The impact of political sophistication on the use of cognitive shortcuts: evidence from experiments and secondary data

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Abstract

This research project assesses the role played by political sophistication in terms of its impact on the voters' resort to cognitive shortcuts, with reference both to the conscious and non-conscious components of voting decisions. The investigation scrutinises empirically the way both sophisticated and unsophisticated individuals make political judgments when prompted with cognitive cues in three different settings. In each of them a specific type of cue impinges on the political judgment of individuals at a different level and leads to a specific decisional outcome. The overall findings cast doubts on the virtues of heuristic reasoning as effective remedy for voters who have to find their bearings in the ballot box, but they also downplay the importance of political sophistication when visual or subliminal cues are involved in the decision.

Resum

Aquest projecte de recerca avalua el paper exercit per la sofisticació política en termes del seu impacte sobre el recurs dels votants als atalls cognitius, amb referència tant als components conscients i no conscients de les decisions de vot. La investigació examina empíricament la manera com ambdós individus sofisticats i no sofisticats fan judicis polítics quan si li estimuli amb senyals cognitives de tres tipus diferents. En cada un d'ells un tipus específic de atall incideix en el judici polític dels individus en un nivell diferent i condueix a un resultat específic de presa de decisions. Els resultats generals posen en dubte les virtuts del raonament heurístic com a remei eficaç per als votants que s'han d'orientar a les urnes, sinó que també minimitzen la importància de la sofisticació política, quan senyals visuals o subliminals estan involucrats en la decisió.

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PREFACE

To a student of electoral behaviour, the amount of academic material produced in the past sixty years appears intimidating at times. One wonders to what extent, if at all, original and useful contributions to a research field in which every possible detail worth studying has already been scrutinized and dissected can still be made. Nonetheless, I believe that the end result of this research amounts to an original contribution which is well worth the effort that has been put into it.

In the process, I benefited both from being a practitioner in the field of survey research, which allowed me to take advantage of the latest advances made by computer-assisted web interviewing technology and from cultivating a naive interest in disciplines closely related to my research field, such as evolutionary psychology and behavioural economics, which have in recent years so radically changed our understanding of how we make decisions.

Outside of academia, I have had the opportunity to systematically observe how individuals make choices in a number of different contexts. Inside it, I tried to apply this insight to the research I undertook as a PhD candidate.

Naturally, over the course of many years, I have profited a lot from the comments and suggestions of many colleagues in the department and from a very resourceful research environment. I have learnt a lot from many people and, when I could, tried to put their teachings into practice. I hope that the final product which I am submitting to the academic tribunal for assessment will live up to the expectations of all those who have made the completion of this thesis possible.

Barcelona, April 2, 2012.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this doctoral research thesis is to establish if and under what conditions a citizen's knowledge about political affairs matters when decisions about who has to be in power are made. The interest in this topic is based on two main considerations. First, citizens supposedly elect their representatives on the basis of the information they have about all the political objects involved in the democratic process: candidates, parties, ideologies, political and economic actors as well as about any relevant fact which may affect the perception and beliefs about those objects. Insofar as the electoral choices are informed by those perceptions and beliefs, the capability of collecting and processing information about politics has to be considered an asset for the healthy development of democratic life. However - and here comes the second consideration - the way candidates and elected representatives address the public has changed a lot since the principles of democratic representation were first formulated. Political communication has radically changed. Professional politicians have learnt to deploy a number of techniques that make their arguments more effective and their image more credible and trustworthy. Often, it is no longer what is said that counts, but how it is said, and later sold, to voters. Like big brands of consumer goods do, parties and candidates also resort to a whole range of communication tactics to reach and entice as many voters as they can by reaching their inner and non-conscious decisional triggers.

Some may object that political campaigns do not work as standard advertising campaigns since they are constrained by a number of procedures that regulate democratic elections and limit the scope of political marketing tactics. Besides, many also tend to believe that if such tactics have any effect on voters, the most affected will most likely be the least sophisticated ones, who ignore the issues candidates stand for or what the relevant facts are. But does it matter how expert and knowledgeable about politics the voters are? Can a politically sophisticated citizenry be subdued by the trickery of modern political communication?

Early theories of electoral behaviour have dealt with this issue only indirectly. Those centered on the importance of social structures as determinants of voting behaviour suggested that political information flows through networks of family members, friends

and co-workers, but were initially reluctant to accept the idea that informed citizens, once aware of the social structure in which they are immersed, can be influenced in their decisions by factors other than those brought about by social cleavages. Rival perspectives, focusing on the attitudinal orientations that each individual develops in particular through early socialisation, resolved that voters can obtain the information they need from political objects such as party identification, candidates and issues, in the form of cognitive cues. But in so doing they hardly considered the possibility that such cues may have a distorting power on the individuals' perception of political objects.

At a later stage, the economic approach to the study of electoral behaviour theorized that the lack of sophistication in the general public is perfectly rational and borrowed the concept of 'limited rationality' to argue that unsophisticated citizens can rely on heuristic reasoning to make their choices. Only to be later reminded by scholars of political psychology that the idea of 'limited rationality', essential as it is for the study of human reasoning, had nevertheless been unduly stretched well beyond its capacity by the proponents of 'rational choice' theory (Kuklinski 2001).

In general, political knowledge has often been considered a desirable feature of democratic societies. It has been regarded as a manifestation of the virtue of civic culture (Milner 2002), a key factor for the equal and fair distribution of political power (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1993) and even as essential for the correct definition and implementation of government policies (Althaus 1998). By contrast, within the study of electoral behaviour, the conditions under which political sophistication can be thought of as an asset for voters remain largely unexplained. For this reason this research will assess the role played by both sophisticated and unsophisticated voters in those situations when they are asked to express their political preferences as participants to the democratic process. But it will do so while assuming that election candidates are not merely passive objects of evaluation. On the contrary, it will assess the relevance of political sophistication vis-à-vis direct or indirect attempts by candidates to influence the voters' perceptions and choices through a variety of cues. This sort of stress-test of the voters' ability to avoid the bias prompted by cues which are not supposed to enter

the ballot box will hopefully allow us to better understand how we make voting decisions.

1.1 Setting the nature of the problem

"The democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are. By such standards the voter falls short."

(Berelson, Lazarsfeld, McPhee 1954:308; later quoted in Carmines and Kuklinsky 1990:241; Bartels 1996:195; Alvarez 1997:2)

The point in question, made by the authors of one of the most quoted studies of American voting behaviour, has been addressed several times by the contributions of scholars concerned with the implications of voters' inability to satisfy the informational requirements of a modern democratic system. If, on the one hand, a realist view of democracy seems to steer clear from any assertion about the need for a generally informed citizenry and consider it an almost unavoidable feature of democratic politics (Schattschneider 1960; Dahl 1989), on the other a wide literature dating back to the 1950s and 1960s pin-pointed the lack of consistency in public opinion and the precariousness of the ideal of informed democratic citizenship (Campbell et Al. 1960, Converse 1964 and 1970, Achen 1975). Theorists then argued that the elites are meant to filter and orient mass opinion (Schumpeter, 1942; Neuman 1986) and that an uninformed public should not raise too many worries in so far as an informed minority of citizens assure responsiveness and stability.

During the 1980s and 1990s a new argument tried to reconcile the rather poor figures provided by surveys on political knowledge with the intuitive idea that if citizens are required to choose their government with a vote, they need some information on which to base their choice. It was suggested that 'cognitive shortcuts' and heuristic reasoning help individuals fill their informational gap (Fiorina 1981; Popkin 1991; Sniderman et Al 1991; Lupia 1998). The underpinning literature can be identified, among others, with

topics such as *heuristics* or *low-information voting* (Fiorina 1981, Conover & Feldman 1989, contributors to Ferejohn & Kuklinsky 1990, Popkin 1991, Sniderman, Brody & Tetlock 1991, Lupia 1994, Grofman & Withers 1995, Lupia & McCubbins 1998). But a similar argument could already be found in Anthony Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, for which neither political parties nor voters act in conditions of perfect and equal information; the least knowledgeable individuals ('passives') are persuaded by the 'agitators', who hold relevant information (Downs 1957:5). The single voter cannot afford the collection of all the necessary information because this is costly to find and often hard to elaborate. The gap between the information which is needed and the one which is held by each voter in order to make a choice is filled by parties' ideologies, which condense the party position on the relevant issues and exonerates the individual from the burden of political expertise (Downs 1957:98).

As the individual is assumed to possess or find the elements which allow him to make a choice, information can be considered a key element in rational choice accounts of voting (Evans 2004:72) and, after Downs, a number of scholars continued to reinforce the original argument. McKelvey & Ordeshook asserted that voters can make relatively informed choices, basing their argument on experimental evidence about the convergence of candidates toward the median voter. This was taken as evidence that individuals can vote as if they were fully informed and make the electoral process responsive to voter preferences. They concluded that there are a number of ways in which voters can shortcut the requirement of complete information imposed in traditional spatial models of elections and still exercise popular control on the policies of the government (1990: 311).

In the same way, Samuel Popkin suggested that voters who do not devote much time or energy to collect information are not necessarily uninformed, because sources of relevant knowledge are often a by-product of activities pursued as part of daily life (1991: 5-15). To overcome the knowledge-gaps, voters use shortcuts to obtain, evaluate, store and recall information about parties, candidates and issues. For this purpose they rely on party identification, ideology, campaign behaviour, competence, demographic characteristics, private and public morality of candidates as well as the opinion of other voters. In sum, no matter their level of sophistication, voters are thought to use

information shortcuts and cost-saving devices in thinking about parties, candidates and issues (1998:34). Similarly, in a footnote from "The Democratic Dilemma", Lupia and McCubbins point out that debating how much knowledge is necessary for a reasoned choice goes back to different views about what democracy should do and thereby justify the claim that the cognitive capabilities of people and the requirements of democracy are not mismatched (1998:2-4). In their account, an act of delegation succeeds if knowledge about politics can be obtained from others, through administrative procedures, rules of evidence and statutory laws that are expected to help the transfer of knowledge from the most to the least knowledgeable citizens (ibid.:12 and 79-93).

The *heuristics* argument was also given credit by Shanto Iyengar (1990: 160), who stressed that *"…contrary to much conventional wisdom, the average citizen is far from overwhelmed by the issues and events that enter and live the political stage. By resorting to various simplifying strategies, people wrestle the booming, buzzing confusion of politics into meaningful information and, in so doing, they provide themselves with the intelligence to formulate their political preferences and wisdom."* Iyengar maintains that individuals informed about a particular issue will tend to collect selectively more information about that issue and to prefer domains about which they are already relatively informed. In several studies, individuals were indeed found to attach greater weight to the most prominent and salient issues, especially if they are given extensive media coverage. If the media attention focuses for example on the economy, this will acquire more importance, while if it concentrates on the candidates, their relative weight in the perceptive balance of the voters will change too.

Another contribution worth mentioning is Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock's (1991). Starting from the premise that systems vary markedly across mass publics and depend both on formal education and political knowledge, they believed that people can simplify their choices by means of a judgmental shortcut labelled 'likability heuristic', meaning that political likes and dislikes can shape policy preferences. On the basis of this theoretical sketch, Sniderman et al. proceeded to show how ordinary people can figure out what they are for and against politically, notwithstanding their informational shortfalls. As the other proponents of the *heuristics* argument, they hold that "*by making up their minds in a different way, voters who are not well informed about politics - as*

well as those who are - may make electoral choices that are approximately rational" (ibid.:165).

Although it is perhaps not entirely accurate to group all the contributions mentioned so far under a common and unique label, they all share an optimistic view about the healing effect of heuristic reasoning on the lack of knowledge about politics. However, none of them is exempt from potential criticism. From a perspective critical of Popkin's line of reasoning, for example, it could be argued that party identification may well be used as a cue if the respective candidates are trusted and always made accountable for their behaviour. Yet, if the public believes, as is often the case, that most politicians are corrupt, such a heuristic device is simply not viable. By the same token, ideology, if conceived as an alternative to party identification, has the shortcoming of being used more comfortably by voters capable of consistently linking candidates with issues on the left-right scale. Although self-identification with a certain point on the linear spectrum represents the way politics is commonly understood and interpreted both by political actors and voters, this is by no means an obvious vademecum for the politically ignorant.

A similar objection could be raised about Lupia and McCubbins' argument, given that the less knowledgeable a voter is, the less likely that he will be able to assess the adequacy of second-hand information he may gather from other voters, especially in those polities where representative democracy is weaker and therefore more likely to be lacking the context of procedures and statutory laws which help citizens orient their political choices. Free press, equal television times for all parties, campaign finance disclosure laws, penalties for lying are all invaluable instruments in providing information cues, but they often need a basic level of expertise to be effectively deployed as sources of information. Denials, reciprocal accusations, false accusations, stunts and libel may also be used as cues. These are only some of the reasons which account for why we should not be too confident about the efficiency of information by proxy.

With regard to Iyengar's suggestion, the question of whether selective attention and accessibility enable the voter to reach the same result as if endowed with perfect information remains unanswered, because no distinction is made between the

information opportunities available to the knowledgeable and the politically ignorant voter. In counterpoint to Iyengar, Gomez & Wilson's theory of heterogeneous attribution (2001) suggests, for example, that since an individual's ability to make causal associations depends on his level of political sophistication, this aspect strongly affects the relative weight of personal and national economic judgments in shaping presidential candidate preference (2001: 899-914). By the same token, Carmines & Stimson's findings about the relationship between sophistication and issue-voting suggest that while well-informed individuals respond to both 'hard' issues (which require a thoughtful decision based on a sophisticated calculus) and 'easy' ones (issues based on gut responses, which require no sophisticated reasoning), uninformed individuals only use the 'easy' ones and end up omitting relevant issues from their judgment (1980: 78-91). Equally telling is also Alvarez's (1997) claim that, given the incentive for candidates to be ambiguous about their policy positions and given the costs borne by voters of gathering information, a theory of voter preferences and perceptions must be based on the assumption of imperfect information. Uncertainty on the voter's side about a candidate's issue positions makes the vote for that candidate less likely and affects the overall use of issue information in the decision making process (1997:204).

The latest research addressing the role played by heuristic reasoning in voting behaviour in a sense steered clear from previous optimism. With reference to the use made in the literature of the term "cognitive heuristics", Lau and Redlawsk (2001) noted that it is usually based on two assumptions: (1) that any individual, not only experts, can employ cognitive shortcuts in thinking about politics and (2) that the use of heuristics somehow compensates for political ignorance. In order to verify the truthfulness of these assumptions the authors translated them into hypotheses and undertook an experiment which tested whether: (a) all voters employ some common political heuristics during political campaigns; (b) the more complex the information and the more difficult the choice, the more voters rely on heuristics; and (c) whether the use of cognitive shortcuts interacts with political sophistication in predicting higher quality decisions. Their results clearly show that although almost everyone uses the experimental set of five heuristics which were tested (partisan schema, ideology schema, endorsement heuristic, viability heuristic and candidate appearance), these cannot be considered a substitute for political sophistication in the prediction of voting. Only respondents with higher levels of

sophistication seemed to benefit from the use of heuristics. Lau and Redlawsk therefore concluded that low information rationality has become a catch-all term which allows researchers to move on to other problems they find more tractable (ibid.:952). This broad juxtaposition of diverging theoretical and empirical contributions highlights some of the implicit weaknesses of the *heuristics* argument.

But there are a number of additional shortcomings deserving consideration. Although focusing on individual information processing allowed the researchers to assume that cues provide all the information which is required to act as fully informed voters would, this is an assumption which can hardly pass for evidence (Bartels 1996:197). As Green & Shapiro (1994:95) pointed out, the empirical basis for the contention that rationality begets ignorance rests solely on the observation that ignorance about politics is widespread. It should also be remembered that a solid corpus of empirical evidence has undermined the assumptions of rational self-interest underpinning this line of reasoning (Tversky & Kahneman 1973, 1974; Simon 1982; Kahneman, Slovic & Tversky 1982; Frank 1988; Pinker 2001:302). Moreover, if politics is perceived by disaffected citizens as totally detached from one's own real world, it seems difficult to imagine that any cognitive heuristic tool can replace the information needed to maximise their political gains. To sum up, as Kuklinski and Quirk (2000) pointed out, political scientists have long been concerned with levels of political ignorance that are at odds with the idea of a democratic and participative citizenry. In this context, heuristics was believed to save people from their ignorance and taken at face value as the answer to their original concern.

All the same, the claim that any uninformed choice must rely on some kind of informational shortcut is not especially revealing and it misses an important part of the picture. *In what electoral context* political ignorance matters and *how* this relates to democratic theory, are the real questions worth finding an answer to. Before doing so, it will be helpful taking a closer look at the broader theoretical framework within which the debate on political ignorance began. For this reason, the following paragraphs will briefly linger on how each of the main theories of electoral behaviour dealt with the problem of political ignorance and how they came up with such concepts as 'cognitive filters', 'shortcuts' or 'heuristics'.

1.2 Setting the theoretical framework

Along with the increasing attention which political science has devoted to the cognitive processes of human decision-making since the mid 1980s (Lau and Sears, 1986; Lodge and McGraw, 1995), the use of terms such as 'heuristics' and 'cognitive shortcuts' has become more and more common.

As we said earlier, for rational choice theory the integration of these concepts was relatively straightforward. Due to a refinement of the classical assumption of the agents' perfect information, most models considered information itself as part of the calculus of costs and benefits. The resources invested in the search for information had to match the benefits thereby provided in order to work out the overall expected utility (Downs, 1957). The agent should stop searching once it realises that the cost of collecting information outweighs the benefits supplied by its possession.

Inevitably, such a theoretical refinement calls for extra assumptions: that the agent knows if the information is available, where it can be found and how much marginal benefit can be obtained from each extra unit thereof (Elster, 1989). In order to reduce the often vast effort of information-collection, the agent can use his everyday life experience to store knowledge which can later be retrieved and deployed to make optimal or nearly-optimal decisions. The heuristic role played by party-identification and ideology indeed serves the purpose of providing a cheap way to locate the closest party to one's own political beliefs and single-out the most appropriate candidate. Using Popkin's own words:

"*Partisanship can be seen as a running tally of current party assessment. Year-to-year changes in party identification reflect voter reaction to recent political events and have a clear effect on voting. Because a Downsian perspective emphasizes using party as an informational shortcut when other information is missing or limited, we need not see party identification and issue or performance voting as incompatible (…) Drawing on a Downsian perspective on information access and economic incentives also allows us to*

hypothesize about which voters are most apt to use their party identification as a generalized guide to voting and which look to particular issues or current policy performances." (1991:27)

The multiple ways individuals overcome scarce information has also been dealt with by social-structural and socio-psychological theories of voting. Insofar as their assumptions and methodology differ from those adopted by rational choice theory, these should be considered as belonging to a separate, and perhaps adverse, body of research in the field of psephological studies. However, the interest they raise for their discussion of the cognitive processes underlying the collection and treatment of information operated by voters cannot be neglected. The focus of their attention moves away from the costs and benefits of the decision making process and dwells instead on the direct observation of voters' behaviour as it emerges from survey research. While for rational choice theory the definition of how much information is possessed by voters is a matter of economic convenience, for the social structural and socio-psychological theories the perspective was quite different.

The limits to the political competence of voters were particularly stressed by the school of the University of Michigan (Campbell et al., 1954, 1960; Converse, 1960, 1964, 1969; Converse and Dupeux, 1962), which regarded party identification as a sort of psychological filter developed through early socialization and suitable for the evaluation of candidates and policies. Party identification acts as a readily available cognitive compass for the political world of those voters (the majority according to Campbell et al., 1960:180) who do not have stable and well-defined opinions about the main issues at stake during the election campaign. It influences the attitudes and behaviour of the average citizen, who is not involved much in politics and who has a limited awareness of political events.

Later reworkings of the concept of party identification, invoked by the realignments of US voters starting from the early 1960s, suggested that beside a broad tendency to identify with one party, each voter also looks at the main political issues emerging during the campaign and at the candidates' characteristics in order to cast his ballot.

Such additional information is perceived and processed according to the affective influence exercised by party-identification: the strongly identified, usually well-informed, use everything they hear about the political debate to reinforce their original attitudes and to foster their own identification. Weakly identified, poorly informed and uninterested individuals are subjected to a flow of political information - more or less intense depending on the time of the election - which they hardly make sense of. From the early contributions of the Michigan school, an overall image of stability prevails: a strong identification determines a sound resistance to changes of opinion regardless of the amount of information which gets processed. A weak identification, on the other hand, coincides with a poor exposure to information, but equally hinders opinion-change, except for the minority of individuals who are both weakly identified and highly informed.

As many American scholars drove their attention to the effects generated by the media, the cognitive function of party identification underwent further refinement (Fiorina 1981; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Party identification was no longer seen as immutable, but rather as an orientation following the collection of political information and underpinning its acquisition. Interest in politics and political sophistication (Palfrey and Poole 1987, Zaller 1992) came alongside party identification in the illustration of those factors affecting the collection and processing of political information. The most interested as well as the most knowledgeable and sophisticated voters were found to have stronger and more extreme political opinions, based on wider and more thorough information. The floods of information associated with modern political communication, while pressing for a change of opinion, were seen as more and more effective on the least sophisticated voters (Page and Shapiro, 1992). The soundness of one's own identification with a political party is no longer given and fixed as it had been previously thought: it depends instead on the ability of each individual to make sense of incessant and often contradictory political messages. This new perspective, with its focus on the growing importance of the media in politics, drew largely from the contributions of the Columbia University, precisely from the early studies of Berelson et al. who were the first political scientists to provide an empirical emphasis for the claim that the voters' levels of political competence fall short of those required by democratic theory (Berelson et Al, 1954: 308). Among their merits, the effort made to understand

the reasoning behind voting preference formation and the subtle mechanisms of voters' information-processing stands out. According to the original theory put forward by the Columbia School, the voter has a certain predisposition to vote for one given party, depending on the social group to which he belongs. Social characteristics such as socio-economic status and religion are among its main determinants. As each voter's latent predisposition is activated by the electoral propaganda carried out by the media, new information is collected only if it reinforces the original predisposition, which reflects the social group of origin. In this sense, political propaganda acts as a cognitive catalyst, rousing political interest and the tools of selective reasoning associated with one's own social context. More recent contributions inspired by this line of thought have focused their attention on the role played by intermediaries and the mass media in setting the context of electoral behaviour and channeling the overall flow of information (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1987; Muzt and Martin, 2005; Huckfeldt, Ikeda and Pappi, 2005; Gunther, Montero and Torcal, 2007; Richardson and Allen Beck, 2007; Magalhaes, 2007).

Implicit in the account of preference formation put forward by the Columbia School is that voting amounts only to the final stage of a structured cognitive process starting with the heuristic realization of a latent predisposition, that later goes through the collection and analysis of the new information issued by the mass-media and ends the final voting decision. For the Columbia school, one's own latent predisposition has a cognitive function similar to party identification: it filters the additional information so that it can be harmonized with each individual's pre-existing opinions.

By contrast, according to the school of Michigan, this task is performed by party identification, which selects the inputs upfront and rejects those perceived as inadequate for the overall coherence of one's belief-system. Let us imagine a citizen with very high levels of knowledge about politics and consider the filtering role played by party identification: according to the observations put forward by socio-structural and socio-psychological models, the citizen in question will be strongly identified and, although cognitively prepared to do it, will refuse to process information in dissonance with the political line of the preferred party. But, in reality, things have been shown to work differently. Many studies have cast doubt on the immutability of party-ties and

suggested that individuals with different information-processing capabilities have different voting behaviours. Criticism came from Andersen et al. (2005), who tested the Columbia school's theory of enlightened preferences by incorporating the role of political knowledge in the specification of their model. In a study using individual-level panel data along two British electoral cycles, latent predispositions to given party-choices were found to be more likely to emerge as respondents were more knowledgeable of the party platforms on relevant issues. In addition, they found a positive and permanently significant effect during the electoral cycles of the interaction between political knowledge and issue positions on party choice. Overall, the more knowledgeable respondents also showed higher levels of media-attention (television news and newspaper reports).

But the strongest source of criticism originated from the latest advances made in the field of experimental cognitive psychology. Its main contention is that mental processes are much less flexible than previously thought. They respond to ancestral survival patterns of behaviour which happen to be hardwired rather than learnt or shaped by experience. They can only partly adapt to the requirements of modern life, including those to be found in modern democracies (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984; Barkow, Cosmidees and Tooby, 1992; Damasio, 1994; Hauser, 1996; Pinker, 1997). Most of these processes are not available to consciousness, but nonetheless they are involved in most decisions we make and for which conscious thought is believed to be essential. This does not mean that all the decisions we make are separated from consciousness, but rather that there is none which does not imply some sort of unconscious mental activity. These processes may at times influence the outcome of our reasoned choices in unexpected ways. They certainly do so when emotions are at play, since these can easily lead to unsound inferences not subject to rational examination. Emotions were also found to be heavily involved in the citizens' political choices and to distort their judgment without them realising it. Mental processes are also exposed to the influence of deeply rooted cognitive biases, which negatively influence accurate judgment. Once useful to increase the chances of human survival under difficult circumstances, in modern day life cognitive biases often lead us astray, to the extent that we cannot take for granted that individuals are well adapted to making political judgments. For these

reasons, heuristic reasoning should perhaps be considered dysfunctional and misleading as opposed to illuminating and helpful.

Understandably, emphasis has often been placed by political scientists on the importance of political sophistication because voters were considered rationally self-interested and in need of knowing their facts in order to set preferences. If the information necessary to make decisions is missing or incomplete, it was argued, heuristic reasoning can help. But the last 20 to 30 years of experimental research in behavioural psychology have proved that such an assumption is simply not sound. Visceral and subconscious reactions to external inputs outweigh the conscious and rational control of one's own preferences (Munz, 2007).

One should therefore conclude that, due to the limitations of human reasoning, no importance should be attributed to how much knowledge of politics citizens have, given their limited capacity to optimize their choices. However, it seems obvious that this conclusion would also miss the point and oversimplify the work of the researcher. In order to exit from the impasse, given these premises, one should rather ask: under what conditions does the citizens' level of knowledge and political sophistication matter? If we are to accept that individuals use all sorts of cues to make political judgments, what sort of cues, if any, can be properly assessed by voters as useful or phony? Under what conditions do we instead behave as cognitive misers? Vice versa, if we assume that political sophistication helps filter and process the facts and figures of politics, to what extent may it reduce the impact of biased heuristic reasoning on political choices? These sorts of questions acquire even more importance if we assume, as we should, that politicians will use any available means to influence the voters' choices and to take advantage of their cognitive shortcomings. After all, less knowledgeable individuals interpret events and assess situations on the basis of a set of predispositions quite different from those of sophisticated citizens (Popkin and Dimock, 2000). They view the world and politics in a way which can be influenced by skilled political communicators and media professionals. In so far as they find it difficult to follow the political debate, their judgment may be driven by 'easy arguments' (Kuklinsi and Quirk, 2000) or biased interpretations of campaign messages. Understanding under what conditions human rationality is more prone to go off track, and when citizens can

articulate the information in their possession to make accurate judgments, is of key importance to refocus the discussion on the dilemma about political ignorance which started it.

1.3 The goal of this research: the search for a new synthesis

With these questions in mind, the role played by political sophistication will be investigated in the following sections under a set of both real and simulated conditions which replicate the context of three different choices faced by citizens when called to make political evaluations or vote. The first section of the investigation will be based on the analysis of secondary survey data and assesses the electoral behaviour of relatively unsophisticated voters in the context of a campaign characterized by the availability of cognitive shortcuts set by the prevailing party through its own political discourse. This analysis critically scrutinizes the remedial effect of heuristic reasoning on poor political knowledge in the context of a real electoral setting.

The second section will ascertain whether political sophistication helps the voter focus on the available information about the ideology of candidates as opposed to draw from their appearance inferences about their personality. With this purpose in mind, a specific experiment was designed in which 937 people participated in a web questionnaire. In the questionnaire they were presented with two unknown hypothetical candidates and asked to vote for one of them. The information about the candidates was presented (and successively manipulated) by means of electoral posters showing both their picture as well as a set of policy statements. The experiment casts new light on the possible mediating role of political sophistication vis-à-vis ideology and issue voting in the presence of potentially distorting visual cues.

In the third section, the results of a second experiment are presented. In this one, participants were invited to evaluate on 7-point Likert scales a prominent politician in relation to eleven statements, tapping aspects such as his perceived competence, honesty and likability, among others. They were automatically assigned to one of four randomly-formed groups, one of which was negatively primed, subliminally, by

evoking the current economic crisis. The analysis went on to assess: (1) to what extent the negative subliminal prime makes it more likely to either agree or disagree with each of the eleven statements about the politician and (2) if the level of sophistication as well as the degree of interest in politics of the respondents lessens the effect of the subliminal cue.

Table 1.1 – Main sections and type of heuristic considered

	METHODOLOGY	TYPE OF HEURISTIC
SECTION 1	analysis of secondary data	**discourse cue:** fully available to consciousness and rational scrutiny
SECTION 2	experiment	**visual cue**: processed unconsciously but available to the senses
SECTION 3	experiment	**subliminal cue**: processed unconsciously and unavailable to the senses

Each of the three sections presents a specific setting, real or simulated, in which individuals were called to cast their own judgment about a political object. They all reconstruct, historically or experimentally, situations in which a choice has to be made based both on standard, politically-laden information as well as on a set of available cues to which individuals may, or may not, resort. Cues are broadly defined here as stimuli, either consciously or unconsciously perceived, which elicit or signal a type of behaviour.

As a conspicuous body of research suggests, what social and political elites say and do, as well as the way they present themselves to the public through the media, often exerts a considerable influence upon citizens' political cognition and policy evaluations (Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Zaller, 1992). But while some individuals are motivated, interested, and capable of comprehensive processing of political ideas and messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), many citizens, when given appropriate opportunities, use cognitive shortcuts in forming political judgments (Mondak, 1993; Kuklinski & Hurley, 1994) and these can be either

conscious or unconscious (Chaiken & Chen, 1999). This does not imply that individuals are necessarily aware of the deployment of cognitive shortcuts. We will simply test the hypothesis that the more sophisticated citizens are, the less they will resort to cognitive shortcuts, regardless of them being aware of it. This will allow us to establish when and how political knowledgeability matters in terms of decision-making.

For this reason, this investigation explores three decision-making settings that differ in terms of the cognitive mechanisms involved (see Table 1.1). In Section 1 the influence of a cue adopted in the context of a real election campaign by one of the main parties as part of the political discourse will be considered. In this case, the type of heuristic under scrutiny is based on a cue fully available both to consciousness and to rational awareness. Section 2 deals with the influence of a visual cue that is processed unconsciously but available to the senses, such as a candidate's visual appearance. Section 3 will instead present the results of an experiment which tested the effect of a subliminal cue (processed unconsciously and unavailable to the senses) on the evaluative judgment the participants made of a prominent politician.

In each of these three sections the impact of the respective cues on political judgment will be first assessed per se, without considering the role played by other factors possibly involved in the decision-making process. Once the existence of an effect due to the use of a cognitive cue is proved, the analysis will move on to assess to what extent, if any, political sophistication helps reduce the bias that the use of each type of heuristic may introduce in the decision-making process.

In the fourth and conclusive section, the overall results of the investigation will be discussed in the light of further arguments considered relevant in dealing with the paradox of democratic systems characterised by widespread political ignorance. The final discussion will assess their contribution in the light of the results purported by the investigation.

Brusattin, L. (2007) Late anti-communism as a shortcut: the success of Forza Italia in the 1994 Italian election, *South European Society and Politics*, 12(4): 481-489.

2. LATE ANTI-COMMUNISM AS A SHORTCUT: THE SUCCESS OF FORZA ITALIA IN THE 1994 ITALIAN ELECTION

2.1 Introduction

Citizens should not be entirely blamed for their ignorance about politics. Often a new or uncertain political scenario adds disorientation to a lack of knowledge. On some occasions the main parties may change their name or disappear altogether and be replaced by new ones. With very little information about the new actors the voters have to decide how to cast their next vote.

A case in point is represented by the 1994 Italian national elections. Two of the main parties had been forced to disintegrate after mounting corruption scandals in the early 1990s. A new political formation, Forza Italia, led by the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, managed to win the relative majority of votes and to form a new government based on a centre-right coalition. What provided the Italian citizens with the informational means to cast their ballot paper consistent with their previous political beliefs? Why did so many voters side with a brand new party?

In the early 1990s Sniderman et al. theorised the use by the mass public of the 'likability heuristic' (1991). According to these authors, any individual can draw a detailed map of politics and thereby distinguish between friends and enemies, by relying on an affective calculus. Without possessing a full understanding of the abstractions of politics, anyone has an idea of who he or she likes and dislikes. This basic knowledge allows every individual, no matter how unsophisticated, to perform an attentive calculus to work out where to stand politically.

The original formulation of the argument was set in a two-party system. But the resort to a similar type of shortcut can also take place in a multiparty context, as was the case of Italy in 1994, when a critical election (Burnham, 1970) was held.

In March 1994 Italian voters had to face a rather unusual political scenario[1]: the first and third main parties (the Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party respectively) had virtually disappeared, buried by corruption scandals. A brand new party, Forza Italia, won the election and became the most voted for party, within months of its birth. Further interest arises from the fact that the 'Casa delle Libertà' (the coalition led by Forza Italia) won the last Italian election in 2001 and did much better than expected on April 9, 2006. As these events may have common elements, the understanding of the past may somehow help us read the present.

These facts represent an interesting case study and they allow the researcher to reassess the role of ideology with respect to voting. When ideology replaces information which is missing – either because the voters blamefully ignore it or because it cannot be retrieved or is unavailable – it can be argued that ideology works as a cognitive shortcut of the like-dislike type. It saves time and effort while allowing its users to achieve their purpose.

Those individuals who chronically lack basic information about leaders, parties and issues are politically unsophisticated (Palfrey and Poole 1987, Law and Redlawsk 2001). This means that the patterns which influence their voting behaviour do not come from a reasoned and balanced evaluation of the available options in the light of one's own beliefs and convictions, but rather from tentative cognitive associations, evaluative approximation and heuristic reasoning. By contrast, politically sophisticated individuals can better process complex information, evaluate its bias and hold more consistent preferences (Stimson 1975). Why is such a distinction relevant?

Primarily because political sophistication is often unhomogeneously distributed along the L-R ideological continuum and across parties. The less sophisticated an individual is, the more likely he is to turn to heuristics in order to elaborate and make his decisions. At the individual level all this sounds fine. We all tend to avoid costly effort in our own reasoning by using cues on several occasions. In any case, if a large number of

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[1] When there is no control over a) the exposure of a given phenomenon to measurement and b) its randomization, the design of a piece of research is quasi-experimental (Campbell and Stanley 1966:34). In the social sciences quasi-experimental design is often adopted because it is more viable than experimental design and its assumptions less demanding. The case of the 1994 Italian election will be regarded here as one of these.

individuals use the same heuristic path and thereby reach the same decision during a collective consultation – such as in an election - there will be a recognizable pattern in the aggregate decisional outcome.

This paper tries to give an account of Forza Italia's extraordinary success while tackling the complex relationship between sophistication, ideology, parties and voting in Italy at the beginning of the 1990s. The realignment of the Italian party-system will be illustrated in the light of Silvio Berlusconi's rise to Palazzo Chigi as opposed to the victory of the centre-left coalition, while the account of why alternative scenarios did not take place will also be lingered on briefly in order to fully address the whole range of counterfactuals which can be raised.

The success of Forza Italia was characterized, it will be argued, by both these distinctive circumstances: the weakening of traditional social linkages - in particular at the centre of the ideological scale - and the historical legacy of strong electoral polarization. After having presented the theoretical framework within which the argument will be developed and the main explanations given to Forza Italia's resounding success at the 1994 election reviewed, a model will be specified and the resulting empirical evidence used to contend that one of the keys to the understanding of the 1994 Italian election outcome lies in the use of 'late Anti-communism' by the least sophisticated voters as a cognitive shortcut to cast their vote. Forza Italia strategically manufactured its discourse to meet the Weltanschaung of these voters and succeeded.

2.2 Ideology, uncertainty and voting

According to Downs (1957), ideology is the key dimension through which one can make up one's mind and cast a vote. Ideology, in these terms, represents a shortcut both for the parties and for the voter. Each citizen develops a verbal image of a good society and the majority, under conditions of uncertainty, make good use of parties' declared ideologies to distinguish and make their own choice. A party therefore adapts its own ideology to the demand of the groups in which the largest number of votes can be harvested.

What happens to a multiparty-system when some parties loose all their support from the electorate and dissolve? Downs did not consider this possibility when he wrote about the origin and the success of new parties. In fact he related their success to a sudden change in the ideological distribution of voters. Forza Italia can be ranked among the first, but its success was not due to the introduction of universal suffrage, a catastrophic event or social revolution.

Italian voters modified their position on the ideological scale only to a minor extent, instead they simply waited for a new party to occupy the space left empty. From their perpective one could either: 1) recast the vote to one of the surviving parties possibly closer to one's own ideology, 2) vote for the new party closest to one's own ideology or 3) abstain. In the Italian case the first option could involve voting for the former Communist Party (PDS) whereas the second could mean voting for Forza Italia. A good reason to choose the first option was that the ex-communist party seemed to be only marginally embroiled in scandals, not least because they had never been in power at the national level. Yet the former voters of Democrazia Cristiana (DC) and Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI) largely avoided looking to their left and preferred to support Forza Italia. Why?

The political transition which Italy underwent during the early 1990s has been paralleled by new approaches in the psephological literature which followed it. Up to then, each election result tended to be considered as the mere consequence of a slow process of change in the voters' preferences, values and subcultural attachments. A focus on political demand which largely ignored or downplayed micro-factors such as voters' ideological self-placement or campaign effects (Manheimer 1989:175). By the end of 1994 it had become self-evident that some attention had to be also paid to the supply side of Italian politics: parties, alliances, programmes, political communication. Moreover, as a consequence of the deep political transformation, each election started becoming for scholars the object of independent and autonomous scrutiny (Diamanti and Manheimer 1994:8).

On the other hand, analytical approaches based on subcultural attachments, which assume that the electoral behaviour of the Italian voters is relatively stable in the long-term, can not be inherently considered out-of-date. Indeed, an extremely low interbloc

volatility and the persistence of systematic territorial differences still remind scholars that the results of the Italian elections are not entirely determined by the supply side. For this reason, some authors have used the concept of party-identification to account for the outcome of electoral competitions characterised by non-volatile voters who still strongly perceive and endorse the deep fracture between two main political coalitions (Bellucci 1995). Others stressed that Silvio Berlusconi's media power distorted the process of preference formation typical of an open and supply-based political market, by overwhelming the voters with TV adverts. Segatti (1995), for example, has pointed out that the state regulation which disciplined the presence of each party on the media took power only four weeks before the election. This gave plenty of time to Forza Italia, which massively promoted itself for two months as a credible viable option. By the time the new regulation prevented it from doing so, the voters had already made up their minds (Segatti 1995:170). In its most popular - although non-academic – version, this interpretation claims that citizens were brainwashed by the systematic use of TV adverts by Forza Italia.

Some other authors attributed explanatory power to the process of modernisation which the Italian society underwent.[2] Among them, Seisselberg (1996) has claimed that Forza Italia represents a media-mediated personality party and that the conditions of its emergence and success are due to the basic change in politics, as a result of socio-cultural and socio-economic modernization in Western Europe. In his account, the expansion of information and communication technology of modern post-industrial societies oriented towards secular ideas and basic consumer goods are held responsible for the new conditions of politics and parties: differentiation, individualisation and consumerisation. According to Seisselberg, numerous parties in Western Europe face a decrease in party-loyalties, more flexible electoral decisions and voting behaviour which resembles a consumer pattern of personal satisfaction of needs. Politics responds

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[2] These approaches nonetheless face some important limitations when they have to explain the political behaviour of the voters at the 1994 election. Modernization did actually take place in Italy during the '70s and '80s and new secular values entered the political scene during this period. But this remark does not explain why it benefited only Forza Italia and as late as 1994. Secondly, although the internal structure of Forza Italia deploys a high number of managers from the private sector and its public image is painstakingly manufactured according to state-of-the-art marketing techniques, the audience which it addresses is neither the most educated nor the most post-materialist. On the contrary, housewives seem to be the privileged target and supporters of Berlusconi's party (ITANES, Istituto Cattaneo 2001:47).

with image factors, PR instruments and personalization, especially of the top candidate. In the specific case of Italy, a late modernization put into question the subcultures of Catholicism and Communism which had been the basis for a relatively stable electoral behaviour. Koff and Koff (2000:25) have also endorsed this view when they affirmed that secularisation and modernization can be held accountable for the 'depolarisation' of ideological subcultures, while Ricolfi (1994), in a similar fashion, reached an almost identical conclusion when he attributed the success of Forza Italia to the "laicizzazione" of the Italian vote.

These and other contributions undoubtly represent an advancement in the study of Italian voters' behaviour. Nonetheless, a renovated effort should be made in order to find a new point of theoretical equilibrium between old demand-based approaches and new, supply-based, ones, if we are to assume that Italian politics works as an open market and analyse it accordingly.

One of the aims of this article is to show that a cognitivist approach may help accomplish this task and act as trait d'union between explanatory arguments based on long-term subcultural attachments of the individuals and alternative ones, which portray the voters as dynamic addressees of the solicitations coming from parties, leaders and their communication campaigns. This approach allows us to assess an intrinsic feature of the Italian electorate, namely the historical wariness of the centrist voters vis-à-vis leftist parties, in a new light. In the 1994 election, it will be argued, a new political scenario, the absence of an incumbent and the shadows over the national economy, favoured the adoption of a cognitive shortcut by the majority of moderate-centrist voters, who simply repeated their past electoral behaviour voting for 'anything other than the Communists', which by that point had become Social Democrats.

The results of the analysis which will be undertaken seem to show that the enduring ideological split between left versus centre, far from being absent, still affected the way the Italian electorate cast their preferences at the ballot box as late as 1994. If we take for granted that the ideological de-alignment took place, it should also be stated that it mainly concerned the positions in the centre and on the right of the ideological scale. An invisible barrier seemed indeed to obstruct the flow of votes from position '5' (centre) to '4' (moderate left) and vice versa.

In the specific case of Italy in 1994 voters seemed to apply the decision-making tools of the past to the new situation. From the perspective of a new party it is relatively easy to detect these perceptions and occupy the most convenient place on the ideological scale. As a matter of fact, in 1993 Forza Italia based a massive TV campaign on the 'Communist Threat' which perfectly suited the need for an easy way out of the complexities of a political system close to collapse.

The ideological identity of the Italian electorate was certainly based up to 1989 on the Communist Vs Anti-communist discourse, while the Left had been stigmatised and identified as a threat to Italian democracy since 1948. The supporters of the opposing ideologies were deeply divided, leading to intense partisanship and strong hostility between the two blocks. Such differences were also reinforced by class-divisions. The Catholic and Marxist subcultures were largely responsible for the adoption of 'pro-system' and 'anti-system' political discourses, while the animosity between the two was, according to Pasquino (1992), greater in Italy than in any other nation. Similarly, Bartolini and D'Alimonte (1995) are also right when they say that the Italian citizens had been basing their voting behaviour on a bi-dimensional schema, left versus right and system versus anti-system. As the median voters considered the PCI an anti-system political force, competition got substantially defused for decades (1995:454). In this respect, whether in the aftermath of the Italian 'Prima Repubblica' electoral competition could be seen as resembling an open market is still, to some extent, an open question.

2.3 Ideological self-placement and party choice

In 1992 the Italian party-system faced a deep crisis. All the parties which had previously formed the governing coalition (DC, PSI, PRI, PLI, PSDI) were under investigation for corruption. In fig.2a this phase corresponds to the sudden fall of the lambda coefficient, which measures the strength of the association between last vote and vote intention. From 1988 to 1991 the respondents declared that they were going to vote, with a slight decreasing tendency, for the same party which they voted for at the last election. In 1992-1993 most of the Italian electorate seemed to abandon their previous preferences.

In the meantime, a number of new parties made their first appearance. Some of them were formed by former Christian Democrats, like the PPI and the CCD, others (i.e. the Lega Nord and AN) received the vote of disappointed citizens and so increased their political weight. In 1993 Silvio Berlusconi founded Forza Italia and in a year became the leader of the most successful new party in the history of Western Europe

Fig. 2a - Last Vote and Vote Intention in Italy: Lambda Coefficient 1988-1995 (Source: Eurobarometer)
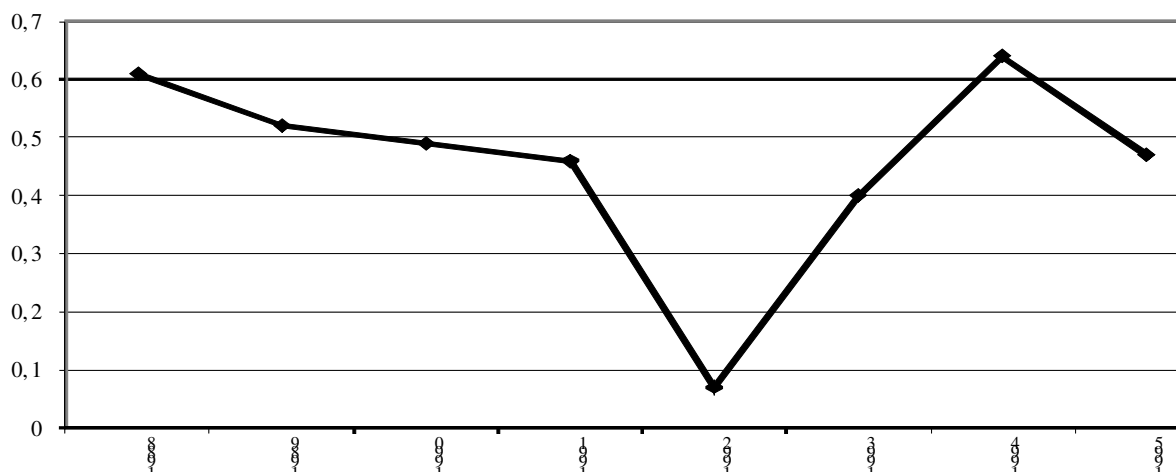
Fig. 2b - Left-Right Self-placement in Italy 1973-1999 (Source: Eurobarometer)
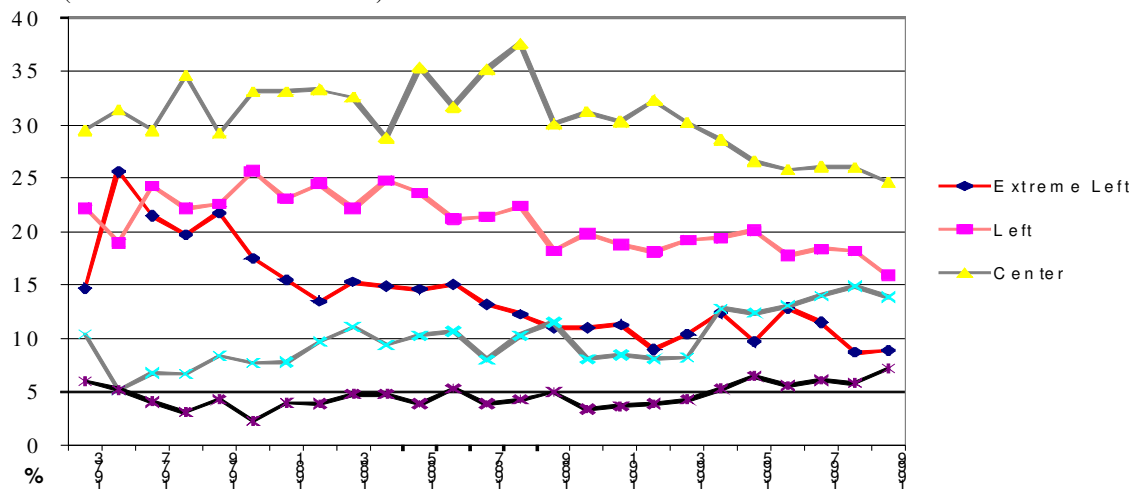
Fig.2b shows the trend of left-right self-placement in Italy between 1973 and 1999. The centre (positions '5' and '6' on the ideological scale) attracted the majority of the population until the early 1990s, when the end of the political leadership of the Christian Democrats made a purely centrist ideological self-location less appealing and reduced their share of votes from 32 per cent in 1992 to 25 per cent in 1999. Self-identification with positions of both moderate left ('4' on the ideological scale) and extreme left, already in decline in the mid 1980s, declined further in the 1990s. In 1999 only 16 per cent of the respondents claimed to hold an ideological position of moderate left and eight per cent a position of extreme left. The progressive weakening of the left can easily be associated with the abandonment of a radically alternative political struggle by leftist parties and with the wreckage of Marxian philosophy after the end of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. On the other hand more and more respondents placed themselves in positions of moderate right (positions '7' and '8') and extreme right (positions '9' and '10'). In particular, the percentage of citizens who identified themselves with locations seven and eight on the ideological scale jumped, according to the samples, from eight per cent in 1993 to 14 per cent in 1999. The upward tendency of moderate right ideological self-identification seems to coincide with a) the appearance of Forza Italia, b) the moderate turn of MSI into AN, c) the electoral success of the Lega Nord and d) the political alliance of the three[3].

Still the success of Forza Italia can not be fully explained only by the increase in the number of rightwing voters, as it collected most votes from the centre.

The hypothesis which is presented here suggests that for many years the centrist voters entered the ballot box with the aim of preventing 'the Communists' from reaching the majority of the votes. At the beginning of the 1990s, after the scandals, the launch of a new electoral system and the disintegration of the parties which had thus far formed the government-coalitions, these voters were left without political representation. Forza Italia gave them what they were looking for: an anti-communist discourse and organizational credibility.

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[3] The interpretation of the increasing self-identification with a purely rightwing ideology seems more complex. Three possible explanations can be put forward: 1) the interplay between party identification and ideology, 2) the demand for independence/autonomy in some regions of northern Italy, which found

Of these two elements the shortcut of anti-communism was felt by the 'orphan' centrist voters in their guts while the second can be seen as complementary. Credibility was indeed necessary in order to start a new organizational party-machinery and provide it with the required apparatus. Credibility was also boosted by the broadcasting of Forza Italia's political-adverts[4] for several months on three out of six national TV channels (owned by Silvio Berlusconi himself)[5]. The message did not persuade everybody, but it certainly did convince the least sophisticated, who represent the majority of centrist voters.

2.4 Indicators and model specification

Admittedly, the anti-communist bait could be effective only with non-leftist and scarsely sophisticated voters: non-leftist because an anti-communist discourse could be appealing only to centrist or rightwing individuals; scarsely sophisticated because anyone with a basic understanding of politics could have easily cottoned on. In a situation of relative uncertainty many voters had to make up their mind quickly and make their bid. A 'likability heuristic', which split the political options into mostly liked and disliked, may well have proved helpful at this point.

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in the rightwing Lega Nord its political point of reference, 3) an increasing concern for the phenomenon of illegal immigration.

[4] Most adverts involved Silvio Berlusconi stating that *someone had to stop the Communists* and that *freedom was under threat* if the Left had won the upcoming election and their broadcasting started as early as in late spring 1993.

[5] For an in-depth analysis of the 1994 election campaign see Morcellini, M., *Elezioni di TV: Televisione e Pubblico nella Campagna Elettorale del 1994*, Genova, Costa & Nolan, 1994 e Ricolfi, L. (1994) Elezioni e Mass-media: Quanti Voti ha Spostato la TV, *Il Mulino*, 6 (4), pp.1031-1046.

Fig. 2c - Political Sophistication by Party-choice: Italy 1994
(Source EES 1994)
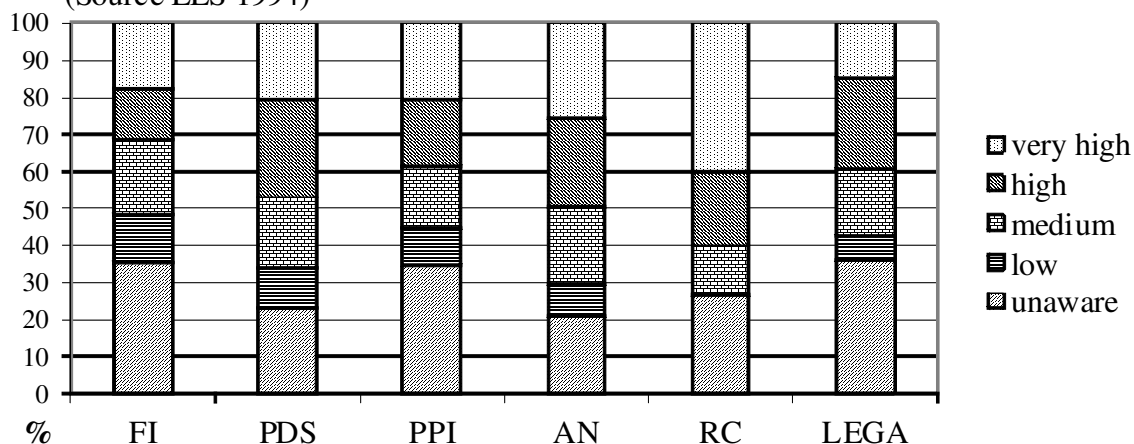
Fig. 2c illustrates the distribution of political sophistication[6] by party-choice. Every 100 votes collected by Forza Italia 48 came from politically unsophisticated individuals ('unaware' or with 'very low' sophistication). Similar figures hold for the PPI and LEGA. The highest percentages of sophisticated votes were collected by the parties located at the extremes of the ideological spectrum (AN, Rifondazione Comunista) and by the PDS.

In order to assess the relevance of the use of a dislike-based cognitive shortcut by centrist voters, two logistic models are presented (model specification can be found in the appendix). If the hypothesis put forward is correct, it is expected that the ideological self-placement on the positions '5' and '6' of the ideological scale (centrist self-positioning) should be characterized by (a) a significantly lower probability of voting for the PDS and (b) a significantly higher probability of voting for Forza Italia. However, it is not enough to show that centrist voters prefer Forza Italia. The model is meant to illustrate that centrist voters dislike parties representative of the moderate left, especially the PDS.

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[6] Political sophistication is measured in terms of an index of factual political knowledge (alfa reliability = .84) based on four items included in the European Election Study 1994 (see appendix for more details).

Table 2.1 - 1994 Italian Election: Effect of Centrist Ideology on Party-choice

	Partito Democratico della Sinistra (a)		Forza Italia		Allenza Nazionale	
	model 1 N 389	model 2 N 389	model 3 N 354	model 4 N 354	model 5 N 310	model 6 N 310
	B	B	B	B	B	B
Very Religious	-.61**	-.67**	-.20	-.99***	-.13	-1.11**
Non-religious	.36	.15	-.10	.34	-.14	-.42
Lower-Middle Class	.90**	.21**	-1.03**	-.59	-.50	.11
Working Class	.87**	.18**	-.84**	.16	-.02	.65
Upper Class	-5.58	-5.21	.76	2.56**	1.90**	1.41
Upper-Middle Class	.33	.30	-.42	-.08	.15	-.36
Community <100.000 people	-.19	-.30	.38	.49	.66**	.91*
Community <250.000 people	.20	.07	.64	.69	.70	.34
Community <1.000.000 people	-.02	-.19	.48	.60	-.72	-.03
Secondary School Education	-.39	-.41	-.10	-.29	-.42	-1.06*
University Education	-.25	-.33	-.42	-.67	-.29	-1.61**
'Maintain Order' Priority	-.83***	-.77	.12	-.23	.73**	.99**
Leftwing		**5.84***				
Centrist		**-2.04***		**2.34***		**2.76***
Rightwing				**4.60***		**6.61***
Constant	-.78**	-.18**	-.58**	-2.19***	-1.55***	-4.13**
	Chi-square 42,1*** df 14	**Chi-square** 60,15*** df 16	**Chi-square** 16.3 df 14	**Chi-square** 147.5*** df 16	**Chi-square** 22.7** df 14	**Chi-square** 191.7*** df 16
	Pseudo R² .15	**Pseudo R²** .62	**Pseudo R²** .06	**Pseudo R²** .47	**Pseudo R²** .10	**Pseudo R²** .70

Source: Eurobarometer 1994

The models presented in Table 2.1 were estimated for Partito Democratico della Sinistra, Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale in order to introduce some elements of comparison[7]. For each of them an estimation which does not include ideology is presented first, while a second model inclusive of ideological controls is introduced afterwards.

In model 2 centrist ideology proved to have a strong negative effect on the vote for the PDS. Centrist voters, as hypothesised, do not vote for parties of the moderate left, while they tend to prefer the parties which can be identified with the centre-right and the right of the ideological scale. Which is to say that voters who place themselves in positions '5' and '6' of the ideological scale 'dislike' parties to be found at their left while being attracted by the parties on their right. The Forza Italia (Table 2.1, models 3 and 4) and Alleanza Nazionale models (Table 2.1, models 5 and 6) confirm the expected pattern for the centrist vote. In both, centrist and rightwing ideologies have a significant impact on the preference cast by the voters.

The findings from the 1994 Eurobarometer data tell the same story, although set in a different context. Self-identification with the centre of the ideological scale proved to be an asset for Forza Italia. Not only did centrist voters feel closer ideologically to Silvio Berlusconi's party, but most importantly it was their dislike for the Italian Left that proved to be decisive. Suggestive empirical evidence is provided by the negative sign for 'centrist ideology' in model 2, which can be taken as proof of the 'dislike' for the PDS, and its positive signs both in model 4 and 6 (to be interpreted as a favourable feeling of centrist voters for Forza Italia and AN respectively).

If this account is correct, the use of 'likability' as a heuristic tool helped many centrist voters (the relative majority of Italian voters) to coherently cast a vote in favour of Forza Italia in a scenario dominated by the uncertainty caused by the loss of the old political referents. Likes and dislikes contributed to reshape the political map of less sophisticated voters and to replace the old actors with a new one.

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[7] The voting dependent variable takes the value of one when there is voting for the selected party and the value of 0 when there is not. In the PDS model the votes for Rifondazione Comunista have been codified as missing values. In the Forza Italia model the votes for Alleanza Nazionale, CCD and Lega have been codified as missing values. The same criterion has been adopted for the Alleanza Nazionale model.

Nevertheless, up to this point no definite evidence has been offered for the lack-of-sophistication of Forza Italia's voters and for the direct advantage which this gave vis-à-vis rival parties. A second, multinomial regression model has been designed for this aim. As no individual-level data about political sophistication is available in the 1994 Eurobarometer, this time the analysis is based on survey data from the 1994 European Election Study, which comprehends a battery of questions tapping each individuals' political factual knowledge. For the lack-of-sophistication effect to be proved I expect to find a negative effect of higher levels of sophistication on the probability of voting for Forza Italia (equivalent to a positive effect on the probability of voting for its opponent party in each dichotomy).

Table 2.2 - 1994 Italian Election: Effect of Ideology and Sophistication on Party-choice

	FI / Patto per l'Italia	FI / Lega Nord	FI / PPI	FI / Allenza Nazionale	FI / PDS	FI / Did Not Answer
	B	B	B	B	B	B
Very Religious	1.24**	.88	1.50***	.30	-0.59**	.14
Lower Middle Class	-.49	-.56	-.35	-1.09*	-.05	-.69*
Working Class	-.33**	-.58	.26	-.45	.11	-.42
Upper Class	-.07**	.22	1.45	.60	.07	.34
Upper Middle Class	-.17	-.19	-.29	.17	-.23	-.39
Community size 10K to 100K	-.36	-.57	-.46	.40	.29	.10
Community size 100K to 1.000K	.36	.30	.16	.79	.28	-.27
Community size 1.000K+	-.66	-.31	-1.16**	.23	.36	-.36
Secondary School Education	.13	-.88*	-.03	.51	.14	-.41
University Education	-.23	-.20	-.20	-.27	-.16	-.59*
Centrist	**1.07******	**.07**	**1.39***	**-1.40***	**-1.64***	**.05**
Political Sophistication	**.34******	**.18**	**.08**	**.27***	**.21***	**-.01**
Constant	-3.32*	-.76*	-2.36***	-1.55***	-.44	.47

Nagelkerke R² .30 - Chi-square 250.647* df=72 - N=727**

Source: European Election Study 1994

The estimated Beta coefficients shown in table 2.2 re-confirm the hypothesis: lower levels of political sophistication increase the chances of a vote in favour of Forza Italia as opposed to Allenza Nazionale, Partito Democratico della Sinistra and Patto per l'Italia, while they do not seem to increase the probability of voting for Forza Italia as opposed to Lega Nord or Partito Popolare. Moreover, Forza Italia's support is mainly centrist if compared to Alleanza Nazionale and Partito Democratico della Sinistra's, but less so if compared to the support enjoyed by centrist parties such as Patto per l'Italia and Partito Popolare Italiano.

These findings suggest that Forza Italia, located at the centre-right of the ideological spectrum, collected its votes from a mainly moderate and relatively unsophisticated electorate. As argued in the previous section, the Italian centrist voter seems to lean towards the right of the ideological spectrum and to dislike parties of the Left as opposed to ideologically equidistant parties of the Right. At the same time, the more unsophisticated a voter, the more likely it is that heuristics such as "likability" will be used to make a decision in keeping with each individual's understanding of politics. In the case of Forza Italia's success in the 1994 Italian election, as is shown in tables 2.1 and 2.2, both these elements, late Anti-communism and the lack of political sophistication, coexisted.

2.5 Alternative scenarios

It was earlier said that, beside abstention, one of the voters' possible moves at the 1994 Italian election were recasting their vote to one of the parties which survived the implosion of the previous party system. So far, the empirical evidence has suggested that (1) unsophisticated voters did prefer Forza Italia to the Centre-left coalition because of the way its anti-communist discourse was cognitively processed and (2) that those individuals who voted for Patto per l'Italia or Lega were not that sophisticated either (at least no more sophisticated than Forza Italia's). Why then did most unsophisticated voters converge towards Forza Italia rather than choosing any of these alternative options?

A set of reasons can account for this pattern of voting behaviour. First of all, neither the PPI nor Lega Nord took full advantage of an anti-communist discourse as Forza Italia did. Although Lega Nord did certainly benefit from sharing its ally's discourse under the symbol of the Polo delle Libertá, it had also agreed not to directly compete with Silvio Berlusconi's party. Moreover, because of its territorial roots and its calls for a secession, it could draw votes only from a limited geographic portion of the country, mainly confined to the northern regions.

As far as the PPI is concerned, it definitely missed all those elements which were required to attract unsophisticated voters. At the 1994 election it presented itself as a party which had already lost its initial appeal. Its leader, Mario Segni, had left Allenza Democratica, another recently-born centrist movement, only months before the election and promoted himself as an alternative to both Centre-left and Centre-right. This attempt met only a partial success due to rather poor communication skills and the limited amount of resources which could be thrown into the campaign.

 In sharp contrast, Forza Italia enjoyed a shiny aura of newness and popularity. The fascinating personal success of its founder and the almost unlimited financial resources (Forza Italia and Mediaset belonged to the same owner, who simply had to move some of his money from one pocket to another), were exactly the elements which the PPI was missing. Let alone the funambolic electoral promises made by Silvio Berlusconi and the huge network of well-trained executives who gave Forza Italia the strong efectiveness it needed. Although the Patto per l'Italia was also a new party, by March 1994 it had lost most of its headway (Ricolfi, ibid.:276). On the contrary, just before the election, Forza Italia looked as if it actually could shake the whole political situation up. Something, that in its own way, it did.

An attentive reader may also object that no explanation has been given about the failure of Allenza Nazionale, after the moderate turn ratified in Fiuggi, to occupy from the right of the ideological spectrum the void left by Democrazia Cristiana.

A few considerations may sketch a reply to such an objection. Italian post-war history was characterized not only by a vigorous confontation between communist and catholic subcultures, but equally by the commitment to Anti-fascism. Allenza Nazionale,

inheritor of the ideological heritage of the MSI, was still perceived by many as a post-fascist rather than moderate party, with few presentable leaders and no political programme. In addition, the disproportionate concentration of its electorate in the southern part of the country as well as the ravishing campaign of its allied Forza Italia may all have hindered its role as party of reference for the moderate right of the electorate.

As these explanations seem to reinforce the arguments of those who see in the mediatisation of electoral competition and, more specifically, in Silvio Berlusconi's media power, the key of his electoral success in 1994, it is important to re-state that it was not meant here to deny that the running fire of TV adverts which accompanied the rise of Forza Italia was a key factor of its electoral victory. More precisely, it has been suggested that although a necessary one, this was not a sufficient condition for its success. The late Anti-communism of most moderate, unsophisticated and centrist voters was a factor at least as decisive.

2.6 Conclusion

The analysis presented has tried to provide some understanding of the ideological context which surrounded the electoral success of Forza Italia at the 1994 election. Mainstream explanations often assume that the deployment of a massive media campaign was the key factor explaining the election outcome. Others hold that the ongoing process of modernization can account for the rise of Silvio Berlusconi's media-mediated personality party.

The hypothesis supported here assumes a rather different stance. It departs from the insights offered by a spatial model and argues that a determinant factor in the success of Forza Italia was the reluctancy of ideologically centrist citizens to vote for parties of the left. The long-term ideological confrontation between the Communist Party and anti-communist government coalitions contributed to shape a centrist identity, which was left without political representation by the scandals of the early 1990s. Forza Italia filled

the gap on the ideological scale taking advantage of an out-of-date, although still electorally effective, anti-communist discourse.

Part of the electorate, in a situation of relative uncertainty, adopted their centrist ideology and their feeling of dislike for the party ideologically closest to the former PCI as a shortcut to make up their mind and voted accordingly. The hypothesis is supported by the data, although further analysis is required to reach a clearer confirmation of its consistency. However, the success of the centre-right coalition at the 1994 election seems to pivot around the perceived ideological distance of centrist voters from the parties of the Left and on the increasing tendency of part of the electorate to place themselves on the centre-right of the ideological scale. Part of this tendency should probably be seen as the renewed effect of party-identification after the dealignment of the early 1990s, although exogenous factors cannot be ruled out.

Can a new general hypothesis be inferred from the specific case of the 1994 Italian election? It seems reasonable to believe that the specific Italian historical background does not allow us to draw generalisations which are too broad and abstract. Yet, more than a decade later, some of the elements which explain the outcome of the 1994 election may still be considered relevant to the understanding of Italian political behaviour and its current dynamics.

One of the objectives of this account of the 1994 Italian election outcome is to stress the role played by the "likability" heuristic in helping disoriented voters cast their vote in keeping with their previous ideological stance, in this case soundly anchored to the dislike of parties – and presumably voters - of leftwing tradition. Such aprioristic dislike was turned by Forza Italia's media-driven campaign, with its generous references to 'the Communist threat', into an electoral asset.

All the same, some of the claims often made about the effectiveness of heuristic schemas in replacing missing information cannot be shared and there are reasons for which caution should be recommended when praising the remedial effect of heuristic-reasoning on poor political knowledge. Although individuals can make sense of where the main political groups stand on the most prominent issues without necessarily knowing much about politics, ignorance may still bear a number of political

consequences. Had Forza Italia not triggered and insisted upon a feeling of dislike in the relatively unsophisticated centrist voters, the outcome of the election would probably have been different. The PDS had successfully dominated the 1993 regional and local elections and, before Forza Italia made its first appearance, it seemed to be heading straight to Palazzo Chigi. As Forza Italia seized the ideological void left by DC and PSI and used the past confrontation between Communists and anti-communists as an efficient electoral lever, the former scenario underwent major change. Through this manoeuvre of ideological replacement it successfully addressed DC and PSI's past voters in the aftermath of the burst of Tangentopoli. It was not a coincidence that these voters were also the least sophisticated. In comparison to the huge financial effort which Forza Italia had to make in order to present itself as a credible candidate to run a new government, its manifesto was relatively cheap to buy, based as it was on the protection of civil freedoms and on the far-fetched promise of a million new jobs.

It is not meant here to argue that Forza Italia's 1994 electoral success was any different from many others, similarly based on a careful and skilled use of appealing political messages, efficiently delivered by a masterly employment of the media. The idea is rather to show that, under certain conditions, the distribution of political sophistication across the electorate may offer an advantage to the party which best interprets and exploits the most obvious shortcuts. Heuristic reasoning, in turn, while being a useful tool for unsophisticated individuals, may not be as inconsequential and unbiased as has often been thought.

While a micro-account from the perspective of political psychology seems to suggest that limited knowledge of leaders and issues can be overcome by resorting to cognitive heuristics, the overall patterns of the lack of sophistication and their distribution across the ideological spectrum are not without consequences. The use of heuristics by unsophisticated voters can not imply that their ignorance is a neutral element in the background of electoral competition. On the contrary, it can easily be exploited by shrewd candidates, better targeted by simplistic slogans or dubious promises, and attention more effectively diverted from their own interests. If under conditions of uncertainty most individuals use the same type of heuristic to make up their mind (either because it is the most obvious or the least costly solution), the electoral outcome

may be biased in favour of populist or *catch-all* parties, which face almost no ideological constraints in their political discourse. Heuristic reasoning, while functioning as a proxy for missing information, may as well fall prey to a free and easy political discourse. If it does, there may be a chance that unsophisticated citizens do not really know what they need to know, but only what they are told.

Brusattin, L. (2011) Candidate appearance as a shortcut for both sophisticated and unsophisticated voters: evidence from a Spanish online study, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, (Spring 2012) 24(1): 1-20.

3. CANDIDATE VISUAL APPEARANCE AS A SHORTCUT FOR BOTH SOPHISTICATED AND UNSOPHISTICATED VOTERS: EVIDENCE FROM A SPANISH ONLINE STUDY

3.1 Introduction

The effects of visual cues and other types of cognitive shortcuts on voting decisions have for a long time been minimised either by relegating their relevance to so-called 'low information elections' (when essential information is scarce, confusing, or poor in quality) or by correlating them inversely to the level of sophistication of the electorate (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Bishin, Stevens, & Wilson, 2006). According to this view, the voters can make decisions in line with their preferences even if they ignore the details of the issues at stake in a given election, since they can attain fundamental knowledge about the candidates through other available proxies. To judge the capabilities of the contenders, voters can glean information about the candidates' profiles, while through previous experience and previous knowledge voters can make plausible propositions about the candidates' belief system and exploit such cues to cast their vote (Conover & Feldman 1989; Lupia, 1994).

It was also believed that voters who are better informed make good use of their knowledge of politics and do not need to rely on those cognitive shortcuts provided by the stereotyping of a candidate's external appearance (Fiske, 1998). Less sophisticated individuals, on the contrary, were thought to be more responsive to cues in their decision making because of their reduced capacity to process political information in terms of partisanship or ideology (Zinni, 1997; Khan & Kenny, 1999; Gomez & Wilson, 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, & Williams, 2004).

This view, which held political information and knowledge to be the discriminating factor among voters - for their resorting to cognitive shortcuts and visual stereotypes - has been challenged by more recent contributions originating within the field of experimental political psychology. In the light of these new contributions, visual stereotypes have to be considered a simplifying cognitive strategy for the processing of

complex and overabundant information (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994; Caprara, Barbanelli, & Zimbardo, 1997), and although these sorts of findings have sometimes been dismissed on the basis of the alleged limitations of experimental oversimplification (King, 2001), the literature on this subject now acknowledges the existence of sizeable effects on voting preferences due to the candidates' perceived competence (Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005), dominance (Little, Burriss, Jones, & Roberts, 2007), and attractiveness, and to the stereotyping of their appearance or physical characteristics (Rosar, Klein, & Beckers, 2008). Even for decisions that are usually based on critically informed judgments, unconscious stereotypical processes based on the candidates' visual appearance may still exercise a conspicuous influence. This sort of influence, according to Todorov et al. (2005), can contribute considerably to voting choices, although additional information about the candidates available to voters may admittedly dilute the effect of first impressions. While previous work shows that snap judgments are indeed related to voting choices, the possibility that the less politically savvy would be more inclined to use them to compensate for the lack of adequate information has been left somewhat ambiguous by these new contributions and is in need of further scrutiny. One of the objectives of this article is to draw this ambiguity to a close.

Common sense tells us that the careful grooming of a candidate's external image may have an effect only on the share of the electorate who are less knowledgeable about complex policy issues or who do not easily discern party alliances and ideologies. Similarly, the possibility that subtle visual cues may tilt the electoral balance in favour of one candidate over another is often associated with a gullible voter, easily enticed by evaluative shortcuts such as the look, elegance, eloquence, or attractiveness of a candidate. Since knowledge of and participation in the political debate – desirable as they are in a democratic electorate – are thought to offset any consideration based on purely epideictic factors, it is often believed that the reason the external image of a candidate has become so important is the lack of political sophistication among voters. This was the conclusion reached by Carolyn L. Funk (2007), who showed in an experiment involving the candidates' perceived 'competence' and 'warmth' that politically sophisticated individuals make more distinctions between trait content dimensions. Consistent with the complexity of their reasoning, sophisticated individuals

evaluate candidates' 'competence' more favourably than 'warmth'. At best, according to the prevailing view, unsophisticated voters are believed to make use of appearance-based heuristics to evaluate candidates, whereas individuals who are better informed are believed to eschew such heuristics and to base their decisions on more meaningful political concepts such as ideology or party identification. At worst, still in the prevailing view, evaluations based on stereotypical image information are neglected as a marginal phenomenon by which voting behaviour remains unscathed (Kaase, 1999).

3.2 Snap judgments and candidate perception

From the psychological perspective of dual processing (Chaike & Trope, 1999), unreflective inferences drawn subconsciously from the appearance of a candidate would belong to "system 1" cognitive processes, while the deliberate and thoughtful judgments that follow would belong to "system 2" processes. Such a model implies that "system 1" processes can have subjectively undetected effects on the conscious "system 2" processes, of which we are more typically aware. In practice, during "system 1" processes, voters may make inferences about the perceived personal dispositions of the candidates. These inferences, it has been shown, may refer to their perceived competence (Todorov et al., 2005) or, under certain circumstances, their perceived dominance (Little et al., 2007). Other experiments have also proved cases of influence based on the attractiveness and perceived personality of a candidate (Budesheim & De Paola, 1994; Rosar et al., 2008).

It is not our intention to either challenge or confirm those findings. In our case, the experimental approach is rather instrumental, in so far as it allows us, first, to isolate the effect of a candidate's visual appearance (as afforded, for instance, by an electoral poster) on the aggregate choice made by the sampled participants in the experiment, and, second, to establish whether such an effect is reduced, amplified, or suppressed by varying levels of political sophistication among the respondents. While the focus of this research is that of establishing whether politically sophisticated individuals, as opposed to unsophisticated ones, are also influenced in their voting decisions by cues prompted by the way candidates present themselves visually, some steps were also taken to

address more specific questions about which inferred personality trait ("system 1") may matter the most in shaping the ("system 2") choice of a political candidate. This was achieved by sampling 102 new participants, apart from those who took part in the main experiment, and asking them to reply to a small questionnaire with both open-ended and closed questions, tapping their top-of-mind impressions of the two mock candidates. This additional step was taken to provide a better understanding of those unreflective inferences drawn from the photos of candidates on electoral posters, which may affect voting decisions.

Previous works in this area reached their conclusions either from small-sample experiments or from large-sample studies based on the analysis of secondary data. Furthermore, experimental research on this matter has taken place only in a limited number of countries, leaving in doubt the existence of similar effects in other contexts. In contrast to previous research, this article will present the results of an experiment involving 937 individuals, all resident in Spain at the time the experiment took place. Spain was chosen because, from among 20 countries for which relevant survey data from the European Election Study 1994 and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems are available (these two surveys are among the few that include a battery of questions tapping the political sophistication of respondents), it is the only country, along with Germany, where no correlation has been found between the level of political sophistication of its citizens and their ideological self-identification (see Table 3.5 in the appendix for a detailed view of the association between these two variables across 18 countries). Moreover, Spearman's Rho correlation scores indicate that Spain is the only country where an association between sophistication and electoral participation is entirely absent. Since the experiment undertaken involved a multivariate analysis of data tapping the ideology, sophistication, and voting preferences of survey respondents, Spain was therefore held to be highly suitable for the experiment, given this country's homogeneous distribution of political knowledge across the ideological spectrum, as well as in terms of participation in general elections.

3.3 Methodology

A total of 937 randomly selected participants in a self-administered CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) online survey were separated into two randomly formed subsamples and were presented with the pictures of two hypothetical (and unknown) male candidates (see Fig. 3a and Fig. 3b). Although both images would have been equally appropriate for an electoral poster depicting the actual candidates, each picture presented the respective candidate in a slightly different context. In this respect, the images used for the experiment were not necessarily in accordance with ceteris paribus requirements concerning the clothing (see Forsythe, 1990), expression, and posture of the individuals used as stimuli (see Campbell et al., 1996). On the other hand, except for a few studies, previous research has allowed a certain degree of "visual noise" in presenting this sort of stimuli (Little et al., 2007).

A separate pilot sample of 102 individuals, other than those who participated in the main experiment, were shown each of the two images (candidate A, then candidate B, in random order) and were asked to express in a web questionnaire their top-of-mind impressions vis-à-vis the person portrayed in each of them. They were also asked to rate the candidates, using a scale of 1 to 5, on the following four traits: competence, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and leadership capability. No information about the objectives of the main experiment or the purpose of the questionnaire was disclosed.

When asked to describe the three main spontaneous sensations they got just by looking at the person portrayed in each of the two pictures, the 102 participants provided similar but not identical perceptual descriptions. Each picture was shown in succession, in random order. The open-ended answers (question wording: *"What sort of feelings or sensations does the person in the picture prompt to you? Write down the first that comes to your mind?"*) provided for each of the two pictures were coded according to identical criteria. The person shown in picture A (Table 3.1) came across above all as serious, possibly a professional or executive, calm, trustworthy, self-confident, and a potential leader. The person shown in picture B was mainly perceived as serious, nice, possibly a professional or executive, affable, self-confident, and trustworthy.

Table 3.1 – Top-of-mind personality perception (open-ended)

 A

 B
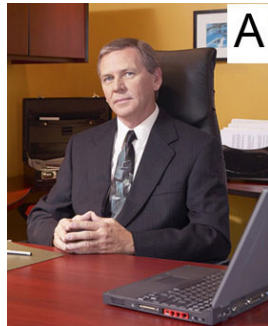
Top-of-mind perception	N	%
Serious	37	12.1%
Executive/Professional	25	8.2%
Calm	20	6.5%
Trustworthy	15	4.9%
Self-confident	15	4.9%
Leader	10	3.3%
Firm	8	2.6%
Elegant	7	2.3%
Boss-like	7	2.3%
Untrustworthy	5	1.6%
Clever	5	1.6%
Thoughtful	5	1.6%
Money-making	5	1.6%
Affable	4	1.3%
Competent	4	1.3%
Politician	4	1.3%
Other (Less than 1.3%)	130	42.8%
TOTAL	306	100%

Top-of-mind perception	N	%
Serious	28	9.2%
Nice	18	5.9%
Executive/Professional	15	4.9%
Affable	12	3.9%
Self-confident	12	3.9%
Trustworthy	11	3.6%
Untrustworthy	11	3.6%
Mature/Old	10	3.3%
Elegant	10	3.3%
Calm	7	2.3%
Competent	6	2.0%
False	6	2.0%
Cold/Distant	6	2.0%
Clever	6	2.0%
Happy	6	2.0%
Unlikable	5	1.6%
Other (Less than 1.6%)	137	44.7%
TOTAL	306	100%

The same participants were also asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, each of the persons appearing in the photos, in terms of four prompted personality traits: attractiveness, competence, trustworthiness, and leadership capability (Question wording: "*Although you do not know the person in the picture, to what extent would you say that this person is… …attractive, …competent, … trustworthy, …capable of leadership, on a 1 to 5 scale?*"). For each of these four traits the mean scores resulting from the ratings were compared. No significant differences were found, except for "leadership capability", on which the person portrayed in picture A scored significantly better (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 – Personality traits: rating means comparison (N=103)

	Mean	Mean	Mean Difference
Attractive	2.69	2.56	0.13
Competent	3.49	3.40	0.09
Trustworthy	3.25	3.13	0.12
Capable of leadership	3.75	3.53	0.22**

** p<0,05

Overall, the two images chosen for the experiment did not seem either too similar or vastly different in terms of the feelings they may evoke. For this reason they were thought to be adequate for the purposes of this research. The picture of each of the two candidates was later presented to participants of the main experiment in combination with a set of rightwing or leftwing policy statements, which were meant both to complete the profile of the candidate and to allow the respondents to easily classify the candidate either as rightwing or leftwing. The two sets of policy statements were

swapped in the two samples, so that each of the two groups of respondents had to express a preference in the presence of two alternative combinations of candidate/statements, which inversely mirrored each other in the two samples.

Fig. 3a - Candidates as seen by subsample A

- Construir más viviendas de protección oficial
- Mejorar la redistribución de la riqueza
- Reducir la tasa de paro

- Aumentar la seguridad ciudadana
- Acabar con la inmigración ilegal
- Reducir los impuestos

Translation of the policy statements:

Construir más viviendas de protección official	Construction of more council estates
Mejorar la redistribución de la riqueza	Improvement of income redistribution
Reducir la tasa de paro	Reduction of the unemployment rate
Aumentar la seguridad ciudadana	Improvement of public security/safety
Acabar con la immigración ilegal	Defeat of illegal immigration
Reducir los impuestos	Tax cuts/reduction

Fig. 3b - Candidates as seen by subsample B

- Construir más viviendas de protección oficial
- Mejorar la redistribución de la riqueza
- Reducir la tasa de paro

- Aumentar la seguridad ciudadana
- Acabar con la inmigración ilegal
- Reducir los impuestos

The candidates' stances on three policy issues were manipulated to randomly assign each respondent to either of two alternative versions of the same questionnaire. In the first version candidate A was assigned a set of statements taken from a leftwing political manifesto, while candidate B was assigned a set of rightwing statements. In the second alternative version of the questionnaire the candidates and their assigned issue statements were, as stated, swapped.

The main objective of the experiment was to establish the extent to which the outer shell of a candidate has an effect on the voters' ballot choices when the candidates hold similar ideological stances but differ in their appearance. Additional questions were included in the questionnaire submitted to the respondents to gather information on a number of variables deemed relevant for the purpose of the experiment. Care was taken to ensure that each combination of picture/statements would randomly appear on either the right or the left of the screen, with no pre-established order. Each respondent was presented with either the first (if he belonged to sample A) or the second version (if he belonged to sample B) of the questionnaire and was asked the following question at the very beginning: "*Imagine that these two people are candidates running in the next general election. Under each photo you can see each candidate's main electoral*

statements. Whom would you vote for?". The questions that followed addressed, in sequence, the intention of the respondent to participate in the next general election, what party the respondent would vote for, what (real) party the respondent had voted for in the last general election, the main socio-demographic features of the respondent (age, gender, education, region of residency), and the respondent's level of political sophistication (measured using a four-question quiz). Although it is impossible to fully recreate the situation in which a voter has to choose between two candidates with a different look and opposite ideological inclinations, it is reasonable to expect that each respondent, given the lack of any other information, would primarily consider the issue statements assigned to each candidate to make a choice in accordance with such respondent's own ideology. Any deviation from this pattern may be indicative of the respondents' use of alternative cues and may suggest the deployment of information shortcuts (in this case the candidates' appearance) during the process of candidate selection.

As far as online survey methodology is concerned, in the last decade web surveys have been deployed more and more as an efficient, fast, and relatively inexpensive tool to measure people's attitudes and opinions. An increasing number of online polls have regularly made an appearance on the news during the weeks leading up to national elections in many Western countries, particularly those in which the use of the Internet is widespread. As opposed to more traditional survey methodologies, online sampling is non-probabilistic in nature and often implies the use of access panels (Porter & Whitcomb, 2005; Goeritz, 2005).

 Sampling in this study was performed through an invitation sent to the members of a commercial access panel normally used for market research purposes. The sampling procedure did not pursue a sample deemed to be representative of the Spanish population, but was performed to obtain 1) an overall equal representation of male and female respondents and 2) two randomly generated and directly comparable subsamples through the automatic assignment of the respondents to two manipulated versions of an otherwise identical questionnaire. The assignment of each respondent to either of the two subsamples was randomised and each subsample was exposed to either one of two electoral posters, each featuring a set of three policy statements jointly with the portrait-image of a hypothetical candidate.

In the first step of the analysis that followed data collection, we looked at the overall frequency distribution of respondents who chose each of the two candidates. Any significant difference in such distribution across the two subsamples was held to be indicative of an effect due to the swapping of the pictures of the candidates, the appearance of the two candidates being the only variable to change in the experiment. In a further step, three multinomial logit models were specified to test a set of three respective hypotheses concerning the nature of the visual cue under scrutiny, namely, that:

1) the appearance effect holds true regardless of the gender, age, and education of the voter (model 1);

2) the level of political sophistication does not eliminate or reduce the impact that the appearance of a candidate may have on the voter's choice (model 2);

3) the appearance effect does not interact in any way with the sophistication of voters and remains unaffected by any such interaction (model 3).

The estimates of the logit models as well as the overall results of the experiment are presented in detail in the following section.

3.4 Results

It should first be said that the overall sample of respondents was slightly biased towards the left of the ideological scale. This partly reflects a natural feature of the underlying universe, because at the time of the experiment a majority of Spaniards supported a leftwing government. There was no attempt, however, to achieve a sample representing the universe of the Spanish electorate. Efforts were only made to gather enough respondents to guarantee robust statistical estimates. The first step in the analysis involved a simple comparison of column proportions between the two subsamples, based on a two-sided test.

Table 3.3 – Comparison of column proportions

	Subsample A		Subsample B	
	N	%	N	%
Leftwing candidate	292	61.6%**	253	54.6%**
Rightwing candidate	182	38.4%	210	45.4%

** p<0.05

The respondents of subsample A were shown a leftwing candidate sitting behind his desk, his laptop open to one side, with his joined hands tidily gathered in front of his chest. The picture also showed part of the room and some of the furniture. The rightwing candidate was presented in the foreground, with no further insight into the surrounding settings. Both candidates were elegantly dressed, and both had a sober and neutral expression on their faces, neither too serious nor smiling.

More than 60% of the respondents in subsample A answered that they would vote for the leftwing candidate, while a much lower 38.4% that they would vote for the rightwing candidate (Table 3.3). Things went somewhat differently with the respondents of subsample B, who were shown the same two candidates, but with the two batteries of policy statements swapped. Only 54.6% of these respondents chose the leftwing candidate, who was embodied this time by the candidate pictured in the foreground. The remaining 45.4% expressed their preference for the rightwing candidate, now sitting behind his desk. A simple test of column proportions shows the difference between the voting patterns of the two subsamples to be statistically significant and therefore not caused by chance.

Differences between the feelings evoked by the photo of each of the two candidates, of the sort of those illustrated in Table 3.2 – in particular, different perceptions of "leadership capability" – may explain the shift of preferences across the two samples. Nevertheless, the identification of the specific perceived personality trait responsible for the significantly higher percentage of preferences for the person portrayed in picture A when presented as a leftwing candidate is beyond the objectives of this work and will not be addressed here directly. The second step in the analysis aimed to estimate the

coefficients of a logit model of candidate choice capable of establishing to what extent the appearance of a candidate may affect voting. The model was specified in accordance with a basic voting prediction model that included the following set of variables.:

X1) the respondent's gender (*female*, *male* as the baseline);

X2) the party/ideological preference of the respondent (*leftwing*, *rightwing*; *centrist voters* were taken as the baseline), inferred from the party for which they had voted in the last general election (Those individuals who had voted for PSOE - Partido Socialista Obrero Español, IU - Izquierda Unida, and ERC - Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya in the last election were classified as leftwing, while those who had voted for PP - Partido Popular as rightwing; all the remaining respondents were classified as neither leftwing nor rightwing and were treated as baseline to estimate the regression coefficients in the logit models that follow);

X3) the respondent's level of political sophistication (*highly sophisticated*, *moderately sophisticated*; *low sophistication* was the baseline). This variable was included in model 2. It was also included in model 3 as a variable interacting with *appearance*;

X4) education (*primary education*, *university education*; *high school education* was the baseline);

X5) age (*18 to 24, 35 to 44 and 45 to 99 y/o*; *25 to 34y/o* was taken as the baseline);

X6) appearance (the provenance from either subsample identified the corresponding appearance of the candidates, which was manipulated in the experiment).

As for the dependent variable, this was based on the policy statements shown along with the picture of each candidate, with 1 coded as rightwing, 0 as leftwing.

Table 3.4 – Logistic Regression Models of Appearance-based Candidate Choice

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Female	0,22	0.14	0.23	0.14	0.22	0.14
Leftwing	-0.54***	0.16	-0.55***	0.16	-0.54***	0.16
Rightwing	0.85***	0.19	0.84***	0.19	0.84***	0.19
Highly sophisticated			0.11	0.17		
Mod'ly sophisticated			0.01	0.17		
Primary education	-0.16	0.21	-0.16	0.21	-0.16	0.21
University education	-0.17	0.15	-0.18	0.15	-0.18	0.15
18 to 24 y/o	0.32	0.20	0.33	0.20	0.33	0.20
35 to 44 y/o	0.16	0.18	0.15	0.18	0.16	0.18
45 to 99 y/o	-0.09	0.19	-0.11	0.19	-0.10	0.19
Appearance	0.29**	0.14	0.28**	0.14	0.34**	0.17
Sophistication x Appearance					-.03	0.05
Constant	-1.04	0.34			-1.04	0.34
N	938		938		938	
Nagelkerke R Square	.095***		.095***		.095***	

*** $p<0.01$; ** $p<0.05$

The logistic regression results of model 1 suggest that the participants in the experiment preferred candidates ideologically closer to their own political beliefs. Being leftwing or rightwing respectively reduced and increased the chances of casting a preference in favour of the candidate associated with the rightwing policy statements (codified as 1 on the left hand side of the equation). This finding comes as no surprise and is consistent with the mainstream models of voting behaviour. Socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, or education do not have any impact on the dependent variable.

More noticeably, the given appearance of a candidate does have an effect on the likelihood of being voted for. Although it is no direct measure of its strength, model 1 shows a significant positive coefficient of .29, a finding that supports the hypothesis of adoption of an appearance-based visual shortcut by voters. It remains to be seen whether the effect that has been detected holds true independently from a voter's political sophistication, or whether it only concerns those unsophisticated voters who presumably lack an ideological map to guide their political decisions.

The second model presented in Table 3.4 includes a measure of the sophistication of each respondent and tries to establish whether the appearance of a candidate influences all potential voters or exclusively those less sophisticated and therefore more prone, in theory, to adopt some kind of alternative and improvised heuristic to make their voting decision. Somewhat surprisingly, the coefficients of model 2 do not show any reduction

of the "appearance effect" due to correspondingly higher levels of sophistication. On the contrary, a higher political awareness seems to be largely irrelevant, so that highly sophisticated individuals are as likely as the unsophisticated to succumb to the influence exercised by the way a candidate looks or presents himself.

In model 3 an interactive term was added to control for a possible combined effect of the visual cue and the level of political sophistication. The results, however, remained unchanged. The only sizeable influence exerted on the choice of one candidate over another, along with the respondent's ideology, is caused by having swapped the pictures of the candidates.

3.5 Conclusion

As George Lakoff (2004) points out, "we all have been taught to think that our reasoning is conscious, literal, logical, dispassionate, disembodied and based on self-interest. Unfortunately what has been learned in the last 30 years of cognitive science is that every single part of this belief is plainly wrong. In reality, 98% of our reasoning is non-conscious". In the study of voting behaviour, cognitive shortcuts and heuristic reasoning have often been associated with voters who lack relevant information about the candidates and the issues at stake as readily available decision-making tools to be deployed when most needed. By and large, this view is indebted to an understanding of human reasoning that is not fully up to date. Recent studies have shown that snap judgments based on unreflective inferences drawn from the visual appearance of a candidate, especially from their faces, can affect the outcome of elections and influence the deliberative processes involved in voting decisions. However, previous research in this area has left ambiguous the possibility that those less immersed in the political landscape would show a greater relationship between visual appearance and voting.

This work has tried to go a step further and to look directly at the relationship between the political sophistication of voters and their susceptibility to visual cues. Our findings argue that a higher degree of political sophistication leaves unaltered the influence of snap judgments based on visual cues. A key question looms in the distance: how and to

what extent can political parties and candidates take advantage of and rely upon non-conscious cognitive visual cues to win an election?

To answer this question one should first accept the possibility that some elements of a political campaign may affect voters' choices without the voters fully realizing it. One of the objectives of this work was to show that there is a qualitative difference between conscious shortcuts adopted because of the lack of one's political knowledge (Brusattin, 2007) vis-à-vis those based on perceptual elements of the campaign, of which voters are not necessarily aware. We can refer to this latter type of shortcut as "unprocessed" or "unconscious". Unsophisticated individuals can fall prey to both types of shortcuts. In contrast, sophisticated individuals can generally make reasoned decisions and thereby rely less on those shortcuts meant to process faster meaningful political information. They can still be influenced by *unprocessed* ones.

More than three decades ago, Butler and Stokes (1974) theorised that for any political issue or object to influence the vote of an individual, the elector has to 1) have some awareness of the object, 2) have a genuine attitude toward it, and 3) identify the object with any of the political parties or candidates. However, the findings that have been presented cast some doubt on the theoretical adequacy of these attributes. In particular, it is hard to envisage the possibility that a voter consciously processes the image of an unknown candidate (the only factor to vary in the experiment) in terms of party politics or ideology. This is rather more likely to occur without the awareness of the influenced subject. Such a conclusion is confirmed further by the fact that the level of political sophistication of the subject does not prevent or reduce such a visual effect.

Nonetheless, since there certainly are shortcomings in the experiment undertaken, which may attract potential criticism, this conclusive section will also try to address at least some of them. Firstly, a simulation based on an online questionnaire may not necessarily reflect the real-life situation that a voter has to face when choosing between two candidates of opposing ideologies. Indeed, the voter usually knows the candidates, even if superficially, and the candidates' appearance is not the only available cue at their disposal. Although care was taken to keep most of the socio-demographic features (i.e., gender, age, and attractiveness) of the depicted candidates the same, it is still possible that a subjective perception of any of these may have biased the choices of the sampled participants. Ideally, a larger number of rotating pictures should have been

used to reduce the effect of other factors concerned with the image of the candidates. Nevertheless, while this objection is legitimate, any effect is certainly due to a perceptual cue based on the image/appearance of the two candidates.

Secondly, it was not possible to describe the possible interactions between the 'appearance effect' and other factors that may influence a voter's decision, or to fully clarify under what condition such an effect takes place. It is likely that local or second-order elections, in which the voters are not always familiar with the candidates, are more prone to witness the influence of unprocessed shortcuts on the final election result. Thirdly, the number of issues that were sampled to communicate the candidate's political/ideological stance should also have been larger, to reduce their relative individual weight in each candidate description. However, the visual stimuli that were shown to the participants do not differ that much from those used by politicians in their electoral posters, usually showing not more than one or two electoral slogans.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned sources of criticism, it can be stated with a reasonable degree of certainty that, in accordance with the findings presented, the exterior appearance of a candidate affects voter behaviour at the ballot box. Moreover, this influence is unaffected by the voter's degree of political sophistication. Although further research is needed, this paper has presented evidence in support of the hypothesis that snap judgments based on the visual appearance of a candidate, on electoral posters for instance, can influence the voter's choices in parallel with the more deliberate and ideologically oriented judgments based on the candidates' policy statements. Such an effect is a resilient one and does not wither away once voters are better informed about politics. Indeed, the findings tend to rule out the possibility that such non-verbal cues are adopted solely by those individuals who lack the sophistication needed to make an informed decision. In the light of this novel evidence, it seems more tenable to state that any individual values a candidate not only for what the candidate says, but also on the basis of what the candidate wears, how the candidate smiles, or what the candidate looks like, no matter the individual's awareness of or interest in politics.

3.6 Appendix

3.6.1 Tables

Table 3.5a - Patterns of correlation between political sophistication and selected variables across 18 countries

	Belgium	Denmark	West Germ.	East Germ.	Greece	Italy	Spain	France	Ireland	Netherl.	Portugal	Great Britain
Satisfied with democracy	.14**	.14**	.19**	.09**	.07*	.08*	.12**	.10**	.08*	.14**	not significant	.08*
Favours the restriction of immigrants' rights	-.21**	-.11**	-.22**	-.23**	-.13**	-.14**	-.23**	-.21**	-.11**	-.16**	-.16**	-.09*
Participation in the last national election	.20**	.20**	.24**	.09**	.22**	.13**	.14**	.17**	.23**	.27**	not significant	.25**
Interest in politics	.44**	.36**	.39**	.44**	.36**	.44**	.43**	.42**	.37**	-.42**	.35**	.44**
Left-right self-identification												
Left vs Centre (Left=0, Centre=1)					-.10*	-.07*		-.09**		-.11**		-.08*
Centre vs Right (Centre=0, Right=1)		.17**						.22**		.07*	-.13**	.15**
Left vs Right (Left=0, Right=1)	.10*	.11**			-.10*			.13**			-.15**	
Left vs Centre-right (Left=0, Cntr-right=1)	.08*				-.09*	-.06*				-.07*		
Centre-left vs Right (Cntr-left=0, Right=1)		.14**						.15**			-.12**	.11**

Source: European Election Study 1994 (Sample Size varies between 1000 and 1082 interviews)

Table 3.5b - Patterns of correlation between political sophistication and selected variables across 18 countries

	Norway	Germany	West Germ.	East Germ.	Hungary	Poland	Spain	Mexico	Taiwan	Netherl.	USA
Satisfied with the democratic process	.05*	.14**	.17**	.10**	.19**	.12**	not significant	-.05*	-.17**	.05**	.16**
Political parties care about what people think	.04*	.05**	.06*	not significant	.10**	.11**	.05*	na	-.07*	.07**	not significant
Whom people vote for can make a difference	not significant	not significant	not significant	not significant	.22**	.14**	not significant	.05*	.11**	.06**	.11**
Participation in the last national election	.11**	.13**	.14**	.12**	.33**	.23**	not significant	.14**	.06*	.17**	.30**
Left-right self-identification											
Left vs Centre (Left=0, Centre=1)					-.15**	-.16**		.10*		-.06*	-.16**
Centre vs Right (Centre=0, Right=1)	.08**				.14**	.15**		-.11**		.06*	.09**
Left vs Right (Left=0, Right=1)	.06*										-.08*
Left vs Centre-right (Left=0, Cntr-right=1)					-.10**	-.08*					-.12**
Centre-left vs Right (Cntr-left=0, Right=1)	.07**				.06*	.09**		-.08**			

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems 1996-2000 (Sample size varies between 950 and 1230 interviews)

Entries are Spearman's Rho correlation scores (*** p<0.01; ** p<0.05)

3.6.2 Formal specification of the logistic regression models presented in the article

Model 1: Ln (Pij /1- Pij)= $\alpha_{ij} + \beta_{1ij} X_{1ij} + \beta_{2ij} X_{2ij} + \beta_{4ij} X_{4ij} + \beta_{5ij} X_{5ij} + \beta_{6ij} X_{6ij}$ + eij

Model 2: Ln (Pij /1- Pij)= $\alpha_{ij} + \beta_{1ij} X_{1ij} + \beta_{2ij} X_{2ij} + \beta_{3ij} X_{3ij} + \beta_{4ij} X_{4ij} + \beta_{5ij} X_{5ij} + \beta_{6ij} X_{6ij}$ + eij

Model 3: Ln (Pij /1- Pij)= $\alpha_{ij} + \beta_{1ij} X_{1ij} + \beta_{2ij} X_{2ij} + \beta_{4ij} X_{4ij} + \beta_{5ij} X_{5ij} + \beta_{6ij} X_{6ij} + \beta_{7ij}(X_{3ij} * X_{6ij})$ + eij

3.6.3 Construction of the index of political sophistication

Step 1 - Four-question political knowledge quiz (January 2008)

1. To prevent the rise of inflation, what do central banks usually do?

	%
They raise interest rates	54,5
They lower the interest rates	19,6
I don't know	25,9
Total	100,0

2. Who is the current President of the European Commission?

	%
Romano Prodi	27,6
José Manuel Barroso	39,0
Toni Blair	2,9
I don't know	30,5
Total	100,0

3. In comparison with the Congreso de los Diputados, the Spanish Senate has...

	%
More power than the Congreso de los Diputados	25,2
Less power than the Congreso de los Diputados	32,3
The same power as the Congreso de los Diputados	11,7
I don't know	30,8
Total	100,0

4. Who is the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs?

	%
Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba	10,3
Miguel Angel Moratinos	74,0
Jesús Caldera Sanchez/Capitán	1,3
I don't know	14,4
Total	100,0

Step 2 - Assignment of each individual to one of three available levels of political sophistication according the number of correct given answers

	%
High sophistication (3 or 4 correct answers)	34,8
Average sophistication (2 correct answers)	30,8
Low sophistication (0 or 1 correct answers)	34,4
Total	100,0

3.6.4 European Election Study 1994, question wordings

Satisfaction with democracy

On the whole are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in (COUNTRY) ? Would you say you are...?

Favours the restriction of immigrants' rights

Still thinking of these people (immigrants), do you think their rights should be ... ? (Extended, Restricted, Left as they are, DK)

Participation in the last national election

The last general election took place in …. For one reason or another, many people in (COUNTRY) did not vote in that election. Could you please think back to that last election, the one in …. Did you vote in that election or not ? (Voted, Did not vote)

Interest in politics

To what extent would you say you are interested in politics? A great deal, To some extent, Not much, Not at all, DK)

Left-right self-identification

In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right". How would you place your views on this scale ? (1-10 scale, left to right)

Political Sophistication

Based on a multiple-question quiz about political knowledge included in the questionnaire of the European Election Survey 1994. The quiz questions are not available.

3.6.5 Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, questions wordings

Satisfaction with Democratic Process

On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?

Political parties care what people think

Some people say that political parties in [country] care what ordinary people think. Others say that political parties in [country] don't care what ordinary people think. Using the scale on this card, (where ONE means that political parties care about what ordinary people think, and FIVE means that they don't care what ordinary people think), where would you place yourself?

Whom people vote for makes a difference

Some people say that no matter whom people vote for, it won't make any difference in what happens. Others say that whom people vote for can make a difference in what happens. Using the scale on this card (where ONE means that voting won't make a difference to what happens and FIVE means that voting can make a difference), where would you place yourself?

Participation in the last national election

Whether or not respondent cast a ballot (regardless of whether the ballot was valid) in PRECEDING election

Left-right self-identification

In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?

Political Sophistication

Based on a multiple-question quiz about political knowledge included in the questionnaire of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems 1996-2001. The quiz questions are not available.

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4. "CRISIS" AS SUBLIMINAL PRIME: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE OF ITS IMPACT ON BOTH SOPHISTICATED AND UNSOPHISTICATED INDIVIDUALS

4.1 Introduction

Individuals are bombarded daily by a number of visual and informational inputs about politics which may affect in one way or another their perceptions of parties and leaders. Often these inputs are there with the specific purpose of influencing the public. But because their delivery is often partial and fragmented, their targets are usually hit only for a fraction of a second by images or messages of which they are hardly aware.

In this sort of environment, the solidity of one's political belief-structure, as well as the degree of sophistication of such beliefs supposedly shields an individual from the persuading power of the many bits of information that are absorbed daily, without being fully processed in terms of content, credibility or source. Or does it?

In terms of political behaviour, unsophisticated individuals are thought to be more responsive to cognitive cues because of their reduced capacity to process political information in terms of partisanship or ideology (Funk 1997, Zinni 1997, Khan and Kenny 1999, Gomez and Wilson 2001, Valentino et al 2004). Recent contributions investigating the role of political knowledge in media priming effects (Seo 2007) and framing effects on public opinion and attitudes (Lee and Chang 2010) suggested a moderating effect for political sophistication, but were far from conclusive. Previous research also showed that unsophisticated individuals, because of their lack of information, consciously resort to cognitive cues in order to form their opinion about political candidates but that, by contrast, political sophistication is largely irrelevant for the adoption of cues that are available to the senses but processed unconsciously (Brusattin 2007, 2010).

According to recent developments in the cognitive sciences, 98% of our reasoning is non-conscious (Lakoff 2004). For this reason, the possible existence of tools of political

communication that have an effect on an individual's political opinions (1) without him fully realizing it and (2) effectively deliverable whatever his level of sophistication, raises considerable interest, especially with regard to the perception of political objects such as parties, candidates or leaders. Even more so, since it is a well established assumption in the study of political behaviour (at least for that part of the research which is based on survey data) that for any political issue or object to influence an individual's political decision, he/she must be, first of all, aware of it (Butler and Stokes 1974).

For the purposes pursued in this paper, it is relevant to distinguish between *implicit* (or *unconscious*) vs. *subliminal* perception of political objects. The first type of perception does not reach conscious awareness due to lack of attention, whereas the second involves the existence of a stimulus that is presented in such a way that it cannot reach conscious awareness even if attention is directed towards it (Dijksterhuis, Arts and Smith 2005). A subliminal message or prime can be defined as such when it is discriminated by the senses (objective threshold) but does not reach conscious awareness (subjective threshold), and therefore cannot be reported verbally.

If we were to adopt the psychological perspective of dual-processing (Chaike & Trope 2000), subliminal perception could be seen as materialising before or together with the unreflective inferences of "system 1" cognitive processes and anticipating therefore the deliberate and thoughtful judgements which belong to "system 2" cognitive processes. In this model, "system 1" processes can have subjectively undetected effects on the conscious "system 2" processes, of which we are more typically aware.

Within the social sciences, the topic of subliminal perception has been dealt both with scepticism and fascination for decades. The most famous anecdote involving the use of a subliminal message goes back to 1957 and refers to the claim, made by the market researcher James Vicary, that he could increase the sales of a given product just by subliminally flashing words that promoted it during a film. At times, this field of research has raised controversies. Its findings have often been met with unease and, according to some, the very notion that human behaviour can be influenced by unconscious perceptions causes fear among scholars (Dixon 1986, Norretranders 1998). Nonetheless, a considerable amount of work about subliminal perception has

accumulated in the last three decades and a sizeable part of the research has addressed the most controversial issue of all those related to subliminal perception, namely the possibility of changing people's attitudes through subliminal stimuli. Is then such possibility, known as '*evaluative conditioning*', a real phenomenon?

A number of experiments have tried to answer this question. Some involved the evaluation of words paired with positively and negatively valenced stimuli (Staats, Staats & Crawford 1962), while others elicited the evaluation of the image of a target person preceded by subliminally presented images of positive or negative events (Krosnick 1992). In this latter case, both words and persons paired with positive stimuli were evaluated more positively than those paired with negative stimuli.

Most of these experiments seem indeed to converge towards a positive answer to the question we posited (De Houwer, Baeyens & Eelen 1994, De Houwer, Hendricks & Baeyens 1997). However, to date only one of these experiments has tried to ascertain the extent to which evaluative conditioning is effective at changing or bending political attitudes. The context thereof was provided by the George W. Bush presidential campaign of year 2000. Then, he was accused of serving television ads carrying subliminal messages. In these messages, the words 'bureaucrats' and 'democrats' were flashed during the ads together with the face of his Democratic opponent Al Gore. At some point, during the same advert, the word 'RATS' also occupied the whole screen for one thirtieth of a second, which is just above the threshold of human visual perception.

In order to assess whether the use of such campaign techniques may influence the voters' behaviour, Weinberger and Westen (2008) tried to replicate the essential aspects of Bush's conditioning message by testing the effect of the subliminal word 'RATS' on the appraisal of a hypothetical political candidate. The participants in the experiment were asked to closely watch a screen in which a screen-sized letter X was replaced by the picture of an unknown candidate. Four different subliminal stimuli (the word 'RATS' and three more) were flashed for one single frame without letting the participants know. The participants were then asked to evaluate the candidate through a battery of 11 evaluative items and were later asked to describe what they had seen using both an open-ended and a close-ended response format, in order to make sure that the

stimulus had not been the object of conscious perception. In keeping with the prediction, the subliminal presentation of the word 'RATS' led to a worse evaluation of the hypothetical candidate, but only when the statements to be evaluated were negative (i.e. "I dislike this politician"). The authors therefore concluded that 1) negative evaluations of politicians are more easily manipulated than positive evaluations and 2) those trying to influence evaluations of others might have more success if they target negative as opposed to positive evaluations (Weinberger and Westen 2008: 638).

Beside the relative scarcity of contributions aiming to assess the impact of subliminal priming on people's political attitudes and voting choices, there are a number of more general issues within this field of research that still remain unaddressed. First, given that most experiments entailed the conditioned evaluation of neutral objects, it is still unclear what role prior attitudes may play in processing subliminal stimuli and to what extent pre-formed opinions about the object of any evaluation may counter the effect of subliminal primes. One would expect that people with weak attitudes are easier to influence than people with stronger ones. Similarly, sophisticated individuals with a great deal of information about the object of judgement may be more resilient to any sort of conditioning. Second, it has been suggested that attitudes prompted by evaluative conditioning could affect impulsive and less rational behaviour, while it would be less likely to affect more deliberate, intention-driven behaviour (Cacioppo, Marshall-Goodell, Tassinari and Petty, 1992). In short, the more a given behaviour is the consequence of thoughtful reasoning, the less we should be inclined to believe that evaluative priming can change it. All the same, these propositions remain mostly unverified. In particular, it is certainly not clear to what extent the conditioning power of subliminal cues can influence people's political opinions.

Previous work looked at the relationship between the sophistication of voters and their susceptibility to non-conscious visual cues and showed that such cues have an effect on voters' choices, no matter their knowledge of politics (Brusattin 2010). But while sophisticated individuals can be influenced by implicit cues which in normal conditions are accessible to the senses, it remains to be seen whether a similar conclusion holds for those cues which cannot reach the threshold of conscious awareness *a priori*, such as subliminal ones. Although the use of subliminal techniques in order to influence the

voters' electoral choices is unheard of in Europe (let alone prohibited by precise deontological guidelines issued by national advertising industries) an experiment of this nature will allow us to better understand the mechanisms behind perceptual judgements of political leaders as well as the extent to which cognitive priming can influence such judgements. As a matter of fact, cues that can be assimilated to subliminal ones are everywhere. Any communication campaign, be it an advertising campaign or an electoral campaign, is effective insofar as it reaches its target not only through plain rational and logically structured messages, but also when it disseminates cues in the target's environment which later get mediated and amplified by word of mouth, overheard conversations, references in the media which do not get full attention, etc.

Cues that are the object of implicit or unconscious perception pullulate. Voters that are impacted by them would not be able to report it, if asked, simply because they are unaware of them. Far from being irrelevant, these cues may play a major role in shaping our judgements both as consumers and as voters. Once again, it could be objected that casting a vote for one candidate or another is based on decisions informed by thoughtful reasoning about political issues, ideology, economic considerations and so on. In short, the more sophisticated the voter, the less likely the influence of this sort of cues on one's vote. But this line of argument cannot be taken for granted and will hereby be put to empirical scrutiny.

The relevance of such an assessment seems even more conspicuous in the light of recent insights achieved within the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience, according to which a clear distinction between *explicit* and *implicit* cognitive processes has to be made. So called "system 1" processes can have subjectively undetected effects on conscious processes, while "system 2" processes, of which we are more typically aware, are responsible for deliberate and thoughtful judgements (Chaike & Trope, 2000; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren & Hall, 2005; Westen, 1998). Now, while *explicit* – "system 2" – processes can easily be reported by opinion polls, *implicit* ones cannot. They have to be detected by specifically-designed experiments.

This has obvious implications for the study of political behaviour. Surveys can ask very detailed questions about the voters' perceptions, but respondents can only report opinions they are consciously aware of. Therefore, many of the emotional associations

which can affect those opinions are not necessarily accounted for, because they are mostly formed through *implicit* – "system 1" – cognitive processes.

In the next paragraphs, this article will present the results of an experiment involving a sample of 390 individuals, who were asked to fill a short online questionnaire at the beginning of April 2011.

4.2 Methodology

Following Weinberger and Westen (2008), 390 Spanish individuals took a web survey based on a self-administered online questionnaire. According to standard practice, all participants (211 males and 179 females, mean age 36,2, s.d. 10,3) had previously registered with a consumer online panel commonly used for market research purposes. They were invited to take the survey by a customised email which did not make any reference to the objective of the research. The questionnaire featured 20 questions and took roughly 7-8 minutes to be filled in. A brief introduction informed the respondents that they were going to see a short online video clip featuring the image of a politician. The actual clip (an MPG-format video file hosted on Youtube) started with a letter "X" in the middle of the screen, on which they were told to click. Once the clip started, the letter "X" was replaced by the static picture of the Spanish Prime Minister, José Luís Rodriguez Zapatero. Participants, automatically assigned to one of four randomly-formed groups, were shown either one of three following subliminal stimuli: the word "RATA", the word "AATR", the word "CRISIS" respectively, all in black capital letters on a white background) or no stimulus at all, before being presented with the picture of Zapatero. The choice of this set of words as stimuli is due to the objective of replicating a previous experiment which took place in the United States in 2000 (Weinberger and Westen 2008), inspired in turn by one of the TV advertisements used by George W. Bush. The sequence of letters "AATR" was used in order to control for the physical structure of the stimulus vis-à-vis the word "RATA" (i.e. to control for the possibility that the unconscious impact is due not to the meaning of the word "RATA" but only to the shape of the letters forming the actual word). Finally, the word "CRISIS" was used in order to subliminally prime those participants to whom such word was shown by

evoking the current economic crisis. Each of the subliminal stimuli were flashed for 20 milliseconds, while the image of Zapatero lasted for 5 whole seconds and remained on the screen after the clip once it stopped playing. The total duration of the clip was 6 seconds. The size of the stimuli was approximately half that of the whole area occupied by the visualisation on the screen of the pre-edited videoclip. Setting the duration of the frames carrying the subliminal stimuli to 20 milliseconds was achieved through the use of specific video editing software and granted that the stimuli could not be seen because the main supraliminal stimulus followed closely behind. Such a procedure is called 'backward masking' (Breitmeyer & Öğmen 2006) and implies that the supraliminal picture, in this case the picture of the Spanish prime minister, by being shown immediately after it, helps prevent the recognition of the subliminal stimulus, which would otherwise be detected without the masking image.

Fig 4a – Stimuli used in the experiment

Subliminally primed individuals ("CRISIS", "AATR", "RATA")

| 3" | 0,025" | 5,975" |

Non primed individuals

| 3" | 6" |
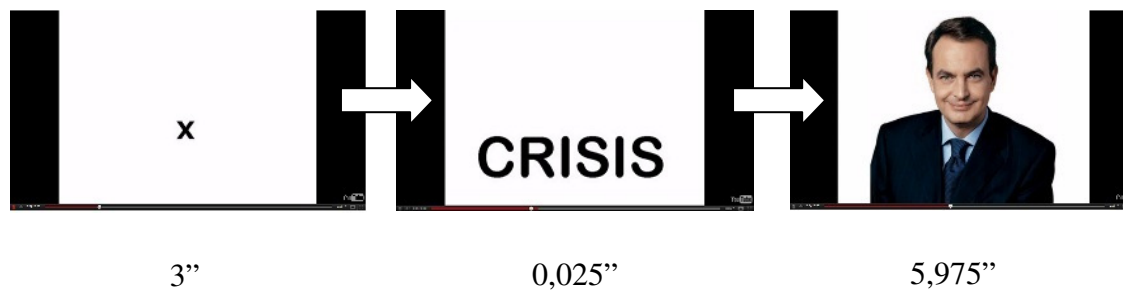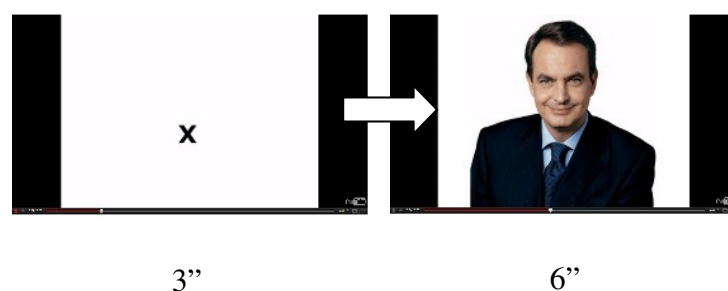
Once primed, the participants were then invited to evaluate the Prime Minister Zapatero - as appearing in the supraliminal picture - in relation to eleven statements, to be evaluated on 7-point Likert scales (ranging from "Agree completely" to "Disagree completely"). Once again, following Weinberger and Westen (ibid.), the evaluative statements were the following: (1) "This candidate looks competent"; (2) "This politician strikes me as honest"; (3) "There is something about this politician that makes me feel positive"; (4) "There is something about this politician that makes me feel disgusted"; (5) "There is something about this politician that makes me feel angry"; (6) "There is something fishy about this politician"; (7) "There is something about this politician that makes me feel that I can trust him"; (8) "I like this politician"; (9) "I dislike this politician"; (10) "I would vote for this politician". To the first ten statements it was added (11) "This politician is generous" as the eleventh evaluative statement, in order to specifically test if the second, alternative, Spanish meaning of the word "RATA", which differs from the English meaning of "RAT", as *despicable person*, and refers instead to a *stingy person*.

The next section of the questionnaire aimed at making sure that the subliminal primes were not perceived consciously by the respondents. An open-ended question required them to describe what they had seen in the short video clip. Next, the participants were asked if they had noticed anything else apart from the initial letter "X" and the picture of a politician. Possible answers were "*yes*", "*no*" or "*I think that I saw something but I could not say what*". Those who answered "yes" were then shown a closed list of 11 words and asked to choose among the words of the list which one they saw. The second part of the questionnaire tapped items such as the party the participants had voted for at the last general election, left-right ideological self-identification, political interest as well as political sophistication (with a 4-question quiz). The final section of the questionnaire asked for the respondent's gender, age, education and region of residency.

4.3 Results

Among the total number of participants, 35 correctly specified the subliminal prime which had been shown to them before the picture of Prime Minister Zapatero. Most of these 35 stated the correct sequence of stimuli presented in the video clip, including the corresponding subliminal stimulus (depending on the group, the words "RATA", "CRISIS", or the series of letters "AATR"). Another 17 did not mention they had seen any of these words spontaneously, but answered that they had seen something after the letter "X" and later correctly identified the right prime from the list.

As the subjective threshold beyond which subliminal primes such as those used in the experiment are noticed varies across individuals (Kihlstrom 1992, Greenwald, Draine and Abrams 1996) the fact that 12% of the participants detected and became aware of the stimuli has to be considered within the norm and could be due to a number of technical aspects related to the streaming speed of the video clip across the Internet. Most of these were beyond the direct control of the experimenter.

The answers of a total of 52 participants (those who detected and became aware of the subliminal stimuli) were therefore removed from the experimental data and excluded from the analysis.

Table 4.1 – Agreement with 11 evaluative statements about Prime Minister Zapatero:
individuals primed with the word "RATA" vs. "AATR" + non primed individuals

		Non primed (Non primed+"AATR")		Subliminally primed "RATA"		Total	
		N=168		N=72		N=240	
"This politician looks competent"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	40	23,8%	13	18,1%	53	22,1%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	32	19,0%	19	26,4%	51	21,3%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	96	57,1%	40	55,6%	136	56,7%
"This politician strikes me as honest"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	49	29,2%	18	25,0%	67	27,9%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	29	17,3%	22	30,6%**	51	21,3%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	90	53,6%	32	44,4%	122	50,8%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel positive"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	32	19,0%	12	16,7%	44	18,3%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	26	15,5%	18	25%*	44	18,3%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	110	65,5%	42	58,3%	152	63,3%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel disgusted"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	100	59,5%	41	56,9%	141	58,8%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	31	18,5%	15	20,8%	46	19,2%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	37	22,0%	16	22,2%	53	22,1%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel angry"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	97	57,7%	39	54,2%	136	56,7%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	22	13,1%	14	19,4%	36	15,0%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	49	29,2%	19	26,4%	68	28,3%
"There is something fishy about this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	100	59,5%*	33	45,8%	133	55,4%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	24	14,3%	20	27,8%**	44	18,3%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	44	26,2%	19	26,4%	63	26,3%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel that I can trust him"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	35	20,8%	16	22,2%	51	21,3%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	23	13,7%	16	22,2%	39	16,3%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	110	65,5%	40	55,6%	150	62,5%
"I like this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	46	27,4%	13	18,1%	59	24,6%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	20	11,9%	20	27,8%***	40	16,7%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	102	60,7%	39	54,2%	141	58,8%
"I dislike this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	95	56,5%	39	54,2%	134	55,8%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	25	14,9%	16	22,2%	41	17,1%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	48	28,6%	17	23,6%	65	27,1%
"I would vote for this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	39	23,2%	11	15,3%	50	20,8%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	31	18,5%	16	22,2%	47	19,6%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	98	58,3%	45	62,5%	143	59,6%
"This politician is generous"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	44	26,2%	14	19,4%	58	24,2%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	38	22,6%	23	31,9%	61	25,4%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	86	51,2%	35	48,6%	121	50,4%

*** p<0,01; **p<0,05; *p<0,10

Table 4.2 – Agreement with 11 evaluative statements about Prime Minister Zapatero: individuals primed with the word "CRISIS" vs. "AATR" and non primed individuals

		Non primed (Non primed/"AATR")		Subliminally primed "CRISIS"		Total	
		N=168		N=150		N=318	
"This politician looks competent"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	40	23,8%	32	21,3%	72	22,6%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	32	19,0%	31	20,7%	63	19,8%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	96	57,1%	87	58,0%	183	57,5%
"This politician strikes me as honest"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	49	29,2%	35	23,3%	84	26,4%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	29	17,3%	44	29,3%**	73	23,0%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	90	53,6%	71	47,3%	161	50,6%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel positive"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	32	19,0%	27	18,0%	59	18,6%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	26	15,5%	31	20,7%	57	17,9%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	110	65,5%	92	61,3%	202	63,5%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel disgusted"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	100	59,5%	97	64,7%	197	61,9%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	31	18,5%	27	18,0%	58	18,2%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	37	22,0%	26	17,3%	63	19,8%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel angry"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	97	57,7%	83	55,3%	180	56,6%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	22	13,1%	36	24%**	58	18,2%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	49	29,2%*	31	20,7%	80	25,2%
"There is something fishy about this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	100	59,5%	90	60,0%	190	59,7%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	24	14,3%	32	21,3%*	56	17,6%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	44	26,2%	28	18,7%	72	22,6%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel that I can trust him"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	35	20,8%	28	18,7%	63	19,8%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	23	13,7%	26	17,3%	49	15,4%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	110	65,5%	96	64,0%	206	64,8%
"I like this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	46	27,4%**	28	18,7%	74	23,3%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	20	11,9%	33	22%*	53	16,7%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	102	60,7%	89	59,3%	191	60,1%
"I dislike this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	95	56,5%	82	54,7%	177	55,7%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	25	14,9%	31	20,7%	56	17,6%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	48	28,6%	37	24,7%	85	26,7%
"I would vote for this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	39	23,2%*	25	16,7%	64	20,1%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	31	18,5%	29	19,3%	60	18,9%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	98	58,3%	96	64,0%	194	61,0%
"This politician is generous"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	44	26,2%	35	23,3%	79	24,8%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	38	22,6%	45	30%*	83	26,1%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	86	51,2%	70	46,7%	156	49,1%

*** $p<0,01$; **$p<0,05$; *$p<0,10$

A preliminary exploration of the dataset points to the overall deterioration of prime minister Zapatero's perceived image across all subgroups by April 2011 (1. non-primed; 2. primed with the letters "AATR"; 3. primed with the word "RATA"; 4. primed with the word "CRISIS"). In particular, tables 4.1 and 4.2 present an overview of the extent to which respondents agreed with each of the eleven evaluative statements that were

presented. In order to simplify the tables, within the 1 to 7 scale, values ranging from 1 to 3 (agree somewhat + a lot + completely) and from 5 to 7 (disagree somewhat + a lot + completely) were collapsed into a single 'agree' or 'disagree' category. Respondents were more likely to disagree with the statement if this was favourable to the Spanish prime minister and to disagree otherwise. The percentage of individuals who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements tended to systematically increase when a participant was subliminally primed either with the word "RATA" (table 4.1) or "CRISIS" (table 4.3) as opposed to non-primed or primed with the meaningless sequence of letters "AATR". The difference is significant for four statements out of eleven for those participants primed with the word "RATA" and for six out of eleven when the subliminal prime was the word "CRISIS". A higher number of neutral evaluations seems to correspond to a lower level of agreement with favourable statements and disagreement with negative ones, but this is by no means a stable and consistent pattern. In principle, the word "CRISIS", flashed before the image of Mr. Zapatero without being consciously perceivable, should worsen the evaluation of the prime minister. But, in practice, this does not seem always to be true. If we consider the statement *"There is something about this politician that makes me feel angry"*, the percentage of individuals who disagree is significantly lower among primed individuals and a similar – not significant - pattern can also be found in relation to the statement *"There is something fishy about this politician"*.

It is possible that the idea of "CRISIS" itself unconsciously plays in favour of the leader of PSOE, as opposed to being damaging to his public image. After all, one may argue, the economic troubles of the Spanish economy are not necessarily his fault. Far from trying to undertake the extremely complex task of untangling the inner cognitive processes involved in the evaluation of political leaders, the only relevant conclusion for the purpose of this investigation is that meaningful subliminal primes may affect public judgements about political leaders. Indeed, tables 4.3 and 4.4 show that for the differences in the percentages of neutral evaluations to be significant, the subliminal cue has to be meaningful. A simple sequence of letters ("AATR") does not cause any change in the evaluative patterns, while both meaningful primes ("RATA" and "CRISIS") determine once again significantly higher percentages of neutral evaluations for three out of eleven statements even with lower sample sizes.

Table 4.3 – Agreement with 11 evaluative statements about Prime Minister Zapatero: individuals primed with the word "RATA" vs. "AATR" and vs. non primed individuals

		Subliminally primed "AATR"(*)		Non primed(+)		Subliminally primed "RATA"	
		N=63		N=105		N=72	
"This politician looks competent"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	15	23,8%	25	23,8%	13	18,1%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	14	22,2%	18	17,1%	19	26,4%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely	34	54,0%	62	59,0%	40	55,6%
"This politician strikes me as honest"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	19	30,2%	30	28,6%	18	25,0%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	15	23,8%	14	13,3%	22	30,6%++
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely	29	46,0%	61	58,1%	32	44,4%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel positive"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	14	22,2%	18	17,1%	12	16,7%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	11	17,5%	15	14,3%	18	25,0%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely	38	60,3%	72	68,6%	42	58,3%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel disgusted"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	37	58,7%	63	60,0%	41	56,9%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	12	19,0%	19	18,1%	15	20,8%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely	14	22,2%	23	21,9%	16	22,2%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel angry"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	36	57,1%	61	58,1%	39	54,2%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	7	11,1%	15	14,3%	14	19,4%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely	20	31,7%	29	27,6%	19	26,4%
"There is something fishy about this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	37	58,7%	63	60,0%	33	45,8%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	11	17,5%	13	12,4%	20	27,8%++
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely	15	23,8%	29	27,6%	19	26,4%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel that I can trust him"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	14	22,2%	21	20,0%	16	22,2%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	10	15,9%	13	12,4%	16	22,2%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely	39	61,9%	71	67,6%	40	55,6%
"I like this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	18	28,6%	28	26,7%	13	18,1%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	8	12,7%	12	11,4%	20	27,8%++
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely	37	58,7%	65	61,9%	39	54,2%
"I dislike this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	36	57,1%	59	56,2%	39	54,2%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	9	14,3%	16	15,2%	16	22,2%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely	18	28,6%	30	28,6%	17	23,6%
"I would vote for this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	17	27,0%	22	21,0%	11	15,3%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	11	17,5%	20	19,0%	16	22,2%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely	35	55,6%	63	60,0%	45	62,5%
"This politician is generous"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	14	22,2%	30	28,6%	14	19,4%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	18	28,6%	20	19,0%	23	31,9%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely	31	49,2%	55	52,4%	35	48,6%

***/+++ p<0,01; **/++p<0,05; */+p<0,10

Table 4.4 – Agreement with 11 evaluative statements about Prime Minister Zapatero: individuals primed with the word "RATA" vs. "AATR" and vs. non primed individuals

		Subliminally primed "AATR"(*)		Non primed(+)		Subliminally primed "CRISIS"	
		N=63		N=105		N=150	
"This politician looks competent"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	15	23,8%	25	23,8%	32	21,3%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	14	22,2%	18	17,1%	31	20,7%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	34	54,0%	62	59,0%	87	58,0%
"This politician strikes me as honest"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	19	30,2%	30	28,6%	35	23,3%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	15	23,8%	14	13,3%	44	29,3%+++
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	29	46,0%	61	58,1%	71	47,3%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel positive"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	14	22,2%	18	17,1%	27	18,0%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	11	17,5%	15	14,3%	31	20,7%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	38	60,3%	72	68,6%	92	61,3%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel disgusted"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	37	58,7%	63	60,0%	97	64,7%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	12	19,0%	19	18,1%	27	18,0%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	14	22,2%	23	21,9%	26	17,3%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel angry"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	36	57,1%	61	58,1%	83	55,3%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	7	11,1%	15	14,3%	36	24%*
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	20	31,7%	29	27,6%	31	20,7%
"There is something fishy about this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	37	58,7%	63	60,0%	90	60,0%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	11	17,5%	13	12,4%	32	21,3%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	15	23,8%	29	27,6%	28	18,7%
"There is something about this politician that makes me feel that I can trust him"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	14	22,2%	21	20,0%	28	18,7%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	10	15,9%	13	12,4%	26	17,3%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	39	61,9%	71	67,6%	96	64,0%
"I like this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	18	28,6%	28	26,7%	28	18,7%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	8	12,7%	12	11,4%	33	22%+
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	37	58,7%	65	61,9%	89	59,3%
"I dislike this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	36	57,1%	59	56,2%	82	54,7%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	9	14,3%	16	15,2%	31	20,7%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	18	28,6%	30	28,6%	37	24,7%
"I would vote for this politician"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	17	27,0%	22	21,0%	25	16,7%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	11	17,5%	20	19,0%	29	19,3%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	35	55,6%	63	60,0%	96	64,0%
"This politician is generous"	Agree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	14	22,2%	30	28,6%	35	23,3%
	Neither agree, nor disagree	18	28,6%	20	19,0%	45	30,0%
	Disagree (somewhat+a lot+completely)	31	49,2%	55	52,4%	70	46,7%

***/+++ p<0,01; **/++p<0,05; */+p<0,10

The analysis went on to assess to what extent the subliminal prime "CRISIS" makes it more likely to either agree or disagree with each of the eleven evaluative statements about the head of the Spanish government. We focused exclusively on the effects of the subliminal prime "CRISIS" because of its presumed more immediate meaningful valence, as opposed to the word "RATA", which only partially matches the meaning of the English equivalent word "RAT", used in an earlier experiment with US individuals.

The next step aimed at the estimation of a multinomial logit model of agreement/disagreement with the proposed statements, capable of establishing to what extent subliminal primes influence - positively or negatively - people's evaluation of a political leader. The model was specified in accordance with a basic predictive equation which included the following set of variables:

X1) age (recoded as: 20 to 29 = 1, 30 to 39 = 2, 40 to 49 = 3 and 50+ y/o = 4);

X2) a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was meaningfully primed (belonging to the subgroup primed with the word "CRISIS" = 1, belonging to the remaining subgroups of individuals either non-primed or primed with the meaningless word "AATR" = 0);

X3) the respondent's level of political sophistication (very high sophistication = 4, high sophistication = 3, moderate sophistication = 2, low sophistication = 1, utter ignorance = 0 - see the appendix for more details about the construction of the index).

X4) vote for PSOE at the last general election (vote for PSOE = 1, anything else = 0);

X5 and X6) the ideological preference of the respondent (X5 leftwing, X6 rightwing, while centrist voters were taken as the baseline), inferred from the self-location on a 1 to 10 scale where 1 to 4 = leftwing, 5 to 6 = centrist and 7 to 10 = rightwing);

The inclusion of X4, X5 and X6 both in the basic model and in the full model, which includes a set of explanatory interactive terms, aims at the assessing how the potential effect of subliminal primes would interact with (1) the party preferences of the respondents and (2) their ideological self-identification.

X7) self-reported political interest (very interested in politics = 5, quite interested = 4, somewhat interested = 3, little interested = 2, not at all interested = 1) has been included in order to control for the tendency of those individuals not interested in politics to take neutral positions when asked to evaluate politicians or parties;

X8) the respondent's gender (female = 1, male was the baseline);

As for the dependent variable, in the "agree vs. baseline" model it was coded as 1 if the respondent agreed (somewhat, a lot or completely) with the given statement and it was coded as 0 if the respondent remained neutral (i.e. he/she chose the option 'neither agree nor disagree'). In the "disagree vs. baseline model, it was coded 1 if the respondent

disagreed (somewhat, a lot or completely) with the given statement and it was coded as 0 if the respondent remained neutral.

Formally, the models presented in table 4.5 are expressed as follows:

Step 1: $\text{Ln}(P_{ij}/1-P_{ij}) = \alpha_{ij} + \beta_{1ij}X_{1ij} + \beta_{2ij}X_{2ij} + \beta_{3ij}X_{3ij} + \beta_{4ij}X_{4ij} + \beta_{5ij}X_{5ij} + \beta_{6ij}X_{6ij} + \beta_{7ij}X_{7ij} + \beta_{8ij}X_{8ij} + e_{ij}$

Full model: $\text{Ln}(P_{ij}/1-P_{ij}) = \alpha_{ij} + \beta_{1ij}X_{1ij} + \beta_{2ij}X_{2ij} + \beta_{3ij}X_{3ij} + \beta_{4ij}X_{4ij} + \beta_{5ij}X_{5ij} + \beta_{6ij}X_{6ij} + \beta_{7ij}X_{7ij} + \beta_{8ij}X_{8ij} + \beta_{9ij}(X_{2ij}*X_{4ij}) + \beta_{10ij}(X_{2ij}*X_{5ij}) + \beta_{11ij}(X_{2ij}*X_{6ij}) + \beta_{12ij}(X_{2ij}*X_{7ij}) + \beta_{13ij}(X_{2ij}*X_{3ij}) + e_{ij}$

Table 4.5 – Effect of subliminal priming on the likelihood of agreeing or disagreeing with 11 statements about Prime Minister Zapatero

Agree Vs. Baseline (Baseline: "Neither agree nor disagree")

	"This politician looks competent"		"This politician strikes me as honest"		"There is something... that makes me feel positive"		"There is something... that makes me feel disgusted"		"There is something... that makes me feel angry"		"There is something fishy about this politician"		"There is... that makes me feel that I can trust him"		"I like this politician"		"I dislike this politician"		"I would vote for this politician"		"This politician is generous"	
	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model
Intercept	2,54*	2,24	1,18	1,32	1,443	2,03	2,44***	2,15*	2,90**	2,01	3,22***	3,28**	,99	-,02	1,61	1,37	3,63***	2,37*	,85	1,42	,99	1,53
Age	-,17	-,19	,13	,13	,08	,08	,11	,17	,13	,14	,09	,14	,00	,01	,02	-,01	,05	,07	,23	,21	-,01	-,04
Subliminal prime "CRISIS"	-,22	,73	-,66*	-,86	-,33	-,96	-,17	,41	-,92**	,37	-,61*	-,41	-,28	1,52	-1,09***	-,46	-,74**	1,57	-,38	-1,59	-,26	-1,19
Political sophistication	,13	,19	,15	,17	-,09	-,19	,25*	,14	,16	,10	,08	,11	,02	,17	,29*	,75**	,15	,40*	,15	-,01	,10	,01
Vote for PSOE at last election	-,19	,75	,36	,73	,08	1,21*	-1,24***	-1,20**	-1,01*	-,36	-1,55***	-1,41**	,54	,72	,10	,82	-1,76***	-1,08*	,50	,50	,10	,06
Leftwing ideology	-,10	-,87	,60	,27	,01	-1,25*	-,80**	-1,18**	-,68*	-,65	,03	-,92	,05	,19	,14	-,58	-,82**	-1,23**	-,09	,11	,69*	1,03*
Rightwing ideology	-,11	,49	-,28	-,21	,34	,46	,67	-,12	,36	,72	1,04*	,91	-,17	,89	,70	,87	,60	,37	-,06	,65	-,13	,47
Political Interest	,50***	,40	,46***	,50*	,45**	,50*	,14	-,07	,27*	,06	,42***	,30	,37*	-,23	,35*	,39	,41**	,16	,33*	,50*	,29*	,49*
Female	-,32	-,40	-,15	-,19	,01	-,09	-,61*	-,63*	-,43	-,40	-,34	-,42	,16	,11	-,30	-,39	-,37	-,32	-,36	-,43	-,36	-,38
Interaction: subl. prime x vote PSOE		-2,01**		-,68		-2,18**		-,03		-1,10		-,23		-,28		-1,37		-1,27		,08		-,01
Interaction: subl. prime x leftwing id.		1,71*		,67		2,40**		,55		-,18		2,00**		-,01		1,51		,59		-,28		-,61
Interaction: subl. prime x rightwing id.		-1,20		-,54		-,45		1,58		-,44		,34		-1,95		-,42		,33		-1,98*		-1,11
Interaction: subl. prime x sophistication		-,19		-,09		,12		,25		,13		-,12		-,38		-,78**		-,46		,34		,18
Interaction: subl. prime x pol. Interest		,16		-,13		-,11		,49		,36		,23		,19		-,19		,47		-,38		-,37

Disagree Vs. Baseline (Baseline: "Neither agree nor disagree")

	"This politician looks competent"		"This politician strikes me as honest"		"There is something... that makes me feel positive"		"There is something... that makes me feel disgusted"		"There is something... that makes me feel angry"		"There is something fishy about this politician"		"There is... that makes me feel that I can trust him"		"I like this politician"		"I dislike this politician"		"I would vote for this politician"		"This politician is generous"	
	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model	Step 1	Full model
Intercept	3,33***	3,16**	3,35***	3,12**	2,78**	2,88**	,47	,50	1,59	,87	,49	1,15	2,32**	1,31	2,58***	1,42	2,68**	2,54*	2,80**	2,45	2,06**	2,28**
Age	,11	,14	,04	,06	,20	,24	,17	,18	,21	,21	,36*	,42	,16	,21	,10	,12	,01	,00	,43**	,50**	,08	,07
Subliminal prime "CRISIS"	-,47	-,12	-1,02***	-,69	-,65*	-,69	-,18	-,12	-,92*	,08	-,76*	-1,79	-,60*	1,08	-1,10***	,84	-,51	,12	-,29	,28	-,56*	-,93
Political sophistication	,31**	,24	,29**	,26	,07	-,06	,02	,01	,03	-,04	-,06	-,17	,24	,21	,34**	,81***	,08	,28	,25*	,11	,26**	,18
Vote for PSOE at last election	-1,12***	-,76	-1,42***	-1,17**	-1,14	-,44	,10	,33	,20	,93	-,21	,16	-,99**	-,94*	-1,63***	-1,35**	-,35	,68	-1,40***	-1,62**	-1,13***	-1,41***
Leftwing ideology	-1,28***	-1,64***	-,49	-,64	-,53	-1,41**	,19	-,08	-,04	,03	,71	-,41	-,80*	-,76	-,53	-,95	-,02	-1,23*	-1,03**	-1,11**	-,20	,19
Rightwing ideology	,38	,46	,41	-,31	,71	,27	,47	,30	-,24	1,09	1,14*	1,53	,31	,61	1,31**	1,16	,11	-,07	,36	,17	,04	,21
Political Interest	,47**	,36	,56***	,46**	,36**	,24	,16	,14	,27	,17	,44**	,45*	,28*	,02	,25	,05	,48***	,42	,85**	-,17	,19	-,24
Female	-,46	-,47	-,38	-,35	-,17	-,20	-,30	-,32	-,33	-,35	,24	,11	-,03	-,04	-,24	-,23	-,38	-,47	,23**	-,76**	-,65**	-,64**
Interaction: subl. prime x vote PSOE		-,64		-,45		-1,32*		-,48		-1,28		-,76		,03		-,29		-1,91**		,54		,61
Interaction: subl. prime x leftwing id.		,72		,01		1,68**		,56		-,05		2,38**		-,13		,69		2,41**		,03		-,86
Interaction: subl. prime x rightwing id.		-,11		1,21*		,73		,31		-3,30**		-,88		-,43		,26		,32		,37		-,30
Interaction: subl. prime x sophistication		,15		,10		,22		,00		,13		,18		,07		-,73**		-,44		,30		,17
Interaction: subl. prime x pol. Interest		,23		,24		,25		,02		,10		-,07		,55*		,34		,07		,41		-,08
Nagelkerke R²	,27***	,30***	0,33***	,37***	,18***	,23***	,23***	,27***	0,20***	,25***	,235***	,28***	,23***	,26***	,30***	,34***	,26***	,30***	,31***	,36***	,20***	,22***
N	318		318		318		318		318		318		318		318		318		318		318	

*** p<0,01; **p<0,05; *p<0,10

Table 4.5 presents the logistic regression coefficients of a set of 11 predictive multinomial logit models (with two dichotomies each). For each evaluative statement, four estimations are presented. In the "Agree vs. Baseline" model (the first dichotomy, above) the dependent variable is the logged odds of agreeing (somewhat + a lot + completely) with the presented statement, as opposed to remaining neutral. Vice versa, in the "Disagree vs. Baseline" model (the second dichotomy of the multinomial model, table 4.5 - below) the dependent variable is coded "1" if an individual disagrees (somewhat + a lot + completely) with each respective statement, as opposed to remaining neutral.

For each of these two dichotomies the coefficients appearing under the column labelled "Step 1" were first estimated in order to assess the impact of the subliminal prime on the evaluative task without taking into account interactions. Five out of eleven times those individuals subliminally primed with the word "CRISIS" were significantly less likely to agree with the corresponding statement, while seven out of eleven times they were significantly less likely to disagree. These findings confirm the tendency for subliminally primed individuals to increase their level of evaluative neutrality when asked to take sides about prime minister Zapatero. In other words, the effect of the subliminal prime alone on the individuals who took part in the experiment seems to be that of lessening their tendency to manifest strong opinions either in favour or against the politician they are evaluating. But, as we shall see, this may well be a foregone conclusion, which does not take into due account possible interactions between the effect of the subliminal prime and that of previously held political beliefs.

Still with regard to the "Step 1" model, it is not surprising to observe that having voted for PSOE at the last general election and, to a minor extent, being ideologically leftwing makes an individual less likely to agree with negative statements about the leader of PSOE or to disagree with positive ones. This is the case for the evaluation of ten out of eleven statements.It is also worth noticing that higher levels of self-reported interest in politics tend to decrease the probability of neutral evaluations. We interpret this latter finding as evidence that being interested in politics favours stronger political opinions and therefore less agnostic evaluations of political objects. Age, gender and the level of sophistication only have a marginal impact on the predictive power of the model.

This far, we merely tested the effect of subliminal exposure to the prime "CRISIS" in isolation, without considering the possibility that a causal relationship between the experimentally manipulated variable and the evaluations given by the participants may take place through the interaction with an individual's own political preferences. Such a scenario is far from unlikely, especially if we consider that the mechanisms involved in casting an evaluative judgment may imply a continuous update of the 'affective tags' attached to concepts in memory. Such 'on-line processing' (Lodge Steenbergen and Brau 1995, Lodge and Taber 2000) assumes that people form or revise an overall impression about a political object by constantly updating a running tally of their previous evaluation of an object, stored in the long-term memory, with the new input.

For this reason, in a "Full" multinomial regression a set of interactions between exposure to the subliminal prime and, in turn, ideological self-identification, party preference (tapped by the party voted for at the last general election), political sophistication and political interest were included in the model. Once added the set of interactions, the number of statements for which the effect of the subliminal prime is significant, if only as an interactive term, goes up from five to nine out of eleven. Five times, the effect of the subliminal prime alone is weaker than the effect of its interaction with party preference or ideology. In the light of this findings, we are inclined to believe that individuals political beliefs' evaluative power is somehow triggered or enhanced by the exposure to the subliminal cue. This is especially noticeable in the case of the statement "*I would vote for this politician*" for which the interaction with a rightwing ideology makes an individual less likely to agree with this statement, although rightwing ideology alone does not have any significant effect on the given evaluation. Similarly, although having voted for PSOE and leftwing ideology are not always significant predictors in the "Step 1" model, they turn out to be one for individuals subliminally primed with the word "CRISIS" ("Full" model). In many cases, indeed, the effect of the subliminal prime shows up only as an interaction.

Further, the inclusion of the interactive terms in the "Full" model always coincides with a sizeable improvement of its overall fit (Nagelkerke R² is reported at the bottom of table 4.5 for both specifications). Given that the models take into account both the level of sophistication as well as the degree of interest in politics of the respondents, the

effect of subliminal cues such as the one used in this experiment seems to be unrelated to an individual's political literacy. In particular, moderately or highly sophisticated individuals are as exposed to the effects of subliminal cues as much as unsophisticated ones.

4.4 Conclusion

The experiment undertaken has a number of implications for the understanding of how external precognitive primes can affect the evaluation of political leaders. For the first time an experiment tested the effectiveness of a subliminal stimulus on the evaluation of a prominent political leader. The findings provided evidence of such effectiveness and showed that subliminally flashing the word "CRISIS" for a few milliseconds can determine a significant difference in the way subliminally primed individuals evaluate a well-known politician. This work seems to confirm Weinberger and Westen's (2008) findings and suggests further that people's judgments can be altered by means of stimuli which do not reach the threshold of conscious awareness.

This does not mean that influencing people's opinions subliminally is straightforward. On the contrary, the empirical evidence seems to indicate that the effect of subliminal stimuli interacts with one's pre-existing set of political beliefs in ways that are not always predictable. Most importantly, a higher degree of sophistication or a stronger interest in politics do not alter or reduce the observed priming effect. Being well-informed about politics or in possession of sound political beliefs rooted in factual knowledge and in the understanding of political facts and figures does not shelter us from the many ever-present stimuli which may affect in one way or another our perceptions of parties and leaders. This is not irrelevant, because it proves that if a given political message is pushed through the media with enough power to grant a high number of impacts, there's more than a chance that an aggregate effect due to the subliminal absorption of repeated fragments of that message materialises. In such a

context, even an educated and sophisticated citizenry could potentially be influenced by massive communication campaigns.

This work also raises doubts about the opportunity of assuming that surveys of public opinion report faithfully the reasoning underlying a respondents' political judgments. Insofar as they can be influenced by stimuli of which they are not aware, there is no way that such an effect can be reported to the interviewer and show up in survey data. Of course, a systematic and planned use of subliminal primes as a strategy to win an election is unlikely. However, informational cues which do not meet our conscious awareness and can be considered, in this sense, 'precognitive' are pretty much everywhere, especially on TV. Their impact is hard to measure in a meaningful way, and experiments such as the one undertaken prove that the public can potentially be influenced by stimuli which cannot be self-reported. Implicit cognitive processes of this kind are unavailable to consciousness but given their impact on the emotional associations people make, they can nonetheless be expressed behaviorally (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Our analysis shows that the effect of politically meaningful subliminal stimuli are even more powerful when they interact with one's own beliefs, be they expressed in the emotional attachment to a political party or leader, or ingrained in a ideological framework reinforced through the accumulation of experience and knowledge. In so far as precognitive stimuli elicit such an emotional response, they can be considered a powerful persuasive tool.

In this respect, the findings can also be deemed in keeping with the impression-driven model of candidate evaluation (Lodge, McGraw and Stroh 1989), according to which evaluations are formed and updated 'on-line' as new information is encountered. However, it should be noticed that 'new information' would also have to include inputs or updates of which we are not necessarily aware, such as precognitive ones. Since this point may unduly overstretch the boundaries of the original model, it should nonetheless be taken with caution.

This experiment, which can be improved in many respects, tried to cast further light on those implicit cognitive processes which intervene substantially in shaping our perceptions and, ultimately, our decision-making. While trying to widen the scope of the research in this relatively unexplored field, it focused on the formation of political

opinions about a prominent Spanish politician in order to simulate a real-life circumstance. It remains to be seen if its findings will hold if the experiment is replicated in other contexts. Further research in this direction would certainly be helpful in order to deepen further the understanding of those aspects of political behavior which eschewed, so far, a satisfactory explanation.

4.5 Appendix

4.5.1 Construction of the index of political sophistication

Step 1. Four-question political knowledge quiz (April 2011)

Para contrastar la subida de la inflacción, ¿qué hacen us...

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Suben los tipos de interés	189	59,4	59,4	59,4
	Bajan los tipos de interés	61	19,2	19,2	78,6
	Dejan invariados los tipos de interés	4	1,3	1,3	79,9
	No lo sé.	64	20,1	20,1	100,0
	Total	318	100,0	100,0	

Cuál es el nombre del actual Presidente de la Comisión Eu...

		Frequency	Percent	ValidPercent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Angela Merkel	62	19,5	19,5	19,5
	Herman Van Rompuy	52	16,4	16,4	35,8
	José Manuel Barroso	117	36,8	36,8	72,6
	No lo sé.	87	27,4	27,4	100,0
	Total	318	100,0	100,0	

En España, respecto al poder legislativo, el Senado tiene...

		Frequency	Percent	ValidPercent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Más poderes que la Camara de los Diputados	70	22,0	22,0	22,0
	Menos poderes que la Camara de los Diputados	107	33,6	33,6	55,7
	Los mismos poderes que la Camara de los Diputados	47	14,8	14,8	70,4

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No lo sé.	94	29,6	29,6	100,0
Total	318	100,0	100,0	

En España, ¿quién es el Ministro de Fomento?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba	38	11,9	11,9	11,9
	José Blanco López	207	65,1	65,1	77,0
	Trinidad Jiménez	21	6,6	6,6	83,6
	No lo sé.	52	16,4	16,4	100,0
	Total	318	100,0	100,0	

Step 2. Assignment of each individual to one of five available levels of political sophistication according the number of correct given answers

Index of sophistication

		Frecuency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very high sophistication	48	15,1	15,1	15,1
	High sophistication	66	20,8	20,8	35,8
	Moderate sophistication	93	29,2	29,2	65,1
	Low sophistication	76	23,9	23,9	89,0
	Utter ignorance	35	11,0	11,0	100,0
	Total	318	100,0	100,0	

5. CONCLUSION

For a long time political scientists have debated the implications of citizens' widespread political ignorance on democracy. This subject matter has concerned political theorists as well as a number of scholars who repeatedly observed that, by many standards, the voters fall short (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Campbell et Al. 1960; Converse 1964 and 1970). Attempts to solve the puzzle of uninformed voting has taken several directions, both theoretical and empirical, but no definitive answer has been attained (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Fiorina 1981; Popkin 1991; Iyengar 1990; Lupia 1994; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Althaus 1998; Bartle 2000; Gomez and Wilson 2001; Tòka 2002; Sturgis 2003). In addition, the whole debate about how much people need to know about politics in order to fulfil the requirements of democratic life has conceived the environment in which political information is delivered and obtained as transparent and populated by mainly rational actors. In such an environment, political supply is supposed to design and implement economic and social policies meant to address the interests of specific groups of voters, while political demand is believed to reward those candidates and parties who best address their needs. In reality, practitioners in the field of political communication have learnt that the way voters make decisions does not depend exclusively on rational incentives, but also on determinants of which voters are hardly aware. A number of cues, frames and metaphors shape their perceptions and influence their choices (Lakoff 2008). Nonetheless, the significance of political sophistication among voters has often been discussed with little reference to the non-conscious component of voting decisions.

This investigation, structured into three main sections, tried to tackle this debate in a particular context, in which parties and candidates are presented as determined to make their arguments more seductive, their public image more trustworthy and their promises more credible by resorting to cues that work outside rationality and often beyond the voters' awareness. This work gauged the way both sophisticated and unsophisticated individuals make political decisions in such a context and tried to assess under what conditions being an informed citizen affects his or her voting behaviour.

The role played by sophistication was considered in three different settings. In each of them a given cue impinged on the political choice under assessment at a different level and led to a specific decisional outcome. In general, the overall findings cast doubts about the virtues of heuristic reasoning as an effective remedy for those unsophisticated voters who have to find their bearings in the ballot box. However, the findings also suggest that knowledgeable voters base their voting choices not only on facts, issues and ideology but also that they are as affected by the influence of some sorts of cues (i.e. visual or subliminal) as less knowledgeable ones. If we were to put it simply, we could say that voters may easily be duped into making inconsistent choices, no matter how much they know about politics. To be fair, there are exceptions, which very much depend on the type of shortcut voters take in order to make their choices. But, by and large, once prompted by specific cues, voters' preferences can be influenced in ways that are, more or less, predictable.

In the first section, an analysis of Forza Italia's success in the 1994 Italian election was undertaken. While drawing from the insights of political psychology, an explanatory hypothesis was put forward based both on the historical legacy of the strong polarization of the Italian electorate and on the use of anti-communism as a cognitive shortcut by relatively uninformed voters. The analysis of survey data offered a new insight into the consequences of the lack of sophistication in the electorate, and lent substance to some scepticism about the remedial effect of heuristic reasoning on poor political knowledge. It was argued that some of the claims made about the usefulness of heuristic schemas in replacing missing information cannot be shared and that caution should be recommended when praising the remedial effect of heuristic-reasoning. Indeed, the careful and skilled use of appealing political messages, efficiently delivered by a masterly control of the media, may offer an advantage to the party which best interprets and exploits the shortcuts that are available. Its conclusion suggests that heuristic reasoning may not be as inconsequential and unbiased as previously thought.

Up to this point, the investigation dealt with conscious shortcuts, which can be exploited by political actors through their political discourse and are effective only if they are in keeping with and build on an individual's own beliefs about politics. The second section moved on to investigate the role of candidate visual appearance as a shortcut for voters

(appearance, as a visual cue, is processed unconsciously, although its informational content is fully available to our perception). According to the results of this experiment, the visual shortcut prompted by a candidate's appearance can affect voters' choices at the ballot box at the same time as more deliberate and ideologically oriented judgements based on candidates' policy proposals. It was concluded that snap judgments based on unreflective inferences drawn from the visual appearance of a candidate can affect the outcome of elections and influence the deliberative processes involved in voting decisions. The experiment reported in this section also looked at the relationship between the sophistication of voters and their susceptibility to visual cues. The findings argue that a higher degree of political knowledge leaves unaltered the influence of snap judgments based on visual cues.

Finally, in the third section, the effect of cues that are processed unconsciously and unavailable to the senses was explored. The results of the experiment reported in this final section proved the effectiveness of a subliminal cue on the evaluation of a well-known political figure. In brief, it was established that subliminally flashing the word 'CRISIS' for a matter of milliseconds can significantly affect the way people evaluate a prominent political leader. This supports previous research in its assertion that people's evaluations can be influenced by stimuli not in their conscious awareness (Weinberger and Westen 2008). By means of this experiment, we tried to cast further light on those implicit cognitive processes which intervene substantially in shaping our perceptions and, ultimately, our decision-making. Similarly to what we observed in the experiment involving a visual cue, the effect of the subliminal stimulus is not reduced by a higher level of sophistication and adds to the argument that even highly sophisticated voters can be tricked into making political judgments that are not fully explained in terms of rational and conscious decisions.

One of the main objectives of this research was to assess to what extent individuals with little knowledge of politics can satisfactorily resort to cognitive shortcuts as a substitute for the information they lack in order to make consistent electoral choices at election time. Up to now, most of the literature on this topic was based on the assumption that voters always make consistent and reasoned choices, no matter how much they know

about politics. However, the empirical evidence presented in this investigation seems to disprove such a claim and reach another conclusion.

In general, we tend to assume that individuals who possess abundant factual knowledge about politics are also more likely to hold better structured beliefs about political actors such as parties, candidates, issues. They are also believed to be able to produce consistent reasoning, as well as to make rational decisions, about targeted political objects. Since they hold more information than average, we would expect that they have little or no need to rely on information cues and shortcut their decision making process. Still, our data tell a different story. Even when we are put under the conditions to behave as rational actors, we can still be duped into following fixed and predictable decisional patterns, triggered by very simple cues. It is even more remarkable to notice that we do not only use this sort of cognitive shortcuts when we are in need of essential information to make up our mind. We also tend to do it when we all the information we presumably need is available.

Thanks to this investigation we also established a typology which classifies cues according to the level of consciousness at which they operate (see Table 5.1). We started by analysing discourse cues, which are available both to consciousness and to the senses. As voters, we can detect them and process their content consciously. For this reason, the more structured and sound our understanding of politics, the less likely it is that we are influenced by this type of discourse. We proved this point by showing that the 'late anti-communism' cue used by Forza Italia at the 1994 Italian election was indeed more effective among relatively unsophisticated citizens. For sophisticated individuals, discourse cues will most likely be ineffective, but, depending on how sophisticated the whole electorate is, they may still have a sizeable effect on the election outcome at the aggregate level.

Table 5.1 – Relevance of political sophistication by type of cognitive cue

	METHODOLOGY	TYPE OF CUE	COGNITIVE PROCESSING INVOLVED	SOPHISTICATION RELEVANT?
SECTION 1	Analysis of secondary data	**discourse cue:** fully available to consciousness and rational scrutiny	**System 1 & System 2**	**Yes**
SECTION 2	Experiment	**visual cue:** processed unconsciously but available to the senses	**System 1**	**No**
SECTION 3	Experiment	**subliminal cue**: processed unconsciously and unavailable to the senses	**System 1**	**No**

In the second section we showed that political sophistication does not stop visual, appearance-based, cues from biasing our perception of candidates. These were found to significantly affect the aggregate results of a simulated voting task, even after controlling for how much the participants knew about politics and what the candidates' preferences were in terms of policy-making.

The third type of cue we took into consideration was a subliminal one. By deliberately including an experiment which tested the effect of a cue processed unconsciously and unperceived by the senses, we meant to determine in what way bits of information which we cannot recall or report do affect our political judgment. It turned out that even if we are unaware of this sort of stimuli, our evaluations may change as a consequence of their impact on our cognition. In a way, this result is a reinforces the findings we obtained in the experiment presented in the second section, involving a visual cue, with the only difference being that in the latter case individuals did not have sensorial access to the stimulus affecting their judgment.

All in all, does sophistication make any difference? Some scholars seem to think so. Chaiken et Al. (1999), for instance, argued that the impact knowledgeability has on information processing and judgment may reflect differences in the nature and strength of the heuristics that high- versus low-knowledge individuals perceive as appropriate to use in domains where personal views are relevant. Individuals who know an issue very well may differ, in the way they apply their knowledge to judgmental tasks involving that particular issue. A recent study carried out by Lenz and Lawson (2011) also investigated the impact of candidate appearance in relation to the voters' level of sophistication. While its findings support the idea that a candidate's appearance helps achieve a better electoral performance, a different conclusion is put forward about the role played by political sophistication. According to the authors, the effect of appearance is more pronounced among those who know little about politics but watch a lot of TV and therefore are more exposed to visual images of candidates.

In our opinion and in the light of the findings presented throughout the preceding sections we need to refer to 'System 1' and 'System 2' modes of thinking (Kahneman 2011) in order to answer the aforementioned question. It is useful to recall that System 1 refers to thinking that operates automatically and rapidly, without our control and with almost no effort, while System 2 refers to a number of relatively effortful mental activities often associated with decision-making. Our consciousness, as well as our beliefs, are embedded within System 2 cognitive operations and require reflective thinking. By contrast, System 1 generates automatic impressions, emotions and feelings on which System 2 bases its conscious deliberations. Impressions and intentions are suggested by System 1 and turned into beliefs and voluntary decisions by System 2. Both Systems are active when we are awake and interact constantly. In every individual such division of labour is highly efficient. System 1 reacts to familiar situations according to well-established and quite accurate patterns, but it may incur systematic errors under certain circumstances. System 2 may try to correct these operational flaws either through learning mechanisms or access to information stored in memory, but its intervention is costly and requires the expenditure of considerable cognitive resources which by default are not always available and can deplete fast. Cognitive biases are therefore the consequence of a fine balance between the relatively cheap automatisms of System 1 mental activity and the more energy-expensive reasoning and careful thought

of System 2 cognition. When the first goes awry, the second may intervene and change a wrong suggestion into a possibly accurate decision. However, when this does not happen, how judgment may end up unduly distorted. While in theory we would be able to avoid such cognitive pitfalls by systematically questioning our thinking, this is easier said than done (Stanovich and West, 2000, Evans 2008, Evans and Frankish, 2009).

It would nonetheless be inaccurate to depict System 1 and System 2 cognition as utterly separate and independent. The analysis of the experimental data illustrated in section 3, for example, suggests that even the effect of a subliminal cue interacts with our preferences for a given party or our identification with a specific ideology. Although we did not investigate these interactions in depth, our interpretation is that long-standing beliefs developed through early socialisation may sediment into deeply rooted feelings which may be activated unconsciously and intervene in the interplay between System 1 and System 2 cognition. Such a hypothesis, yet to be tested, certainly deserves further consideration.

The sequence of findings documented in sections 1, 2 and 3 seems to indicate further that the type of cue which triggers the heuristic bias is decisive in determining not only the level of consciousness at which it operates but also to what extent sophisticated individuals may avoid it as a shortcut and make a thoughtful decision instead. Since cognitive cues are meant to replace missing information, it is plausible that individuals who are more knowledgeable about politics do not need to use rapid, unreflective inferences to make their choices. Although System 1 cognition will always provide our conscious reasoning with a suitable option to make a fast decision, it is up to System 2 to deem it appropriate and make it its own. As we saw in section 1, a simple discourse cue triggered a *likability* (or *affect*) heuristic which led many unsophisticated Italian voters to choose their favourite argument – anti-communism - on the basis of their own political preferences. Sophisticated voters managed to eschew the cognitive shortcut but less sophisticated ones did not.

Other types of cues do not seem to reach System 2 cognition. Visual cues, for instance, can trigger a *basic assessment* of an individual's appearance and lead to a vote in favour of election candidates who are visually perceived as more competent (Todorov, 2005). Although available to the senses, this type of cue is processed mostly unconsciously at

System 1 level. Even if its effect is not as strong as that of the classic predictors of voting behaviour, such as party preference, income, social class, ideology, etc., it may have a sizeable impact on the electoral outcome and tip the balance in favour of the candidate who successfully exploited the visual cue. Since sophistication alone does not seem to tame the effect of the cue, we should perhaps conclude that as passive targets of political campaigns, our defensive weapons, located mainly at the level of System 2 cognition, are rather limited.

The study of electoral behaviour has for a long time focused almost exclusively on System 2 cognition in order to explain how and why we vote as we do. Scholars often assumed that our decisions about parties and candidates are made consciously and that any irrational element potentially affecting our choices would be overrun by much more sound, rational and reflective reasoning. When addressing the paradox of the uninformed voter, they tended to consider heuristics an efficient tool to make up our mind with little or no information (Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). But by ignoring that heuristic reasoning is rather mechanical and automatic in nature, they overlooked the distortions which typically take place at this stage of human reasoning as well as their effect on the voters' choices. At times heuristic reasoning help us speed up our decision making. But, as we argued in this investigation, in some circumstances it will lead us astray and induce decisions that are inefficient or suboptimal.

Our findings seem to suggest that our thoughts and judgments are highly influenced by the surrounding environment and by the stimuli which impact our cognition either consciously or unconsciously. As they keep multiplying and being delivered by an increasing number of media, we should conclude that many of our decisions end up being less unbiased than we would expect and desire. But another conclusion we can draw from our experimental evidence is that we can make unconscious associations only with information we already possess in our memory. In fact, in the experiment presented in the third section we tried to determine whether higher levels of factual knowledge about politics would interfere with the priming effect of a subliminal stimulus and our results showed that they do not. But things change if we consider the mediating effect of party attachment and ideological self-identification, which were

indeed found to powerfully interact with the effect of the subliminal prime and to be, by means of this interaction, significant predictors of results of the evaluative judgment task. Moreover, the interaction between one's own the interactive term formed by one's own pre-existing political preferences and the experimental exposure to a subliminal prime was a better predictor by far than either of the individual variables taken separately. If we are to accept that the priming effect works exclusively at System 1 level, we may therefore hypothesize that the emotional charge of the information stored in memory is key to understand how it interacts with external stimuli and forces System 2 cognition to produce biased judgments.

Beside the specific findings and the inferences drawn in each of the three empirical sections which constituted the main body of the research, a number of general conclusions can also be established. Back at the beginning, we set about to tackle the paradox of complex democratic systems with notably low levels of political competence among its citizens. The interest in the repercussions of low levels of information springs from the consideration that, while formal equality in the expression of political preferences is guaranteed by the electoral process, the effectiveness of any act of delegation in representative democracy may depend on what people know and on what they ignore. For this reason we believed that the role played by political sophistication in the most important act of delegation, voting, had been downplayed by scholars. In part, we were right. Sophisticated voters are less likely to be influenced by the careful and skilled use of discourse cues, while unsophisticated ones are more likely to do so. As a result, the outcome of an election may reward the party or candidate who best exploits those cognitive shortcuts that naive voters adopt to make their electoral choices.

But, in part, we were deeply wrong too. As the investigation progressed, it became clear that our level of sophistication is largely irrelevant when we face cues that 'by-pass' our reflective (System 2) cognition. The experiments we made proved that the virtues of a sophisticated citizenry are also opposed by recurrent biases that affect our choices as voters. Although biased choices at the individual level can be thought of as cancelling each other out once aggregated, it is far from granted that this is what actually happens in reality. Visual cues may be activated by the perception of attractiveness, competency

or trustworthiness, for example, and lead some voters to prefer systematically a candidate over another just on the basis of his or her appearance. Further, large investments in communication campaigns may disseminate messages and images that - processed subliminally by voters – increase the likelihood of choosing a candidates or a party by means of a mere exposure effect, in a similar fashion to what commercial branding campaigns achieve for consumer goods. Vis-à-vis cues that make us shortcut our decisions without the intervention of System 2 cognition our 'defensive' kit is limited. For this reason it makes perfect sense to regulate the access of political campaigners to the mass-media and to cap the expenditure in TV commercials whenever possible.

More in general, this investigation has also tried to offer a new perspective concerning the how voters are influenced by political issues or objects. Traditionally, the study of electoral behaviour assumed that individuals' awareness of the political objects under assessment is a necessary condition for the existence of any kind of sway on voters (Butler and Stokes 1974). However, most of the findings which have been presented cast a reasonable doubt on the adequacy of this supposition and call for a review of any assumption about voting which does not take into full account the implications of dual processing models of human cognition. This does not mean that standard predictive models of electoral behaviour have become obsolete. They still provide us with a powerful tool to explain why we vote as we do. Still, the study of political behaviour would certainly benefit from recognising that cognitive cues and biases also play an important role in the way we perceive, judge and decide our political representatives.

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