Does Political Knowledge Erode Party Attachments?: The Moderating Role of the Media Environment in the Cognitive Mobilization Hypothesis

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This paper reviews the cognitive mobilization hypothesis and proposes a new theoretical framework from which to analyze the relationship between political knowledge and partisanship. It suggests that the influence of political knowledge on partisanship is not direct – as assumed in early studies and in Dalton’s CM hypothesis --, but moderated by the media environment. The paper uses survey data taken at different points in time in Spain to test the role of the media environment as a moderator in this relationship. It finds that exposure to the traditional media increases the effect of political knowledge on partisanship, while exposure to the new media reduces the effect of political knowledge on partisanship. These results have several implications for studies addressing how the new media affects political attitudes, and how different types of mass media systems shape the relationship between political knowledge and partisanship.

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INTRODUCTION

How does political knowledge affect party attachments? Does it strengthen party attachments, as early studies believed, or does it erode party identification, as recent studies have suggested?

For a long time, we believed we had a nice clear answer to this question. Early studies of electoral behavior and of public opinion found consistently that political interest and/or political knowledge were positively and strongly associated with partisanship (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). They found that educated and politically interested individuals were more likely to recognize parties as political objects and they were in turn more able to develop some kind of identification with them (Converse 1964).

This long-held belief was challenged in the mid-eighties. In an influential article, Dalton (1984) challenged the view of these early works by formulating the cognitive mobilization hypothesis, which stated that higher levels of political sophisticated would reduce not increase party identification. Dalton expected political sophistication to increase as a result of growing levels of education and the expansion of the mass media. Yet, contrarily to the old belief, he expected political knowledge not to increase but to decrease partisanship.¹

Controversial facts also invite to revisit this question. The literature examining the effects of the new media finds conflicting evidence concerning its influence on political attitudes. Padró-Solanet (2010) finds that greater exposure to political information through the Internet increases the likelihood of abstention among major-party voters. Cantijoch (2009) reveals that exposure to information through the new media increases the probability of extra-representational forms of participation. Finally, Sudulich et al. (2013) find, through a natural experiment, that broadband connection increases the uncertainty in voting decision-making. Although indirectly, all these studies suggest that exposure to the new media might be eroding party identification. However, in contrast to these studies, Prior (2007) finds that exposure to the new media environment increases the knowledge gap and revitalizes partisanship among the knowledgeable, suggesting that political knowledge strengthens party attachments.

In the face of both academic controversy and controversial facts, I propose to revisit the question of whether political knowledge strengthens or erodes party identification. To examine this question I start by revisiting Dalton’s cognitive mobilization hypothesis. This hypothesis is suggestive because it is inspired by the forces that are driving social change in our political systems; namely, the expansion of education and the infinite supply of information. Yet, it is also vulnerable because, among other things, it fails to incorporate these forces in a productive way into a theory of cognitive mobilization.

This paper argues that what matters for party identification it is not so much the amount of political knowledge, but the context in which this knowledge is acquired through exposure to different media environments. Media environments shape processes of political learning because they diverge in the ways in which information is organized and accessed. While in the traditional media environment gatekeepers organize and

¹ This expectation accounts for the fact that he stands out as one of the sole voices that views party dealignment as an ongoing process (Lewis-Beck et al. 2009: 157)
control access to political information, in the new or social media environment 
information is neither organized nor controlled by traditional gatekeepers. These 
differences, I argue, are expected to affect the relation between political knowledge and 
partisanship in different ways. Since gatekeepers control access to political information 
in the traditional environment, more exposure to information in this environment is 
expected to increases the effect of political knowledge in partisanship. Conversely, 
since traditional gatekeepers do not control access to political information in the new 
media environment, more exposure to political information in the social media 
environment is expected to reduce the effect of political knowledge in partisanship. 
Hence, in contrast to the CM hypothesis, I do not expect a direct effect of political 
knowledge on partisanship but an indirect one though exposure to different media 
environments. Or in other words, I expect the media context to play a “moderating” role 
in the relations between political knowledge and partisanship.

To test this argument I use survey data from the Spanish Center of Sociological 
Investigations (CIS) for different years. The use of longitudinal data should allow me to 
retest the CM hypothesis and contribute to make my test more robust. Spain is a good 
case study because it is one of the European countries where the forces of social change 
underlying the CM hypothesis have operated more visibly. According to the OCDE, 
Spain is one of the top 10 countries with the highest levels of upward intergenerational 
mobility in education.2 Also, in the last two decades, the Spanish media system has 
liberalized and undergone profound change. Finally, Spain is one of the countries where 
access to the new media has grown faster.

This paper is organized as follows. In the next section, I discuss some of the problems 
of the CM hypothesis and I propose a new framework for revisiting the relations 
between political knowledge and partisanship. In the third section, I review several 
hypotheses concerning the role of the social media in political learning, and use my own 
framework to derive predictions. In the forth section, I present the data and measures 
that I will use to test my predictions. In the following section I will present the results of 
my empirical analysis and discuss some implication of my theory. I will conclude with 
some final comments.

REVISITING THE COGNITIVE MOBILIZATION HYPOTHESIS

The cognitive mobilization hypothesis stems from a functional model of party 
identification. Essentially, the functional model explains party identification as a result 
of voters’ limitations and need. Voters have no direct experience with politics. As a 
result they should invest a great amount of resources -- cognitive and of other type -- 
gathering information to make good decisions concerning the political life. Parties are 
useful to voters because they help them to save costs of information and to make sense 
of the political world. Thus, voters use parties as “short cuts” and “cues” to make 
political decisions. In other words, for proponents of the functional approach 
partisanship is explained because, due to limited cognitive abilities and high costs of 
information, individuals need decisional functions to guide their choices concerning the 
political world (Shively 1979). From this approach, it follows that once these obstacles 
are removed, party identification will decline.

Dalton (1984; 2009) uses this approach to party identification to derive his hypothesis of cognitive mobilization. He contends that due to increasing levels of education and the expansion of the mass media the obstacles motivating party identification in the first place – limited cognitive abilities and high costs of information -- may be disappearing. As a result of these forces of social change, he predicts a decline in partisan forms of mobilization and an increase in cognitive forms of mobilization. Also, since these forces of social change are here to stay, he sees party decline as an ongoing process (Lewis-Beck et al. 2009).

Unfortunately, the functional model of party identification has several problems. The first problem is that it is not the only model of party identification. There are other models – the rational or the psychological -- offering competing explanations of partisanship. Moreover, the functional account has one obvious weakness with respect to these other models: it might be incurring in the functional fallacy of confusing causes with consequences. Because one of the consequences of partisanship is that it indeed reduced the costs of information and provides heuristics for voters the causes of partisanship -- so goes the rationale -- must lie in the limitations of human cognitive abilities and in the high costs of information.

The second problem is the simplistic nature of this model. Even if cognitive limitations and high costs of information were the true cause of partisanship, the mechanism the functional model foresees linking these causal forces with the effect -- partisanship -- is way too simplistic. First, it assumes that political knowledge is strictly determined by individual characteristics, such as education and motivation, when indeed we know that contextual factors play an important role (Fraile 2013). Second, it assumes that political knowledge has a direct linear effect on partisanship, that is, that more political knowledge -- regardless of the context in which it is acquired -- reduces automatically partisanship. In sum, the functional model does not take into account that contextual factors play a role first in the amount of political knowledge that an individual acquires, and second in how acquired knowledge translates into stronger or weaker ties to parties.

Finally, the CM hypothesis has the additional problem that there is no clear evidence supporting it. In his two original articles, Dalton used aggregate data to support his hypothesis. But this empirical strategy has rightly been criticized (Albright 2009). Moreover, using individual data, Albright (2009) has shown that there is no evidence supporting the CM hypothesis.

In this paper, I revisit Dalton’s hypothesis and test it for the Spanish case. The purpose however is not simply to offer another test of Dalton’s hypothesis, but actually to reformulate his theory and re-test it by incorporating the moderating role of the media environment. Indeed, the main argument of this paper is that individual characteristics – such as education and motivation – cannot be used as sole factors to make predictions about partisanship; they need to incorporate the role of context, or, more in particular, the role of the context in which political information is provided. Indeed, I argue that the context shaping the way in which political information is provided – i.e., the media environment -- is critical to understand and explain how individual-level factors such as education and motivation play out to affect partisanship.

THE MODERATING ROLE OF THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT
The media can affect the relationship between political knowledge and partisanship in two different ways. First, it may affect this relationship by influencing the amount of political knowledge -- *how much* knowledge -- an individual acquires. Second, it may affect it by having an effect on *what* and *how* an individual learns from exposure to different media environments.

Regarding the first mechanism, scholars not only have discussed the effect of media exposure on average levels of political knowledge, but also -- and perhaps more importantly -- on the distribution of this knowledge. The hypothesis that not all social groups are equally prepared to transform exposure to political information through the mass media into political knowledge has led to the so-called “knowledge gap” hypothesis (Tichenor et al. 1970). This hypothesis expects exposure to political information in the mass media to increase the inequality in the distribution of political knowledge as a result of an uneven distribution of resources among individuals. The knowledge gap hypothesis has been examined for exposure to different traditional media, such as the television and the newspapers, and more recently for exposure to the new media (Bonfadelli 2002; Prior 2007; Anduiza et al. 2009). Existing evidence points to different effects of the media in the knowledge gap hypothesis. While there is abundant evidence that exposure to television news tends to reduce the knowledge gap (Kwak 1999; Hwang y Jeong 2009), exposure to the new media -- either cable television or the Internet -- seems to increase it (Prior 2007; Bonfadelli 2002; Anduiza et al. 2009), and the role of newspapers is somehow more controversial (Fraile 2011).

Even if there is evidence pointing to an increase in the knowledge gap -- with the educated becoming more knowledgeable -- as result of exposure to the new media, it is not entirely clear how greater political knowledge affects partisanship. Some studies find that the effect of party cues on attitudes decreases as political awareness increases and that the politically sophisticated tend to engage in more systematic processing information if given the opportunity than use party cues (Kam 2005; Malhotra y Kuo 2008). Yet there are other studies arguing for, and finding, the opposite effect. They argue that the politically aware have better developed cognitive schemas and stronger predispositions that contribute to more biased information processing (Meffert et al. 2006). Hence, the evidence concerning the effect of political knowledge on partisanship is inconclusive (Anduiza et al. 2013).

However, media effects are not only relevant for explaining the amount of political knowledge acquired through exposure to the different media; they are also relevant for explaining *what* and *how* an individual learns from exposure to different media environments.

The literature examining the influence of the new media on political attitudes and behavior provides some insights with regard to this second question. Indeed, the focus in this literature has shifted from stressing the amount of information circulating through the Net to its quality. Many of these works consider the diversity of the information circulating through the Net the relevant feature explaining different forms of political behavior (Mossberger, Tolbert, y McNeal 2008; Padró-Solanet 2010; Cantijoch 2009; Sudulich, Wall, y Baccini 2013).
The core of this argument is that the possibility of accessing more diverse information makes it more likely that people will encounter opinions and views that challenge their preexisting ones, and allows them to escape traditional gatekeepers in establishing the political agenda (Williams y Carpini 2000; Williams y Carpini 2004; Cantijoch 2009). This in turn is expected to make individuals more critical towards established institutions, and to affect their political behavior.

While this argument is interesting because it focuses not so much in how much people learn through exposure to the new media but in what they learn, it has some weaknesses. The first weakness is that it is not clear why people, when searching for political information in the Net, should be exposed to more diverse political views. Indeed, this view has been challenged by arguments predicting more selective exposure in the new media environment (Prior 2005; Prior 2007; Stroud 2008). A second weakness is that, assuming that individuals are exposed to more diverse views when searching for political information through the Net, it is not clear what this diversity does to them, how it matters for the relationship between political knowledge and partisanship.

I propose an explanation that focuses also in what people learn from exposure to different media environments, but that answers some of the questions that this literature does not answer. In this explanation media environments are critical to relationships between political knowledge and partisanship because they shape the way in which information is accessed and interpreted. There are fundamental differences in the way information is organized and accessed across media environments, particularly, between the “traditional” and the “social” media environments. By the traditional media environment, I mean the environment shaped by the traditional media -- TV, radio, and newspaper; by the social media environment, I mean the environment shaped by Internet or, more specifically, by all of the different technologies included under the general concept of Internet. For our purposes, the relevant difference between these two media environment is that in the traditional media political information is entirely organized by gatekeepers (mass media and political parties), who also control access to this information. In contrast, in the social media environment gatekeepers neither organize nor control access to political information. This constrains individual behavior, and has very important implications for what and how people learn about politics.

In the traditional media environment, since political information is controlled and organized by gatekeepers, people use gatekeepers (mass media and political parties) both to access and as “cues” to identify political information. Hence, if individuals want to consume only information that conforms to their political views they can do this very efficiently. They will use gatekeepers as cues to identify the information that conforms to their political views. In contrast, in the social media environment, gatekeepers do not control access to political information and cannot be used as “cues” to identify it. In the social media environment, even if people only or mainly want to consume information that conforms to their political views they will not be able to. First, they will be faced with sorting out the information they are interested in among a huge amount of other information stored in the Net. While browsers can make the searching process efficient they will hardly assist them in “identifying” the content of political information. Hence, at least some of the time, people will have to use their own judgment to decide whether the information they encounter conforms or not to their own political views. This means that at least when it comes to select political views – not media contents --, selective
exposure will be less efficient in the social media than in the traditional media environment. But not only that, since gatekeepers cannot always be used as “cues” to identify political information because they do not control access to it, at least some of the time people will have to use their own judgment to decide whether the information they encounter conforms or not to their political view.

I expect these different ways of accessing political information to affect political learning and partisanship in the following way. Because gatekeepers are key players in facilitating access and identification of political information in the traditional media environment, I expect them to aid individuals in selective exposure and to reinforce the role of partisanship as a learning device. Since in the traditional media environment individuals use gatekeepers to access political information, they can make more efficient in selective exposure. At the same time, using gatekeepers to identify political information reinforces partisanship as a cue to make sense of the political world. Hence, I expect greater exposure to the traditional media environment and more political knowledge -- acquired through this environment --, to increase individuals’ partisan bias (the extent of this bias will depend on the degree of symbiosis between the mass media and the political parties) and to reinforce the role of partisanship as a heuristic.

In contrast, since in the new media environment gatekeepers cease to be key players in facilitating access and interpretation of political information, I expect individuals to be less efficient in selective exposure and the role of partisanship as an heuristic device to diminish. Indeed, as I argued, in the new media environment, people are expected to encounter more diverse political information and to use their political judgment to decide whether the information they encounter conforms or not to their political views. Hence, I expect greater exposure to political information and more political knowledge in the new media environment to reduce individuals’ partisan bias and to diminish the use of partisanship as an heuristic device.

Note that my argument also stresses the greater diversity of information and the diminishing role of gatekeepers as key features of the new media environment. Yet, I believe my account offers a more convincing explanation for why people should be exposed to more diverse political information in the Net. While the assumption in previous accounts is that people consume more diverse political views because the Net encourages them to (Mossberger et al. 2008; Cantijoch 2009), in my account it is not motivation but constraint what drives greater exposure to a diversity of political views. My approach shifts the question from whether people want or not to consume more diverse political information to whether they can. Also, I believe that my approach specifies what exposure to political information in the Net – thus, to more diverse political information – may imply for political learning and partisanship. As I argue, because gatekeepers do not control access to political information in the Net, selective exposure is expected to be less efficient and partisanship less relevant as a heuristic device. This part of my argument seems to contradict Prior’s, since he argues that selective exposure is expected to be more efficient in the new media environment. However, this contradiction is only apparent, since what qualifies for the new media environment and for selective exposure in Prior’s story and in this story is different. In discussing the effects of the new media environment, Prior studies the influence mainly of cable television, while I focus on the Internet. Also, in discussing selective exposure Prior refers to exposure to different media contents – mainly, news versus entertainment – while I refer to exposure to different political views.
To summarize this and the previous discussion, I formulate the following hypotheses. First, in contrast to Dalton’s hypothesis, I expect cognitive mobilization (or political knowledge) to increase the likelihood of partisanship. Dalton’s hypothesis has been tested examining the effect of CM on partisanship over the years and across age cohorts (Albright 2009). As Albright states, if Dalton’s hypothesis is right we should observe that the effect of CM in partisanship decreases over time and increases with age. Since I argue that CM per se does not explain and cannot predict partisanship, my first hypothesis is:

\[ H1: \text{CM has a positive effect in partisanship, and this effect does not vary for different years and ages.} \]

However, I argue that the media environment plays a moderating role in the relationship between political knowledge and partisanship. Thus, I expect the relationship between CM and partisanship to vary across media environments. In particular, I expect exposure to political information in the traditional media environment to potentiate the effect of CM in partisanship, and exposure to political information in the new media environment to reduce the effect of CM in partisanship. This leads to the following two additional hypotheses:

\[ H2: \text{Exposure to political information in the traditional media increases the effect of CM in partisanship.} \]

\[ H3: \text{Exposure to political information in the new media environment decreases the effect of CM in partisanship.} \]

In the next section I argue why Spain is a good case for re-testing the CM hypothesis, and testing the new theoretical framework that I propose to review the relationships between political knowledge and partisanship.

**WHY SPAIN?**

Spain is a good case to re-test the CM hypothesis and the alternative framework that I propose here because it has been subject to the forces of social change that underpin the CM hypothesis. In the last three decades, Spain has seen the levels of education rise to unprecedented levels. From 1980 to 2010, public spending in education as a percentage of GDP more than doubled in Spain (from 2.13% of the GDP to 4.98% of the GDP), and the country also made a considerable effort to increase public spending in research and development. As a result of this increase in public spending, attainment rates in all levels of educations (primary, secondary, and tertiary) have greatly increased across generations, and Spain is one of the top 10 countries with the highest levels of upward intergenerational mobility in education (Country Note, OCDE, 2012: 2-4).

But Spain not only has seen its levels of education rise; the media has also expanded, and access to the new media – i.e., to the Internet -- has grown at a fast rate from 2000. In the nineties, the audiovisual market liberalized, and the Spanish television system evolved from a monopoly (with only two state channels) into a competitive
multichannel system (Fraile 2011: 67). The press also suffered important changes during this decade, and the Old Spanish newspapers evolved into smaller tabloids (Barnhurst 2000, quoted in Fraile: 67). During this period, the liberalization of the broadcast market increased the choice of media contents. However, two other trends took place in the Spanish media system during this period: a trend towards greater concentration of media ownership, and a trend toward an increase in ideological polarization of the media (Fraile 2011: 67).

As for access to the new media, the percentage of Internet users has grown from 13 percent of the population in 2000 to 63 percent in 2010 (see Internet World Statistics). Moreover, of those who have access to the Internet, the percentage of intensive Internet users, of those who access it daily, represents half of the population (49.9%), according to the National Statistics Institute. Also, as use of the Internet has generalized, use of the Net for purposes of acquiring political information has increased. In the last barometer of the CIS (in January 2013), more than 16 percent reported the Internet as their preferred media to acquire political information.

Consistent with these trends, the data shows that CM increases with each survey year. If in 2005 (the first year for which we have information), the mean of CM is 3.62, in 2012 (the last year for which we have information), it is of 3.86. This increase in average levels of CM can also be seen in the distributions below.

The data also shows that use of the Internet for acquiring political information increases with each year. If in 2005 only 3 percent of respondents reported using the Net every day to acquire political information, in 2012 this percentage grew to be 17 percent. Moreover, in 2012 more than 25 percent of the respondents reported using the Net more than 3 days per week to acquire political information, compared to 6 percent in 2005. The distributions below show how the number of people using the Internet for purposes of getting political information increases overtime.

Figure 1. Distributions of CM for each survey year

Figure 2. Distributions of frequency of use of the Internet for purposes of political information for each survey year
DATA AND MEASURES

In this study, party identification is defined and measured as an attitude not as a behavior. Extensive research has shown that partisanship affects a wide range of evaluations. Party identification acts as a perceptual screen shaping evaluations that concern policies, candidates, and issues (Campbell 1964; Lewis-Beck et al. 2009; Bartels 2000; Bartels 2002), and it continues to be one of the strongest and most powerful predictors of voting behavior (Bartels 2000). Measuring party identification as an attitude allows examining whether it continues to be a strong predictor of voting behavior. Since party identification has long been associated with the stability of the vote in advanced democracies, changes in party identification may have important consequences for the stability of vote and policy in our democracies.

The CIS surveys ask several questions that can be used to measure party identification. Some of these questions measure party identification as a behavior, and have been directly discarded. Among those that measure party identification as an attitude, some have been eliminated for asking about identification with specific parties. I use the question: DO YOU FEEL CLOSE TO ANY PARTY AND COALITION?, which has been used in other studies to measure party identification (Dalton 1984; Dalton 2009; Albright 2009). Respondents answering yes to this question are then asked if they feel very close, quite close or somehow close to that party. The possible answers to the second part of this question are more restrictive in the CIS survey than in other surveys.\(^3\) Thus, I use the first part of the question to code respondents as partisans and not partisans. I code as partisans respondents answering yes to the first question, and as not partisans respondents answering no to the same question. Hence, in my study partisans include people that feel very close, quite close or somehow close to a party.

Cognitive mobilization is measured the same way than in Dalton and Albrights’ studies. I combine the questions on education and political interest to construct an index of cognitive mobilization. In our dataset, education has three categories (low, medium and

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\(^3\) In surveys such as the PAS, ANES, and the Eurobarometer, people are asked whether they feel very close, somehow close, or not very close to the party, whereas in the CIS survey they are not asked whether they feel not very close, but only whether they feel very close, quite close or somehow close.
high) and political interest four (none, some, quite, a lot). Cognitive mobilization is simply an additive index of these two variables; thus, it ranges from 2 (the lowest level of CM) to 7 (the highest level of CM). The main reason for using this measure is to make my results comparable, since one of the goals of the paper is precisely to revisit the CM hypothesis and test it for the Spanish context. But there are also theoretical reasons for combining education and motivation. There is evidence pointing that what matters for political knowledge is not education or motivation in isolation but the combination of the two (see discussion in Bonfadelli 2002).

I use the question with which frequency do you see, listen, read or obtain news from the television, radio, newspapers or the Internet? Every day, 3-4 times a week, 1-2 times a week, with less frequency, or never, to measure exposure to political information through different media environments. Exposure to political information through the traditional media environment is an additive index measuring frequency of exposure to political information in the three traditional media combined – television, radio and newspapers. This additive index is then normalized in an index ranging from 1 to 5. Exposure to political information through the Internet is an index measuring frequency of exposure to political information through the Internet that ranges from 1-5.\(^4\)

I use survey data for different years from the CIS in this study. The fact that the CIS has asked the same question about party identification in nine occasions from 2000 to 2012 constitutes an opportunity to test the longitudinal implications of the CM hypothesis (Albright 2009: 256). Unfortunately, not all these surveys ask the question about party identification in a comparable context. Four of the surveys are post-electoral, meaning that the question about party identification is asked in a context in which parties’ visibility is at its peak. This contextual variation produces systematic biases in the response: while in post electoral surveys the percentage of partisans is, as an average, close to 50 percent, in surveys between elections the percentage of partisans is, as an average, of 35 percent -- 15 percentage points lower. I eliminated all the post-electoral surveys from my study because they tend to overestimate the percentage of partisans as a result of enhanced party visibility in electoral contexts. Unfortunately, I could not work with all of the not post-electoral surveys because not all include questions about my independent variables. I dropped one other survey (CIS 2837, May 2010) because it is devoted to environmental issues and contains no measures of media exposure. I performed descriptive and statistical analyses for four surveys (January 2005, October 2010, January 2011, January 2012), although I show results only for three of these surveys (January 2005, October 2010, and January 2012). I finally dropped the January 2011 survey for two reasons. The first and most important is that it formulates the question about political interest in slightly different terms. Instead of four options of response (a lot, quite or some, very little, none), it includes five (a lot, quite, some, very little, none). This minor change affects severely the distribution of CM, making it hardly comparable with the others. The figure below shows how the distribution of CM is affected by this small change, compared to the distribution of CM in other surveys.

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\(^4\) For the survey year 2010 I use a dichotomous measure of exposure to political information through the Internet because the question is formulated in a different way. Fortunately, there is question asking about the frequency of access to the Internet that I use as a control and sometimes in combination with the dichotomous measure for exposure to political information.
A second reason for dropping the January 2011 survey is that, even if it is not a post-electoral survey, it took place in an electoral year. National elections in Spain took place in November of 2011. Given the context of rapid economic deterioration in which these elections took place, the opposition party, the PP, had an enormous advantage over the incumbent party, the PSOE, by the beginning of the election year. The expected victory of the opposition party and its popularity at the beginning of 2011 might explain the slightly above the average percentage of partisans in this survey. While the average percentage of partisans reported in all surveys between elections is 34.98%, the percentage of partisans reported in the January 2011 survey is 37.7%. The figure below shows the percentage of partisans in each of these surveys.

Figure 4. Percentage of partisans in all the survey years

Finally, I use several controls. The first and most important is age. In fact, age matters so much in the relationship between political knowledge and partisanship that it enters the analysis not always as a control but sometimes as a moderator. Time is used also as
a control and as a moderator. Polarization may be a confounder, since we know that it increases the probability of partisanship (Stroud 2010, Lupu 2012), and it is also related to political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1992). I use the square of self-placement in a left-right scale to control for the effect of polarization or more extreme political views. Finally, following Albright, I use church attendance and, when possible, affiliation to trade unions as controls too.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To test H1 I followed Albright’s strategy. He uses time and age as moderating variables to test Dalton’s cognitive mobilization hypothesis. If Dalton’s hypothesis holds, we should expect the effect of CM on partisanship to vanish as a function of time. If it holds, we should also expect the effect of CM on partisanship to be stronger for older than for younger generations. In other words, if the CM hypothesis is not true it must be true that our first hypothesis holds; that is, that effect of CM on partisanship does not vary overtime and with age. To test H1 we estimated the model with and without interactions for the pooled dataset. First, I estimated the model without interactions, and found CM, year, and age to be significant. In a second stage, I estimated the model with interactions, and found no significant effect for the interactions between CM and year, and CM and age.

In the figures below (Fig. 5 and 6) we can see that age and time matter for partisanship. In general, young individuals are less likely of being partisans than old ones, a result that is consistent with the findings of early studies (Converse 1969). In particular, among 25 year-olds the predicted probability of being a partisan for all values of CM is an average almost 0.2 points lower than among 70 year olds. Also, the probability of being a partisan in a later period is lower than in an early period. In particular, the probability of any individual being a partisan in the last year for which we have information (2012) is, as an average, .05 points lower than for the first year for which we have information (2005).

However, these figures also show that the effect of CM on partisanship (the slopes in these graphs) does not vary with the year or with the age of individuals. Despite average differences across ages and years (different intercepts), the effect of CM on partisanship (the slope) seems to be more or less the same regardless of the age cohort and year. Indeed, CM always increases the probability – in some cases by more than 2 points -- of being a partisan, and this effect not only is highly significant but also robust across different model specifications. These results not only support H1 but also provide additional evidence that add to the findings in Albright’s study that the CM hypothesis does not hold in the Spanish case.

Figures 5 and 6. Predicted probability of PID by CM for different ages (fig.5) and for the first and last year of the study (fig.6)
To test for H2 and H3 I estimated the model with and without the relevant interactions, first, for the pooled dataset. I find that the interaction between CM and exposure to the traditional media is significant, but the interaction between CM and exposure to the new media is not (see appendix for model output). Fig. 7 shows the interaction effect for CM and exposure to the traditional media for the pooled dataset. As Figure 7 shows the positive effect of CM on partisanship is potentiated by the exposure to the traditional media environment. At low levels of CM, exposure to the traditional media environment does not make much of a difference on the probability of being a partisan (the probability change is of 0.03). However, at high levels of CM, exposure to the traditional media environment increases considerably the probability of being a partisan. The cognitively mobilized at high levels of media exposure have a probability of 0.61 of being partisans, while at low levels of exposure the probability is 0.47 – a probability change of 0.14. This difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Figure 7. Predicted probability of PID by CM for high and low levels of media exposure

But what is also interesting is that I find that the effect of this interaction increases overtime. When I estimate the model with this interaction for the data separated by years, I find that the effect of this interaction gets really large for the most recent year.
Indeed, the difference for different levels of exposure to the traditional media among individuals with high CM increases now by more than 2 percentage points.

Figures 8. Predicted probabilities of PID by CM at high and low levels of exposure to the media for the first and last year of the study

Moreover, when I estimate the model with interactions for the data separated by years, I find that the interaction between CM and exposure to the new media is significant at the 0.1 level for the two most recent years, 2010 and 2012. Figures 9 shows this interaction effect for the two survey years -- 2010 and 2012. In contrast to what we saw with exposure to the traditional media, and as expected in H3, exposure to political information through the Internet always reduces the probability of being a partisan for cognitively mobilized individuals. Among individuals with high CM (for survey year 2010), exposure to political information through the new media reduces the probability of being a partisan by 0.18 points, from 0.68 to 0.55.

This effect, however, is stronger for survey year 2010 than 2012. This suggests two possible explanations – one substantive and the other methodological. The substantive explanation is that in contrast to what we saw happening with exposure to the traditional media, the moderating effect of exposure to the new media on the relationship between CM and partisanship might be diminishing overtime. The methodological explanation is that I use different measures for exposure to political information in the new media in the two datasets. In survey year 2010 the measure for exposure to political information through the Net is a dichotomous variable, while in survey year 2012 the measure is a 5-point scale measuring frequency of exposure. Since a dichotomous variable tends to reduce the amount of measurement error (Przeworski et al. 2011), this might explain weaker effects in survey year 2012.

Figures 9. Predicted probabilities of PID by CM at maximum and minimum exposure to the Internet for the two latest years of the study
Additional tests tend to confirm that the moderating effect of exposure to the new media is not diminishing, but perhaps changing. Indeed, what I find for survey year 2012 is a strong interaction effect between age, exposure to the new media, and CM. This indicates that the moderator -- exposure to the new media -- is having a much stronger effect in young individuals than in old ones. Figure 10 shows the effect of exposure to the new media on partisanship by CM for individuals with less than 25 years. The moderating effect of exposure to the new media is clearly much stronger than in the previous figure. Indeed, among individuals with less than 25 years, exposure to the new media tends almost to eliminate the positive effect of CM on partisanship. For a less than 25 year-old that is highly exposed to political information through the new media, it is almost as likely to be a partisan at low levels of CM than at high levels. Indeed, the probability of being a partisan among individuals with less than 25 years and highly exposed to the new media with low and high levels of CM changes from 0.26 to 0.34 (0.08 points). In contrast, for individuals with less than 25 that are not exposed to the new media, this probability changes from 0.12 when CM is low to 0.55 when CM is high. In other words, when exposure to the new media is at a minimum, CM increases the likelihood of being a partisan for a less than 25 year-old by 0.43 points, which makes a big difference compared to the probability change (0.08) when exposure to the new media is at a maximum.

Figure 10. Predicted probabilities of PID by CM at maximum and minimum exposure to the Internet for a 25-year old.
IMPLICATIONS

Internal efficacy and use of the Internet. One implication of the theory that I have laid out here is that it may account for certain empirical regularities that appear in studies examining the effects of use of Internet in Spain. An important regularity that appears in most studies examining the causes and consequences of use of the Internet is a strong association between use of the new media and internal efficacy. Use of the new media seems to be associated with low levels of trust in institutions (external efficacy) and with high levels of trust in one’s capacity to change the environment and strong feelings of self-control (internal efficacy). This might constitute additional evidence for the mechanism that I contend mediates in the relationship between exposure to the new media, political knowledge, and partisanship. In the new media, gatekeepers do not control access to political information and people cannot relay on them but have to use their own judgment to identify political information. This might affect attitudes towards political objects (institutions) and towards oneself vis a vis these political objects and institutions. One consequence of the fact that people, in the new media environment, have to use their own knowledge as the “decisional function” to navigate through the world of political information is that feelings of self-confidence and self-control might grow in general, and especially among those more capable of using their knowledge. At the same time that feelings of self-control grow among those exposed to the new media confidence in existing institutions may diminish. In other words, internal efficacy might be mediating in the relationship between exposure to political information in the Net, political knowledge, and partisanship. Introducing internal efficacy into the model could easily test this. If when this variable is introduced in the model both the direct and the moderating effect of exposure to the new media disappear, we can presume that internal efficacy is a mediator in the relationship between exposure to the new media, political knowledge, and partisanship.

Type of traditional media environment. Another implication of this theory is that it may apply more neatly to certain contexts than others – something that further studies would have to test. I would expect the moderating effect of exposure to the traditional media on partisanship to depend on the extent of identification between the mass media and the political parties. The more independent the mass media from the political parties the
weaker the expected moderating effect of exposure to the traditional media on partisanship. In other words, in a context of a free and independent press I would not expect greater exposure to political information in the traditional media to potentiate the effect of political knowledge on partisanship. Indeed, I would not know what to expect in those contexts. Hence, our theory rests on the assumption that there is at least some identification between the mass media and the political parties. The degree of this identification, of course, varies across democracies. In the Anglo-Saxon democracies there is a strong tradition of a free and independent press, whereas the tradition in continental Europe is of a more politicized and less independent press. Thus, I would expect my theory to have stronger effects in continental Europe than in the Anglo-Saxon countries.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has reviewed the cognitive mobilization hypothesis and offered a reformulation of this hypothesis by incorporating a moderator in the relationship between political knowledge and partisanship: the media environment. It has used survey data from Spain to review the CM hypothesis and to test it under the new theoretical framework.

The results are two-fold. On the one hand, they confirm what we learned from Albright’s study: that there is no evidence for the CM hypothesis as it was originally formulated by Dalton. On the other hand, they provide some support for the alternative framework that is proposed here. The results tend to support the argument that what matters for partisanship is not so much political knowledge, but the context in which political knowledge is acquired. When political knowledge is acquired through the traditional media environment, CM tends to increase the likelihood of partisanship. In contrast, when political knowledge is acquired through the new media, CM tends to decrease the likelihood of partisanship. This result is novel and it implies a nice refinement of the CM hypothesis as originally formulated by Dalton.

These finding shed some new light on the relationship between political knowledge and partisanship, but they also have some limitations. The first limitation stems from the nature of the data used in this study. Given that the data is cross-section, there is no certainty that the direction of causality is the one proposed here even after controlling for several confounders. The second limitation stems from the particular characteristics of the case study: Spain. Spain is an example of a polarized political context with clear spills overs into the mass media system (Fraile 2011; Anduiza et al. 2013). Spanish newspapers have strong ties with the political parties, and the media holdings created throughout the nineties represent specific ideological positions (Fraile 2011).

This characteristic of the Spanish media system may help to explain why among the cognitively mobilized greater exposure to the traditional media actually results in more partisanship and not less. Since this characteristic sharpens the differences between media environments, it might also help to explain why we find the opposite effect for exposure to the new media

The particularities of the Spanish case may thus limit the potential of these findings to be generalized into other contexts. Despite these limitations, I believe these hypotheses make a contribution to the existing knowledge about the relationship between political
knowledge and partisanship, and that there is some potential knowledge to be gained from exploring them in other contexts.
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## APPENDIX

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