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How we think about the political stances of others: evidence on projection from Canada, Germany, and the UK

Seonghui Lee[a] and Anthony Kevins[b]

[a]Department of Government, University of Essex, Colchester, UK; [b]Department of International Relations, Politics and History, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

ABSTRACT

What leads people to assume that others are more or less similar to them ideologically? To answer this question, this article uses original data from three multi-party democracies to analyse respondents' assumptions about the ideological proximity of hypothetical voters. In doing so, it focusses on an under-examined psychological mechanism in political science research – projection onto in-group members – with the aim of extending our understanding of the factors shaping second-order political beliefs. The article empirically assesses the impact of this mechanism, using an original survey experiment fielded in Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom to examine the effect of shared partisanship and overlapping demographic markers on presumed ideological similarity. Results suggest that in all three countries, shared group membership plays an important role in shaping second-order political beliefs, though the effect of socio-demographic similarity is only robust in the absence of a clear partisan affiliation.

KEYWORDS Second-order beliefs; projection; ideology; partisanship; Social Categorisation Model

Recent decades have seen a trend towards assuming an exaggerated gap between the left- and right-wing segments of the electorate, with perceived ideological differences outstripping actual ones (see, for example, Blatz and Mercier 2018; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). Existing analysis of these second-order beliefs – i.e. our beliefs about the political beliefs of others (e.g. Ouellet and Tremblay-Antoine 2024) – however, has generally been limited to two considerations: assumptions about out-partisans, highlighting the public's inclination to paint opposing partisans as extremists (e.g. Jost *et al.* 2022); and the relatively widespread influence of

CONTACT Seonghui Lee s.lee@essex.ac.uk
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stereotypes that link certain socio-demographic markers to particular political views (e.g. Ahler and Sood 2023).

Yet it is likely that this focus on out-group members and stereotypes provides only a partial explanation of second-order beliefs, since *shared* group memberships may influence perceived policy positions (see Oosten *et al.* 2024; Titelman 2023) while simultaneously decreasing the use of stereotypes in inference-making (see, for example, Sened *et al.* 2025). If that is indeed the case, then our current understanding of the factors shaping second-order beliefs is incomplete – with knock-on effects for our ability to anticipate the consequences of different sorts of assumptions. This gap in our understanding matters since past research suggests that beliefs about the political stances of other (ordinary) citizens are liable to matter in at least two key ways.

The first is tied to the trends in perceived polarisation highlighted above: given that most people are unaware of the actual distribution of political stances in their country, perceptions of polarisation are at least partly driven by (aggregated) second-order political beliefs about other citizens. Research on perceptions of mass polarisation suggests that these beliefs have a range of likely implications for political behaviour, shaping factors such as political participation, support for democracy, dehumanisation of rival partisans, and levels of trust in government (e.g. Enders and Armaly 2019; Lee 2022; Moore-Berg *et al.* 2020). The second set of consequences are linked to how citizens interact with one another, and the ways in which these interactions are affected by the perceived politics of those with whom they are interacting. Past research suggests that second-order beliefs can shape an array of inter-personal dynamics, including who people trust to provide accurate political information, who they turn to for help (including vis-à-vis non-political tasks), who they feel comfortable enough with to discuss politics with, and what sorts of opinions they either share or withhold (e.g. Ahn *et al.* 2013; Carlson and Settle 2023; Marks *et al.* 2019). Overall, then, second-order beliefs about other ordinary citizens are deeply tied to our comprehension of political sophistication, political behaviour, and the use and misuse of group-centric cues (see, for example, Carlson and Hill 2022; Titelman and Lauderdale 2023).

In order to shed further light on the drivers of second-order political beliefs, this article considers whether projection – '[an] inferential act of ascribing one's own specific attributes to resolve something previously unknown about the target groups' (Ames 2004: 574) – might be playing a role in shaping the impact of group memberships on perceived ideological proximity. While projection is a general phenomenon that individuals may engage in with anyone, a large body of research in social psychology suggests that it should be strongest vis-à-vis in-group members, with individuals more likely to project their own attributes onto people with whom they share similar group markers (see, for example, Robbins and Krueger 2005). Building

from these expectations, this study explores the extent to which shared group characteristics may affect assumptions about another person's politics in multiparty systems – and possibly even when one is aware of that other person's partisan identification. Our core research question is thus as follows: to what extent do shared partisan and socio-demographic markers lead individuals to assume that others are more similar to them ideologically?

We address this question using data collected via an original survey experiment fielded in Canada, Germany, and the UK, examining the perceived left-right ideological distance between a given respondent and the (hypothetical) voter profiles that they read about. Our theoretical expectations draw from projection models in social psychology – namely, the Social Categorisation Model and Similarity Contingency Model (see Ames 2004; Clement and Krueger 2002) – which highlight that individuals are more likely to project their own beliefs and attitudes onto in-group members. By incorporating insights from social psychology and recent political science research studying assumptions about other people's vote choice and party affiliations, we hope to contribute to the literatures on second-order political beliefs, ideological projection, and perceptions of polarisation in multi-party systems (e.g. Harteveld 2021; Mason and Wronski 2018; Ward and Tavits 2019).

In what follows, we began by laying out the existing literature and theories that lie behind our investigation, and then draw out three testable hypotheses. After introducing our survey experiment data, we turn to the main analysis: examining the impact of shared partisanship and overlapping demographic markers on presumed ideological proximity, while controlling for a set of shared political values and policy preferences. Our follow-up analyses then (1) attempt to parse projection effects out from other factors that might shape these inferences, (2) examine additional potential sources of heterogeneity in respondents' assumption patterns, and (3) consider the robustness of our main analyses. Findings suggest that across all three of our countries, shared group membership plays an important role in shaping how we think about the political stances of others – though the effect of socio-demographic similarity is only robust in cases where no explicit partisan affiliation is mentioned.

Background

A long line of research has highlighted a tendency, in particular among partisans, to assume a larger left-right divide than is warranted by the actual distribution of public opinion (see, for example, Ahler 2014; Enders and Armaly 2019; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). These findings are supported by related work on affective polarisation, which points to a growing trend towards asserting a high social distance with opposing partisans (e.g. Iyengar *et al.* 2012; Theodoridis *et al.* 2023).

Yet while partisanship is clearly a strong – if not the strongest – determinant of these misperceptions, assumptions about other people's politics are clearly shaped by a wide range of other considerations as well (see, for example, Carlson and Hill 2022). Research by Ogura *et al.* (2022) examining perceptions of other people's partisanship, for instance, has found that assessments were affected by factors such as family backgrounds, political engagement, and policy stances. Past work on perceived left-right placement, in turn, has often focussed on stereotypes and their impact on the assumed ideology of candidates for office (e.g. Claassen *et al.* 2021; Orr and Huber 2021): studies on this topic suggest, for example, that respondents tend to assume that female, working class, and racialised candidates are more left-leaning, all else being equal (e.g. Carnes and Sadin 2015; Jacobsmeier 2015; McDermott 1998; Visalvanich 2017a).

While these sorts of assumptions clearly matter, a growing body of literature suggests that projection may be another important psychological process shaping second-order political beliefs. Individuals use projection to make inferences about others (e.g. as a left-leaning immigrant, I assume other immigrants that I meet are also left-leaning). The mechanism here is distinct from stereotyping (e.g. immigrants are more left-leaning than the native-born population), instead reflecting a tendency to assume that similar others (i.e. those with whom we share key in-group/out-group markers) are more likely to think like we do. If this is true, then existing work on these questions may be missing an important psychological process that is partly driving the assumptions we make about others.[1]

Our theoretical starting point for thinking about projection is the Social Categorisation Model (see, for example, Clement and Krueger 2002), which suggests that people are more likely to project their own beliefs and attitudes onto in-group members – in particular when the group marker in question has a high degree of salience (e.g. Crisp and Hewstone 2007).[2] A related framework, based on the Similarity Contingency Model, bridges the gap with broader evidence on stereotyping, suggesting that perceived similarity leads to increased projection, while perceived dissimilarity leads to increased stereotyping (see Ames 2004; Sened *et al.* 2025).

Although this approach finds its origins in social psychology, research in political science suggests that projection may be shaping assumed political positions as well. Earlier work in this vein found evidence of these dynamics vis-à-vis candidates for office in the US (e.g. Lerman and Sadin 2016; Piston *et al.* 2018), which more recent research suggests may be relatively generalisable: Kevins and Lee (2023), for example, find evidence that in-group/out-group class and racial divisions shape the likelihood of assuming shared partisan affiliation in Canada, the UK, and the

US; while Titelman (2023) tests the impact of ten group markers in the UK and finds that overlapping demographic markers broadly increase the perception of having things in common politically.

For our purposes, however, there are three key limitations to existing research on this topic. First, most past work concentrates only on one or two group markers at a time, and typically focusses on candidates for office rather than ordinary citizens (e.g. Lerman and Sadin 2016; Piston *et al.* 2018). This restricts our ability to assess the real-world scope of projection: when learning about others, we tend to be exposed to various potentially relevant group markers, not just one or two in isolation; and, in light of the relatively limited number of candidates for office, most of the second-order political beliefs citizens develop day-to-day are centred around ordinary citizens, not politicians. Taken together, these points seem especially pertinent given debates on whether we lack the cognitive capacity required to make (recurrent) use of multiple in-group/out-group divisions (c.f. Grigoryan 2020a; Hall and Crisp 2005; Urada *et al.* 2007).

Second and relatedly, existing work in this strand of the literature – including the few studies that do consider more than just one or two socio-demographic markers (see Oosten 2022; Titelman 2023) – does not incorporate party affiliations into their research designs. This raises questions about the extent to which we are liable to see these effects manifested in the real world, given that partisanship information (1) is often readily available in practice, especially when it comes to politicians and (2) offers both a powerful cue and a strong in-group/out-group marker in its own right (see, for example, Kirkland and Coppock 2018). It thus remains to be seen whether the projection effects of basic demographic markers will be crowded out by information on partisanship.

Third and finally, most of the broader research on these kinds of political misperceptions has been focussed on the (two-party) American case (see, for example, Ahler and Sood 2023; Carlson and Hill 2022). This makes it difficult to assess how misperception dynamics play out in multi-party systems – especially in light of the assumed influence of partisanship on assumed ideology, which past research suggests may work differently in different country contexts (cf. Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2021). It also raises questions about the potential impact of the absence of partisanship information on respondents' assumptions, given that a lack of partisan affiliation – associated in the US with centrist 'Independent' voters – is likely to work differently outside of two-party systems (see, for example, Navarrete 2021). Indeed, this gap in our understanding is particularly troublesome since, for multi-party systems, perceived ideological proximity also serves as a key indicator of polarisation in empirical research (see, for example, Röllicke 2023; Traber *et al.* 2023).

In order to address these limitations, the rest of this article turns to assess the influence of shared partisan affiliation and socio-demographic characteristics on perceived ideological similarity in three multi-party parliamentary democracies: Canada, Germany, and the UK.

Theory

How might projection play a role in shaping ideological assumptions in multiparty systems? Drawing from the above literature, we build from baseline hypotheses on (1) partisan affiliation and (2) socio-demographic similarity, and then assess (3) the extent to which projection linked to socio-demographic similarity is likely to persist even when information on party affiliation is present.

To begin, it seems clear that shared partisan identification, be it to a particular party or no party at all, should play a central role in shaping the perceived ideology of other citizens. Part of the expected effect is likely to be driven by the ideological information contained within a given partisan affiliation: even if voters vary in the precise inferences they draw from a party label, in most instances that label will convey at least some information about left-right positioning (see, for example, Aldrich *et al.* 2018; Muraoka and Rosas 2021). Above and beyond this effect, however, a long line of research also highlights that party identification is one of the clearest general cues/groupings that differentiate perceptions of 'us' from 'them' in the political sphere (see, for example, Iyengar *et al.* 2012; Theodoridis *et al.* 2023). Thus, even if respondents project their own beliefs across both co- and opposing partisans, projection tends to be notably stronger among co-partisans (Vandeweerdt 2022).

Taking these points together, we expect that partisan identification will be a powerful (if not *the* most powerful) signal shaping perceived ideological similarity. Respondents are thus expected to place others closer to themselves on the left-right spectrum when that other person shares their own partisan identity marker – whether that is as a non-partisan or as a supporter of a specific party.

> **H1:** *Shared partisanship will be associated with a smaller perceived ideological distance between the respondent and the hypothetical citizen presented in the profile.*

Above and beyond this baseline effect, however, we anticipate that respondents, driven by an underlying inclination to assume consensus among 'people like them', will be more likely to project their own ideological positioning onto demographically similar others. This expectation is supported by work in social psychology examining how people understand others on non-political issues (e.g. Grigoryan *et al.* 2022; Robbins

and Krueger 2005), as well as by recent research in political science examining reactions to candidates for office (e.g. Kevins and Lee 2023; Piston *et al.* 2018). In brief, theoretical expectations around projection are derived from the argument that individuals implicitly link their own individual-level characteristics with their own behaviours and beliefs, since doing so provides a simple, low-effort heuristic for understanding similar others for whom we have limited information.

When considered alongside in-group/out-group divisions, this process thus enables individuals, as Robbins and Krueger (2005: 32) put it, to use 'their own dispositions or preferences as data… [to] make quick predictions of what others are like or what they are likely to do'. In line with this theoretical approach, past studies suggest that a wide array of demographic markers – including gender, age group, class, race, religion, education, and place of residence – shape perceived non-political (e.g. Grigoryan 2020b) and political (Titelman 2023) similarity across a range of country contexts. The degree of influence of these markers, as well as the mechanism through which they might work (e.g. projection, stereotyping), are nevertheless likely to vary depending on the context (see, for example, Donnelly 2021; Oosten *et al.* 2024).[3]

As such, even though the impact of any given marker (e.g. specific classes, religions, or age groups) is likely to vary contextually, we anticipate that assumed ideological proximity will be affected by overall similarity – captured in this study by the number of shared socio-demographic characteristics. Perceived ideological distances between the respondent and the person presented in the profile should thus be smaller when the profile contains a greater number of overlapping socio-demographic markers.

> **H2:** *Greater socio-demographic similarity will be associated with a smaller perceived ideological distance between the respondent and the hypothetical citizen presented in the profile.*

Finally, combining the above two (direct-effect) hypotheses, we examine the extent to which the likelihood of socio-demographic projection is affected by information on partisan affiliation. As highlighted above, we expect co-partisanship to play a key role structuring the perceived ideology of the hypothetical citizens presented in the profiles. Indeed, past research suggests that partisanship may be so powerful a cue that it drowns out the potential relevance of other social groups, both in the US and beyond (see, for example, Westwood *et al.* 2018).

Notably, the closest research to our own finds that political projection based on socio-demographic markers is common vis-à-vis non-partisan politicians (see Kevins and Lee 2023) – but with a research design that avoids mentioning party affiliation precisely because it is expected to crowd out other effects. This practice is relatively widespread in

experimental research studying reactions to demographic markers (e.g. Sances 2018; Visalvanich 2017b), yet it raises questions about the scope of these effects when information on partisanship is available. What is needed is therefore a research design that allows us to investigate the impact of socio-economic markers both with and without partisan cues.

In doing so, we draw our expectations from past research on candidate assessments (see Kirkland and Coppock 2018) and anticipate that the availability of partisanship information is likely to reduce and possibly even nullify any effect of shared socio-demographic characteristics. As a consequence, we expect that projection based on socio-demographic similarity will play a larger role when respondents are presented with a profile that does not contain an explicit partisan identification.

H3: *In the absence of a partisan cue, shared demographic characteristics will have a larger impact on the perceived ideological distance between the respondent and the hypothetical citizen presented in the profile.*

Drawing together the discussion above, our model can be expressed as follows:

$$Y_{perceived\ similarity_{ij}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Xshared_{pid_{ij}} + \beta_2 * Xshared_{soc_{ij}} + \beta_3 * Xshared_{values_{ij}} + \beta_4 * Xshared_{policy_{ij}} + Z_i\gamma + \epsilon_{ij}$$

whereby projection, the act of individual i to ascribe her own ideological stance to target individual j ($Y_{perceived\ similarity_{ij}}$), is explained by a series of observed shared attributes between i and j: shared partisanship ($Xshared_{pid_{ij}}$); shared socio-demographic characteristics ($Xshared_{soc_{ij}}$); and other shared views that are relevant to political positioning – namely, shared values ($Xshared_{values_{ij}}$) and policy stances ($Xshared_{policy_{ij}}$). Z_i in turn, is a vector of control variables for respondent i's characteristics (e.g. age, gender, education, social class, etc.), while γ is a vector of coefficients corresponding to the control variables in Z_i. The beta coefficients indicate the direction and the size of these observed shared attributes.

Our first two hypotheses thus investigate the role of shared partisanship (H1) and socio-demographic similarity (H2) – controlling for shared value and policy stances – while our third hypothesis examines whether shared socio-demographic traits matter only/primarily in cases without clear partisan cues (H3).

Data and research design

Our analysis is based on an original survey fielded in 2019 in Canada ($n = 1{,}006$), Germany ($n = 1{,}006$), and the UK ($n = 1{,}003$) using a Qualtrics' online panel, quota sampled to match population demographics for age and gender.[4] In order to examine patterns of projection in multiparty contexts, the survey included an experiment that had respondents read a series of profiles about hypothetical individuals and then place them on a left-right scale. Later in the survey, respondents also expressed their own left-right stances on the same scale. Perceived ideological proximity, the outcome variable, was then calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the left-right placements of the respondent themselves and the target person in each profile.

The introductory text informed respondents that they would be asked 'to read a very short description of a particular citizen and then place that citizen where you think he or she belongs on a left-right scale'. Each profile incorporated seven pieces of information, as described in Figure 1. The profile screen opened with the text 'This individual who is [age group, gender]…', which was shown alongside one of six simple avatar images designed to draw attention to the age-gender combination. We used visual images as they are known to enhance respondents' engagement (e.g. Guin *et al.* 2012) – but we were also careful not to use realistic images to prevent eliciting unnecessary biases, for example, due to the potential impact of facial similarity and/or skin colour (see, for example, Bailenson *et al.* 2008). This opening sentence (and corresponding avatar)

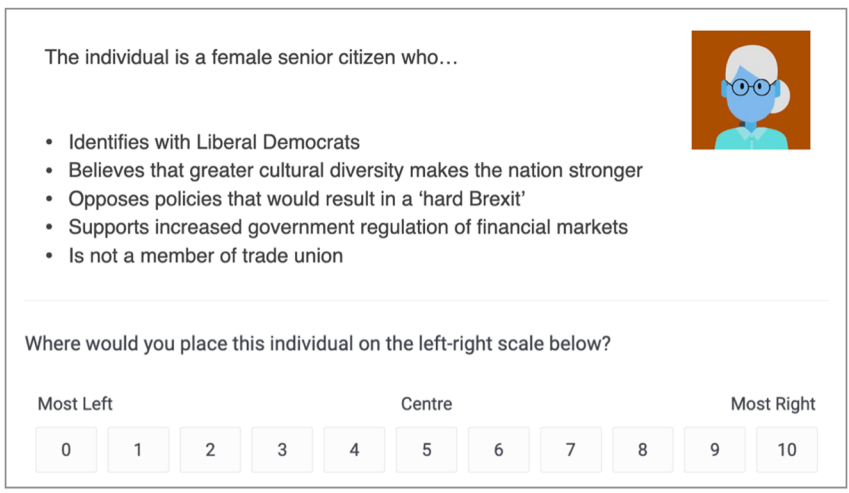

Figure 1. An example of the task screen in the experiment.

showed whether the individual in the profile was male or female (*gender*) and whether they were young, middle-aged, or elderly (*age group*). The screen then displayed five additional pieces of information in a bullet-point list: *partisanship,* an additional *socio-demographic* characteristic, two statements about *policy* views, and one *value* statement. For each profile, respondents were then asked to place the individual on a left-right scale ranging from zero ('Most left') to five ('Centre') to ten ('Most right'). Each respondent was presented with either 10 or 20 such profiles[5] – resulting in a total of 55,510 observations of respondent-profile pairs in our dataset (17,960 in Canada, 19,390 in Germany, and 18,160 in the UK).

After the experimental tasks, we recorded respondent information corresponding to each of the factors included in the survey experiment with regards to partisanship, socio-demographic characteristics, policy preferences, and value orientations. This allows us to construct our key explanatory variables, which indicate whether a respondent's partisanship and demographic characteristics overlap with the description of the target person in a given profile. Similarly, overlapping policy and value orientations serve as key controls in the models.

An important note on our research design is that the experiment presents a diverse set of individuals by retrieving the information shown for each profile from a large pool of sub-attributes and levels. For UK respondents, for example, partisan information is randomly chosen from a total of 15 statements that describe either a lack of partisan attachment or an attachment to a specific political party, including potential variation in levels of partisan strength. The socio-demographic information, in turn, includes a randomly selected gender and age group alongside one additional marker randomly chosen from a set of 12 characteristics – capturing education, religiosity, place of residency, social class, and union membership – with minor variation in characteristics across countries. We thus follow past literature in our selection of a range of group identity markers that research suggests individuals use in projection (see, for example, Grigoryan 2020a, 2020b). Lastly, each respondent is also presented with one value orientation, randomly selected from a set of ten statements (e.g. 'Believes that improving national security is more important than protecting civil liberties'), and two policy positions out of a set of 18 (in Canada and the UK) or 20 (in Germany) (e.g. 'Opposes increasing taxation of fossil fuels to promote renewable energy').[6]

This design brings several advantages for the purpose of the study. First, limiting the amount of information to a total of seven discrete characteristics (five bullet-pointed description plus age and gender) reduces the cognitive burden placed on respondents. This is particularly important given that respondents were required to process ten or twenty profiles within a reasonable amount of time (respondents spent an average of 19 s

per screen). Second, using a large library of attributes generates more diverse profiles, which in turn helps to ensure that the source of respondents' judgments is not restricted to a certain characteristic within a broader category. This matters because we are interested in the category of individual characteristics (i.e. categories of partisanship, socio-demography, policy stances, and values) rather than any specific traits within the categories (e.g. wanting more military spending (out of the various policy stances) or holding a university degree (out of the various socio-demographic traits)). The research design thus ensures that our estimations are based on a wide range of considerations vis-à-vis the individual characteristics of our respondents and the hypothetical individuals that they read about.

Key variables

The outcome variable – perceived political similarity – is a latent variable in nature. Nevertheless, given that respondents were asked to evaluate the ideological stances (an 'unknown attribute') of the hypothetical individuals and that we have information about respondent ideological stances, we operationalise perceived similarity as the proximity between the respondent's left-right placement of themselves and of the hypothetical individual. This (absolute) distance between these two placements serves as the dependent variable in our analysis and varies from 0 (most proximate) to 10 (least proximate). The average distance for all respondent-profile pairs ($n = 55{,}510$) is 2.62 (with SD = 2.14), and full details on the distribution are reported in Online Appendix A.

In order to examine the effects of overlapping partisanship and socio-demographic characteristics, we coded our two key explanatory variables by comparing the profile characteristics and those of the respondent. To assess the impact of co-partisanship, we generated a binary variable to indicate whether the partisan affiliations of the respondent and the hypothetical individual were identical.[7] Note that shared partisanship not only includes cases where the respondent and the profile is affiliated with the same party, but also cases where the respondent and the profile are non-partisans (i.e. shared non-partisanship).[8] 21.6% of the profiles shown to the respondents across three countries were described as non-partisan ($n = 13{,}035$), and this non-partisan profile subsample will be used to test our third hypothesis.

We use a similar approach to examine the effect of shared socio-demographic characteristics, though here the resultant variable can take a range of values. In the experiment, respondents received three pieces of information regarding the hypothetical individual's socio-demographic traits: all profiles were shown with a gender and age group,[9] alongside a randomly selected piece of information from a pool of descriptions

regarding education (having a university degree or not), social class (working, middle, or upper class), place of residence (urban, suburban, or rural), religiosity (religious or not), and union membership (union member or not). In our coding, we first generated a series of bivariate variables indicating the overlap between the respondent and each profile on these socio-demographic characteristics,[10] and then summed the number of matches. The resulting variable indicates the degree of socio-demographic similarity, with a value range from 0 to 3.

Finally, all multivariate models also include two control variables for shared views on policy and value statements, given that left-right placements – as well as perceived ideological similarity more generally – are likely to be affected by shared policy positions and political values (see, for example, Lesschaeve 2017). These variables are coded using the same 'matching' approach as was used for the explanatory variables. Importantly, controlling for these factors helps us to tease out the effects of co-partisanship and socio-demographic similarity even when directly relevant political information is available to respondents.

Main analysis

To test our first hypothesis, which anticipates that the perceived ideological distance will be smaller when the partisanship of the respondent and the profile overlaps, we first present the bivariate relationships between ideological proximity and: (1) shared partisanship, to assess H1; (2) the number of shared socio-demographic traits, to assess H2. We then show the findings from multivariate OLS regression models where we control for shared value and policy stances.

Results from the difference of means tests support the first hypothesis, indicating that the perceived ideological distance is significantly smaller when the hypothetical person is a co-partisan (or shares non-partisanship) than when the hypothetical person's party identification is different from that of the respondent.[11] As shown in Figure 2 (see also Table 1, Model 1), the overall (pooled) mean ideological distance in cases of shared partisanship is 1.98, versus 2.75 in other cases (the left-most panel in Figure 2). In other words, respondents tended to place a hypothetical individual 0.77 units closer (on the 0 to 10 scale) when partisanship was shared. The same pattern is observed across all three of our countries individually.

Our second hypothesis anticipates that a greater number of shared socio-demographic characteristics will be associated with smaller perceived ideological distances. To assess this, we first tested the bivariate relationship using the same approach employed for H1. Figure 3 plots the predicted value of ideological distance by number of shared socio-demographic characteristics, based on a bivariate regression model with

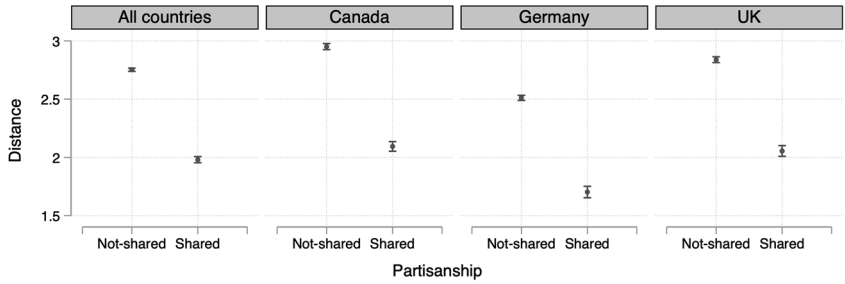

Figure 2. Perceived ideological distance when a hypothetical individual does and does not share partisanship.

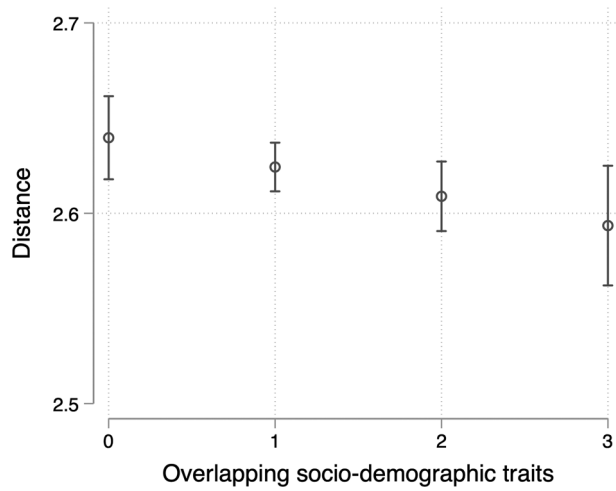

Figure 3. Perceived ideological distance by the number of shared socio-demographic characteristics.

country fixed effects and errors clustered by respondent (see also Table 1, Model 2). Contrary to the sizeable effect of shared partisanship that was found above, the overall impact of similarity in socio-demographic characteristics is substantively insignificant and non-robust. Although the figure suggests that the perceived ideological distance tends to decline as the number of shared socio-demographic traits increases, the effect size is small and statistically insignificant, and the cross-country evidence is decidedly mixed.

We then assessed the first two hypotheses more precisely by running a multivariate regression model where we control for the effects of shared value and policy stances, respondents' partisanship, and their socio-economic characteristics, clustering errors by respondent. The results are reported in Model 3 of Table 1 and are consistent with the bivariate models.[12] Findings so far thus broadly reflect the expected effect of shared partisanship on the

perceived ideological distance, but socio-demographic similarity does not appear to matter when information on partisan affiliation is also readily available to respondents.

Our third hypothesis suggests that the impact of shared partisanship and socio-demographic traits may matter differently depending on informational conditions. In particular, we posited that the availability of information about the target person's partisanship would be key: socio-demographic traits should become more useful when a lack of (information on) partisan affiliation makes drawing inferences more challenging.

To test this, we first re-ran the multivariate regression but for two separate conditions: (1) when the hypothetical person is described as identifying with a party (see Table 1, Model 4); and (2) when the hypothetical person is described as having no partisan attachment (see Table 1, Model 5). Our results show that, for the subsample of profiles identified as a partisan, the effect of shared partisanship is slightly larger than it was in the overall sample, and the effect of socio-demographic traits remains statistically insignificant. This contrasts with the results when we focus exclusively on the non-partisan profile subsample: the effect of shared (non-)partisanship decreases and becomes insignificant while the impact of similarity in socio-demographic traits become substantially larger and statistically significant (Model 5), both compared to the effect in pooled sample (Model 3) and the sub-sample with partisan profiles (Model 4).

Table 1. The effects of shared partisan and socio-demographic characteristics on perceived ideological distance.

	Pooled sample			Partisan profiles	Non-partisan profiles
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Shared characteristics in…					
Partisanship	−0.819***		−0.818***	−0.889***	−0.623***
	(0.031)		(0.031)	(0.035)	(0.086)
Socio-demo traits		−0.015	−0.016	−0.005	−0.052**
		(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.024)
Value			−0.608***	−0.566***	−0.775***
			(0.035)	(0.038)	(0.067)
Policy stances			−0.331***	−0.321***	−0.367***
			(0.023)	(0.025)	(0.046)
Constant	2.943***	2.784***	3.594***	3.661***	3.447***
	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.059)	(0.062)	(0.087)
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	55,510	55,510	55,510	43,539	11,971
R-squared	0.026	0.005	0.040	0.043	0.036

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses; errors clustered by respondent in all models. Model 4 includes cases where the profile described the hypothetical individual as partisan (identified with any party). Model 5 includes cases where the profile described the hypothetical individual as non-partisan. **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$.

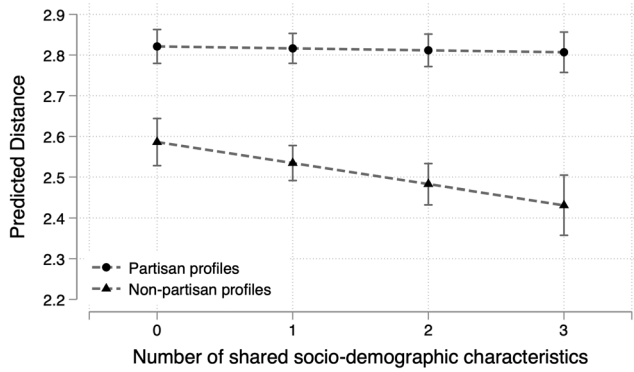

Figure 4. Substantive effect of socio-demographic characteristics on perceived ideological proximity.

In order to test whether these differences are statistically significant across models, we applied the 'seemingly unrelated estimation (SUEST)' method (Clogg *et al.* 1995; Mize *et al.* 2019). The test of equality shows that the effects of shared partisanship and socio-demographic similarities differ (at thresholds of $p<0.01$ and $p<0.10$, respectively) when the hypothetical individual is described as a partisan (Model 4) versus when the hypothetical individual is described as a non-partisan (Model 5). Overall, the results thus support H3, highlighting a substantial increase in the role of shared socio-demographic characteristics when assessing a non-partisan.

As a final step in our main analysis, Figure 4 illustrates the varying effect of shared socio-demographical traits when inferring partisan-profiles and non-partisan profiles (as seen in Models 4 and 5). The y-axis indicates the predicted value of perceived ideological distance, while the x-axis indicates the similarity in socio-demographic characteristics between the respondent and the profile. The figure plots the predicted value of ideological distance for two different situations: (1) when the respondent read about a target person described as having a partisan affiliation (marked with a circle) and (2) when the respondent read about a target person described as a non-partisan (marked with a triangle). Note that, for simplicity, the predicted values are calculated for an individual who does not share partisanship with the target person (i.e. shared partisanship = 0) and with shared value and policy stances set at the value of sample medians.

Examining these two scenarios in turn, when our respondents assessed a partisan, socio-demographic similarity does not appear to shape perceived proximity. Whether respondents have no traits in common with the profile ($x=0$) or share the maximum number ($x=3$), the predicted value hovers around 2.85. However, when our respondents assessed a target person described as a non-partisan (triangle markers), greater socio-

demographic similarity is associated with a perception of higher proximity: on average, perceived ideological distance decreases from around 2.59 when sharing no socio-demographic characteristics to about 2.43 when sharing three socio-demographic characteristics.

Additional analyses

We also carried out a series of additional analyses to explore the relevance of alternative explanations, examine other potential sources of heterogeneity, and assess the robustness of the main findings. We summarise these analyses below, while full results and further details can be consulted in Online Appendix B.

To begin, we conducted follow-up analyses to try to parse projection effects out from other factors shaping these inferences, such as stereotyping. It may be, for example, that the results of our main analysis are simply an artefact of assumptions based on profile characteristics (see, for example, Ahler and Sood 2023). If this is the case, then our evidence on the impact of matching partisanship or socio-demographic characteristics would not, for example, be due to religious people assuming that other people who share certain characteristics hold similar viewpoints (i.e. ideology) to themselves, but simply because: (1) religious individuals tend to be more right-wing than non-religious individuals; and (2) the public is aware of this political cleavage and makes stereotype-based assumptions about the ideological stances of (non-)religious people. Online Appendix B1 thus investigates the extent to which a given overlapping characteristic (i.e. sharing in-group membership with the target individual on a given metric) appears to shift assumed left-right placement away from the mean ideological placement associated with that characteristic. Here, we use mean ideological placements as a proxy for society-wide assumptions about that characteristic's political implications (e.g. due to stereotyping) – though this of course necessarily introduces some endogeneity into the models. The results from a series of bivariate regressions (see Tables B1 and B2) reaffirm the importance of shared partisanship and the (more limited) impact of sharing certain socio-demographic traits. Findings thus support those from our main analyses and suggest that projection is indeed likely to be shaping in-group ideological assumptions.

Second, we assessed the possibility that different partisan groups may perceive ideological distance in systematically different ways. To investigate the presence/degree of heterogeneity across partisan groups, we ran new analyses that incorporate interaction effects for individual party identifications. Online Appendix Table B3 and Figure B1 present the relevant results, employing the modelling approach used in our main analyses but

adding an interaction between respondent partisanship (a total of 18 categories, including one for non-partisans) and a dichotomous variable indicating whether the profile shares that partisanship (or non-partisanship) with the respondent. Results replicate the findings from our main analyses: notwithstanding some modest variation in the effect sizes, it is difficult to discern any theoretically interesting patterns across partisan groups – aside from noting that the differences are not statistically significant in three partisan groups that had small subsample sizes in our data.

Third, our main analysis examined the potential relevance of partisan cues (as per H3) by looking at subsamples based on the partisanship information on the target person in the profile. We also investigate the possibility, however, that it is the respondents' ability to use partisanship information – rather than the availability of partisan information in the profile – that shapes the effect of shared partisan identification on projection. To do so, we carried out further analyses examining separate subsamples based on the level of political interest of respondents. We assume here that more politically interested respondents are more likely to be able to use partisan cues, anticipating that the increased effect of shared socio-demographic traits with non-partisan profiles will be more pronounced among respondents who are less interested in politics. Results support this expectation (see Online Appendix Table B4 for more detail), suggesting that political interest may be an important mediator shaping the effect of partisan cues and socio-demographic traits on projection.

Fourth, we also tested this hypothesis (H3) for each of the socio-demographic traits individually, instead of the sum of the shared traits (see Online Appendix Table B5). Among the seven socio-demographic traits we used in the profile – namely, age, gender, education (university degree), residence, social class, union membership, and religiosity – we found that social class and religiosity most consistently showed the effect we expected in the hypothesis: namely, sharing these socio-demographic traits did not have a meaningful effect on projection when partisan cues were available, but their effects became statistically significant when partisan cues were not available in the profile. Other traits either did not show a significant difference between the models or were statistically insignificant.

Finally, we also assess the robustness of our analyses by investigating the potential implications of our modelling choices: while we typically conduct our analyses using OLS regressions with country fixed effects and errors clustered by respondent, we employ several other approaches – including naïve regression, random effects models, and controlling for respondents' socio-demographic characteristics – to ensure that our results are not an

artefact of the modelling approach. Findings are reported in Online Appendix Table B6, and suggest that results are robust across different modelling strategies. The sole caveat is with regard to socio-demographic similarity, as (unlike in our main analysis) two of the alternative modelling strategies suggest a statistically significant effect even when partisan information is included (as per H2). At most, however, we take this as indicating non-robust support for H2, which we rejected above in the main analysis.

Conclusion

Existing research points to a growing gap between the perceived ideological positions of supporters of different parties (e.g. Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). Most studies on political misperceptions and second-order beliefs, however, have tended to focus on assumptions about out-group members, with a particular emphasis on two factors: the drive to paint opposing partisans as extremists (see, for example, Jost *et al.* 2022); and the use of stereotypes linking particular markers to certain political stances (e.g. Titelman and Lauderdale 2023). We thus set out to complement these analyses via a focus on *shared* group markers, with an eye to interrogating whether projection – a tendency to project one's own beliefs and attitudes onto socially similar others (see, for example, Robbins and Krueger 2005) – may also be shaping how politically similar we assume others are to ourselves. In doing so, we sought to answer the question: to what extent do shared partisan and socio-demographic markers lead individuals to assume that others are more similar to them ideologically?

In order to carry out this investigation, we used original data on the assumed left-right position of hypothetical individuals collected via a survey experiment fielded in three multi-party democracies: Canada, Germany, and the UK. Our analysis centred around examining the effects of partisan and socio-demographic similarity on perceived ideological proximity. In addition, our final hypothesis examined potential variability of effect sizes by looking at how the impact of socio-demographic similarity changes when partisan information is or is not readily available. Findings suggest that in the multiparty democracies under study, partisan and socio-demographic similarity shaped respondents' assumptions about the political stances of others, but that the effect of socio-demographic markers was weak and non-robust in cases where an explicit partisan affiliation was mentioned. Our additional analyses, in turn, examined additional potential sources of heterogeneity and provided support for the claim that projection is at least partly driving the in-group ideological assessment patterns noted in the main analysis (i.e. they are not simply an artefact of strong stereotyping effects).

Our study thus pushes forward existing knowledge in three key ways. First, most past research on political misperceptions and second-order beliefs has focussed on the two-party American case (see, for example, Ahler and Sood 2023; Carlson and Hill 2022) and has often concentrated on assumptions about the political stances of candidates for offices (e.g. Lerman and Sadin 2016; Piston *et al.* 2018). By examining data from three multiparty democracies, we were able to investigate how second-order political beliefs may play out in contexts with more complex in-group/out-group partisan divisions and less straightforward analyses of non-partisans. Examining the assumed ideological stances of ordinary citizens, in turn, allowed us to extend past work on political projection to provide insights on 'everyday' second-order political beliefs. Our findings suggest that despite the more complex partisan landscapes in Canada, Germany, and the UK, political projection is common.

Second, our focus on the concurrent influence of multiple markers is central to developing our understanding of projection: when learning about others, we tend to be exposed to a variety of potentially relevant characteristics (e.g. partisanship, gender, age). By looking beyond the influence of one or two characteristics in isolation, we assess more realistic scenarios than have typically been examined experimentally and help to align political science research with recent work in social psychology (e.g. Grigoryan 2020a, 2020b). Key here is our inclusion of both *partisanship and socio-demographic markers*, alongside additional controls for shared policy and value stances. Past studies have either left partisanship unvaried or excluded it all together (e.g. Oosten 2022; Piston *et al.* 2018; Titelman 2023), once again making it difficult to assess how perceptions of other people's politics might play out in the real world.

Third and finally, our focus on shared group membership allowed us to highlight the potential influence of projection on second-order political beliefs. Insofar as the expected effects of projection on these assumptions diverge from those of existing explanatory factors (e.g. stereotyping, in-partisan/out-partisan divides), models of second-order political beliefs that ignore projection are likely to be mis-specifying the effect of these alternative explanations. Perhaps even more seriously, studies that do not take projection into account may misunderstand the underlying connections between shared group membership, interpersonal dynamics, and political behaviour. All of these issues are likely to be especially pertinent in instances where partisan affiliation information is not readily available – arguably the norm when it comes to everyday interactions, whether in real-world or experimental settings.

The current study is nevertheless marked by several limitations, which in turn point to potentially fruitful avenues for further research. The first is that our analysis is unable to fully parse out the influence of the various mechanisms that may be driving assumed ideological similarity. It is clear, for example, that even if the use of stereotyping in inference-making may be less widespread among in-group members (see, for example, Sened *et al.* 2025), stereotypes are likely to be a key factor shaping second-order political beliefs across the population as a whole; yet notwithstanding our attempts to examine evidence of projection, we are unable to directly assess the relative influence of these mechanisms on second-order beliefs. Next, our analysis on the effect of socio-demographic similarity primarily focussed on examining the impact of overall similarity levels. As our follow-up analyses highlight, however, it is likely that some socio-demographic markers may matter more or less, depending on the political and social context (see also Kevins 2021; Oosten *et al.* 2024). Future studies that tease out this heterogeneity may therefore enhance our understanding of how contexts matter for projection. Finally, part of the strength of our investigation is the focus on the impact of *shared* socio-demographic and partisan markers. Clearly, however, *variation* in social and political differences is also a key consideration to making inferences about others' political stances: it may be, for example, that projection to racial outgroups is also relatively common, but that the strength of that projection varies based on the degree of shared fate between ethnic groups (see, for example, Chan and Jasso 2023; Mejía 2023). Incorporating these factors alongside one another would therefore help to develop our understanding of why people misunderstand the political stances of others.

Notes

1. Empirically parsing out projection from stereotyping is, however, no simple task, especially as it is only under specific circumstances that we would be able to identify which mechanism is at work. To pick back up our example above, in a society where immigrants are stereotyped to be left-leaning, we would need to focus on centrist or right-leaning immigrants: in this example, a right-leaning immigrant who was projecting would assume that other immigrants are also right-leaning, whereas a right-leaning immigrant who was stereotyping would assume that other immigrants are left-leaning. What is more, it may well be that both of these mechanisms are at work at the same time in a given individual. Given these complications, our study does not view projection and stereotyping as competing mechanisms, nor even as mutually exclusive. Rather, we assess evidence as to whether shared partisan and socio-demographic markers may lead individuals to assume that others are more similar to them ideologically, and then conduct follow-up analyses to examine the possibility that our findings may simply be artefacts of strong stereotyping effects.

2. The importance of in-group/out-group divisions, however, may arguably be a question of degree – with some evidence of (weaker) projection even to out-group members (e.g. Robbins and Krueger 2005).
3. Drawing from past research, we would expect that groups that have more fixed in-group/out-group boundaries, are associated with high-relative status, and/or exhibit higher levels of intra-group solidarity may be especially likely to project onto in-group members (e.g. Foroni *et al.* 2010; Lerman and Sadin 2016).
4. Note that our analysis is based on a non-probability quota sample. While convenience samples do not necessarily distort inferences, particularly ones made though experiments (e.g. Boas *et al.* 2020; Krupnikov *et al.* 2021; Robison and Mullinix 2016), we nevertheless compared our sample to benchmark election surveys in each country on several key characteristics that were not included in the quotas (e.g. partisanship). The results are found in Online Appendix A, allowing us to ensure that the sample reflects the general population (and is not particularly biased) on broader key characteristics.
5. The survey began by asking respondents how familiar they were with the terms 'left' and 'right' as used in politics. Based on the responses to this question, we branched those who were unfamiliar with left-right terms to a shorter version of the survey (assessing 10 profiles rather than 20). Overall, a vast majority of our respondents (84.1%) assessed 20 profiles, and only 15.9% assessed 10 profiles. The number of profiles we assigned is well within the number of tasks that provide sensible results without significant declines in response quality (Bansak *et al.* 2018).
6. In the UK, for example, this set of underlying statements creates over three million potential profile combinations. See Online Appendix A for more details on the experimental design in three countries.
7. We used the set of standard partisanship questions to measure respondents' partisanship (question wordings are available in Online Appendix A). We did not account for the strength of partisanship when generating this variable.
8. Given that projection is based on (perceived) similarity between two individuals, we do so since we would anticipate that respondents may engage in projection when they and the target individual both identify as being unaffiliated with any party. For the sake of simplicity, however, we use the term 'shared partisanship' to refer to both shared partisanship and shared non-partisanship.
9. We treated respondents aged 18–39 as young, 40–59 as middle-aged, and those 60 and over as senior citizens.
10. These variables generally indicate overlapping characteristics with two potential values, 0 and 1. The sole exception is overlapping religiosity: since the respondents' religiosity is measured via a 7-point scale while the profile is described in a dichotomous manner, the overlapping religiosity is measured by a continuous measure ranging from 0 to 1.
11. Here and below, confidence intervals for predicted values plots are set at 83.5% to allow us to visualise statistically significant differences at the $p < 0.05$ level (see Bolsen and Thornton 2014).
12. As a robustness check, we also assessed whether the regression results in the pooled analysis were driven by only a subset of the countries in our dataset. To do so, we conducted the same bivariate regression for each country sample separately to ascertain whether our headline results varied across the cases. Results suggest that the findings apply broadly across the cases, with limited variation across countries and coefficients.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Seonghui Lee is Senior Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the University of Essex. Her research on comparative politics and political behaviour has appeared in journals such as *British Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Electoral Studies* and *Political Science Research and Methods*. [s.lee@essex.ac.uk]

Anthony Kevins is Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Studies at Loughborough University's School of Social Sciences and Humanities. His research centres on the linkages between public opinion, policy-making processes, and government legislation, and has been published in journals such as *Comparative Political Studies*, the *European Journal of Political Research*, and *Political Studies*. [a.kevins@lboro.ac.uk]

ORCID

Seonghui Lee http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4562-2121
Anthony Kevins http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3172-6632

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