Evaluating voters' attitudes towards intra-party deliberation using a survey experiment

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Pre-analysis plan
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1. Study Information

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, all major UK political parties held their Autumn 2020 conferences online. This likely impacted party leaders' approaches for managing intra-party groups and altered the standard format of these meetings. This phenomenon of online party conferences reflects the so-called multi-speed model where barriers keeping the electorate from accessing the party are reduced (Scarrow, 2015). This means of hosting party conferences potentially increased transparency around the policy process with the accessibility of the online platform, though opportunities for participation were likely reduced. Parties decreased the number of speakers in debates and other opportunities for discussion and access to key party actors was diminished. Considering this trade-off, we plan to carry out a survey experiment to answer the question, 'is transparency or participation in the policy process more important for voters' perceptions of political parties and democracy?' This study will contribute to an emerging literature that seeks to understand how voter attitudes at the party level impact attitudes towards the wider system (e.g. Close et al., 2017; Shomer et al., 2017) and has specific implications for theories of representation (Aldrich, 2011; Kölln 2015).

2. Study Design

2.1 Experiments

Our design contains four experimental treatments and is intended to identify each element of the conferences that could shape voters' attitudes using a vignette that varies 1) the number of speakers 2) the monetary cost for attendance 3) opportunities to participate 4) the tone of the debate. The treatments for each experiment will be assigned to participants at random. A control vignette simply stating that the conference was moved online will be for comparisons.

The primary vignette reads as follows:

"In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, political parties in the UK moved their party

conferences online in the last year. The online setting led the party to [increase/decrease] the number of speakers, events and other invitations to discuss issues important to diverse groups within the party. As attendees had to enrol as virtual members to observe the conferences, attendance fees were [increased/decreased]. The online format [increased/limited] opportunities for average party members to participate in the conference debates. After the meeting, observers noted a number of [conflicts/agreements] in deciding party policy."

The control vignette reads as follows:
"In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, political parties in the UK moved their party conferences online in the last year."

1. Do you support holding party conferences in virtual format in the future?

   Five-point scale from "Definitely yes" to "Definitely no"

2. How satisfied are you with the state of democracy in the UK?

   Five-point scale from "Completely satisfied" to "Completely dissatisfied"

Participants will also answer a series of questions concerning their attitudes towards political parties in the UK as well as a set of demographic questions. A quality check question relating to the vignettes will also be included to ensure all responses are reliable. Those failing this attention check will be removed from the sample.

2.2 Sample size

We plan to field the experiment using a sample of UK voters. A representative sample of ~1,500 will be sourced by Qualtrics from across the UK. If greater than 10% of respondents fail the attention check, we will field a second survey with identical question wording to increase our sample size to a total figure closer to 1,500 quality respondents.

2.3 Data collection and timeline

We expect data collection to take place between September – October 2021.

3. Hypotheses

Number of speakers

Hypothesis 1a:
Respondents will be more/less likely to support virtual conferences in the future where the online platform enables an increased/decreased number of speakers

Hypothesis 1b:
Respondents will be more/less satisfied with democracy when party conferences enable an increased/decreased number of speakers

Tone of the debate

Hypothesis 2a:

Respondents will be more/less likely to support virtual conferences in the future where the online platform encouraged a number of agreements (conflicts) to be discussed at the conference.

Hypothesis 2b:
Respondents will be more/less satisfied with democracy when the online platform encouraged a number of agreements/conflicts to be discussed at the conference.

Hypothesis 2c:
Respondents will perceive the parties as more unified/divided on issues when the online platform encouraged a number of agreements/conflicts to be discussed at the conference.

Opportunities for participation

Hypothesis 3a:
Respondents will be more/less likely to support virtual conferences where the online format fosters increased/decreased participation of average party members

Hypothesis 3b:
Respondents will be more/less satisfied with democracy where the online format fosters increased/decreased participation of average party members

Cost of attendance

Hypothesis 4a:
Respondents will be more/less likely to support virtual conferences in the future where the online platform elicited lower/higher attendance fees.

Hypothesis 4b: Respondents will be more/less satisfied with democracy where the online platform elicited lower/higher attendance fees.

4. Analysis

4.1 Operationalisation of variables

- Each of the treatments will be coded as a set of binary variable as per the vignettes. In each case the analysis will compare effect of the treatments relative to the control vignette and relative to the other outcomes for the four treatment areas.
- The two dependent variables will be coded as ordinal variables. Brant tests will be used to determine the suitability of these variables for analysis using either binary or ordinal operationalisations.
- The primary analysis will consist of simple difference of means tests and a multivariate logistic regression (either binary or ordinal, dependent on the outcome of the Brant tests).
- Secondary analysis considering the impact of party identification and ideological proximity as moderating variables will evaluate the extent to which the effects are driven by those more closely with a party or more independent respondents.
- A follow up analysis will use the party unity measures as the dependent variable as plausibility check with previous analyses (e.g. Greene and Haber 2015; Lin and Lehrer 2020).

4.3 Additional variables of interest

- Political ideology will be coded on a 10-point interval scale
- Perceptions of political party ideology will be coded on a 10-point interval scale
- Most important political issues facing the UK will be coded on a 6-point ordinal scale
- Voting intention will be coded categorically
- Feelings of representation of party voted for will be coded on a 5-point ordinal scale
- Perceptions of party competence will be coded on a 5-point ordinal scale
- Perceptions of party unity will be coded on a 10-point interval scale

4.2 Control variables

We will control for standard demographic variables and self-reported political preferences and characteristics.

5. Ethics

This experiment has received ethical clearance from the University of Strathclyde's Ethics Committee. Participants will be informed that they are under no obligation to participate or complete the survey and data will be completely anonymised. The investigators will not have access to the identities or information that would easily be linked to the identity of individual participants. The survey responses will be collected and collated by Qualtrics, a well-known survey company that is commonly used for surveys in political science. No risks have been identified in participants responding to this survey.

6. Bibliography

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