democrats in the United Kingdom is no longer statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, t -tests results for the relevant hypotheses (H1) are broadly equivalent. This reflects the small proportion of Liberal Democrats in the U.K. sample, which leads to a small copartisan group for this party—a limitation that was already visible via the larger confidence interval in Figure 2, but that is even more pronounced with the noncensored data.

⁴We also find some suggestive evidence of an effect of shared ethnicity in the United States. For more details, consult Table S4.1 in the online supporting information.

Second, we adopt an alternative modeling approach based on multinomial logit models (for testing H2a, H2b, and H3). This allows us to categorize respondents who responded with “Do not Know” as an independent group, in addition to those who assumed the candidate was a copartisan and those who assumed he was not. The effects on projection are substantively consistent with the results reported in Table S3.1 in the online supporting information, save for in the case of the “similarity score” in the United Kingdom; however, even here the changes are marginal, with a shift from nearing statistical significance ($p < .10$) to no longer doing so.

Third, to assess potential heterogeneity across different racialized groups, we reran the analyses with alternative operationalizations of the ingroup/outgroup divide: namely, categorizing White respondents as “matching” the candidate with an Irish background and categorizing respondents with an Asian background as “matching” the candidate with a Korean one. Results in Canada and the United Kingdom remain unchanged, but the otherwise present U.S. effect no longer attains significance. Further testing suggests that Black respondents in particular may be driving projection among non-Whites in the United States—although it is difficult to disentangle any underlying heterogeneity here given small subgroup sample sizes (the U.S. sample is 11.2% Black, 5.7% Hispanic/Latino, and 2.4% Asian).

Finally, we performed follow-up testing to assess the potential relevance of the strength of partisan identities. Data availability limit us to the American sample in this instance, as it allows us to distinguish “strong” partisans from “weak” and “leaning” ones. Results suggest that partisans of any intensity are more likely to project than other respondents (as per H1) but that the likelihood of projection is greatest among strong identifiers—relative to both weak identifiers and copartisans on the whole. A similar pattern is found when we look at the likelihood that shared class (H2a) characteristics increase the likelihood of projection: All partisans are likely to project, but strong partisans are most likely to do so. When it comes to race (H2b), however, findings suggest that the projection effect was driven exclusively by strong partisans—a point we discuss further below.

Conclusion

Under what circumstances are voters more likely to project their own political position onto a candidate for office? This article has sought to answer this question by examining the assumed partisanship of a self-declared centrist politician, using data from a survey experiment fielded in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In doing so, we set out: (1) to contribute to research on the inferences citizens draw in nonpartisan elections (e.g., Bonneau & Cann, 2015; Cutler & Matthews, 2005) and low-information contexts more generally (e.g., Atkeson & Hamel, 2020; Badas & Stauffer, 2019) and (2) to shed light on a potential methodological complication of using partisanship-less candidates in vignette experiments (e.g., Sances, 2018; Visalvanich, 2017; Weaver, 2012).

Theoretically, we built on the social categorization model to investigate the extent of projection, the conditions under which it is likely to occur, and the prevalence of counter-projection (e.g., Denning & Hodges, 2022; Nicolas et al., 2017; Robbins & Krueger, 2005). We then combined findings from within this framework with insights from recent research in political science, which has—most notably—examined the relationship between projection and ingroup/outgroup racial divides in the United States (e.g., Fulton & Gershon, 2018; Lerman & Sadin, 2016; Piston et al., 2018).

Findings suggested that even in the face of a self-declared centrist candidate, voters from across the political spectrum were inclined to assume shared partisanship in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States—with patterns thus seemingly unaffected by party-system variation. Breaking down the results based on ingroup/outgroup membership, however, indicated that while projection

was affected by class differences in each of our three cases, the racial divide only had mattered in the United States. More broadly, findings also suggested that the more overlap there was between respondent and candidate characteristics, the more likely respondents were to project their own partisanship onto the candidate. Lastly, we also found evidence of counter-projecting to outgroup members—but once again only in the United States.

Results thus broadly replicate past work on differential projection across ingroup/outgroup racial divides in the United States, while at the same time (1) pointing to a similar effect of social class divisions and (2) extending the theory application to inferences regarding candidate partisanship. They also reveal some evidence of counter-projection, including in instances where counter-projection would go against predominant stereotypes. Yet as our inclusion of the Canadian and British cases has shown, these findings only partially generalize: While we uncovered evidence of projection based on class divisions in Canada and the United Kingdom, there was no indication of ethnic effects or counter-projection vis-à-vis outgroup members—arguably reflecting cross-country variation in the political salience of certain racial cleavages and differences across party-system structures.

Overall, the study thus highlights the importance of looking beyond the American case and favoring a comparative approach to studying political behavior. It also suggests that in partisanship-free vignette experiments, disentangling candidate evaluations from projection and counter-projection is tricky. Our findings suggest that this is especially likely to be true in studies that include the (much studied) American case, which was marked by a singular impact of race on projection and class on counter-projection. Indeed, the impact of racial markers in the United States was particularly complex: In addition to the basic cross-country variation in race-related projection, follow-up analyses suggested that respondent ethnicity and partisan ID strength may be conditioning these effects as well.

Several limitations of the present study nevertheless point to fruitful avenues for future research. First, as highlighted above, the measure of ingroup/outgroup racial divides used in the main analysis is based on a relatively crude distinction between White respondents and racialized minorities. Oversampling ethnic minorities would thus be useful for exploring the degree to which projection varies across racialized minority groups. This seems especially crucial given the results of our follow-up testing on race-related projection, which suggested that in the United States, Black respondents appear to have driven projection among non-Whites.

Second, centering the vignettes around lower-/higher-class backgrounds and White/Asian divides necessarily limits our ability to generalize. Studying a wider array of candidate ethnicities would improve our understanding of projection patterns with candidates from different ethnic backgrounds (e.g., exploring the potential role of variation in degrees of linked fate) and allow us to examine the possibility that particularly strong links between a minority group and a party (e.g., African Americans and the Democratic Party) might crowd out projection entirely with candidates from certain backgrounds. Examining the impact of other markers (e.g., gender, age), in turn, would help to further unpack the effect of cleavage salience, as would reducing the amount of background information provided to respondents.

Finally, our study design can only take us so far in investigating the potential role of party politics. On the one hand, our follow-up analysis suggests that partisan ID strength may be moderating race-related projection, but data limitations prevent us from being able to fully unpack these dynamics. On the other, the study's focus on (self-described) centrist candidates makes it difficult to tease out the precise causes of the differing findings between the United States and our other two cases: It could be that counter-projection is less common in Canada and the United Kingdom due to differences in negative partisanship or the degree of polarization; or that reactions to outgroup candidates in multiparty systems, and in particular those with a centrist party, simply differ from those in bipartisan ones. Future work incorporating a broader range of political stances and country cases would thus be particularly instructive.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 Programme via a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship (Grant no. 750556). The article also benefited from feedback from Joshua Robison and from comments received at the 2022 Annual Meeting of the Political Studies Association. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anthony Kevins, Herbert Manzoni Building, Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough, LE11 3TU, UK. E-mail: a.kevins@lboro.ac.uk. Authors contributed equally to the article and are listed in alphabetical order.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web site:

Appendix S1.

Table S1.1. Sample Characteristics

Table S2.1. Assumed Party of Candidate

Table S2.2. Descriptive Statistics

Table S3.1. The Effects of Shared Characteristics on Projection

Table S3.2. The Effects of In-Group/Out-Group Divisions on Projection

Table S4.1. The Effects of In-Group/Out-Group Divisions on Counter-Projection (Original Sample vs. Subsample)