

Attention! The meanings of attention to politics in surveys

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Accepted Version

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and Green, J. (2021) Attention! The meanings of attention to politics in surveys. *Electoral Studies*, 72. 102345. ISSN 0261-3794 doi: 10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102345 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/100276/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102345>

Publisher: Elsevier

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Attention! The Meanings of Attention to Politics in Surveys

Abstract

This research note explores the role of reported attention to politics in survey overclaiming about politics using recognition of real and fictitious political parties in the context of the UK's 2019 European Parliament elections. We find that people who report higher attention to politics are more likely to over-report recognition of fictitious parties, and are also more likely to recognise new real political parties - those that emerged around the issue of 'Brexit' in the months before the election. To resolve these patterns, we show that political attention makes little difference to the accuracy of responses for people who have high political knowledge, or if it does so, it increases accuracy. However, for those with lower political knowledge, high reported political attention is a source of potential survey error and bias. These findings are consistent with higher survey satisficing and norm compliance among those who report having greater attention to politics, particularly among those who have lower knowledge. The implications are important for understanding the meaning and consequences of 'attention to politics' in surveys.

Work on survey inaccuracy in electoral politics tends to focus on turnout misreporting (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012; Bernstein et al. 2001; Dahlgaard et al. 2019; Karp and Brockington 2005), gender differences in survey response (Mondak and Anderson 2004; Lizotte and Sidman 2009; Fortin-Rittberger 2016; Dolan 2011), and the distinction between motivated reasoning and expressive survey response (Bullock and Lenz 2019). We lack a good understanding of the tendency to over-claim about politics in surveys. Insofar as existing work addresses this, one of the predictors of over-claiming appears to be attention to politics (Sturgis and Smith 2010). This presents something of a puzzle, since if someone reports attention to politics, we expect them to have greater political interest, and therefore knowledge and political sophistication (Prior 2018). It is not clear that this assumption holds. The findings on political attention and over-reporting suggest that reporting political attention is a form of virtue-signalling, and so respondents who report higher political attention may provide less reliable data than those who do not. In other words, it is important to understand what the measure of political attention is giving us; is it a proxy of knowledge and interest, or rather of survey satisficing? And for which survey respondents is this the case? This is important for a range of survey-based analyses. Attention to politics is higher in widely used opt-in surveys than the general population (Chang and Krosnick 2009; Malhotra and Krosnick 2007; Sturgis et al. 2016), its weighting has been shown to be an important feature in survey representativeness and reliability (Sturgis et al. 2015; Mellon and Prosser, 2017), and researchers have long been concerned with political attention as an outcome of interest (Verba et al. 1997), and also as a predictor, for example, on the polarisation of political attitudes (Zaller 1990).

The research into attention to politics and survey-overclaiming has so far been undertaken on low salience questions where over-reporting or inaccuracy might be higher (Sturgis and Smith 2010; Schuman and Presser 1980; Bishop et al. 1980, 1986) or on non-political issues (van Prooijen and Krouwel 2019). We explore the role of political attention in survey overclaiming in the context of a high-salience issue of Brexit in the UK, specifically on the recognition of real and fictitious political parties. The UK's 2019 European Parliament elections provide a unique way to assess survey-response bias about politics. They took place in the context of a highly polarized electorate with intense political preferences and Brexit identities (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley 2020) and followed considerable political volatility with the emergence of two new political parties; 'The Brexit Party' and 'Change UK'. This context allows us to explore recognition of fictitious but plausible political parties within the context of Brexit, and recognition of real but new political parties that varied in salience: the Brexit Party ended up topping the poll in the European Parliament elections (winning with 30.5% of the vote), whereas Change UK all but disappeared (winning just 3.3% of the vote). It enables us to assess the role of

political attention on both over-reporting (recognition of fictitious parties) and accurate reporting (recognition of new, real parties), alongside the role of preferences around the issue of Brexit.

Our findings reveal considerable over-reporting of fictitious parties in the post-election period of these European Parliament elections in June 2019. At its maximum, 37% of respondents report recognition of a fictitious party ('The Remain Party'). We identify a relationship between political attention on *over-reporting* and also on *correct reporting*. Political attention thus fulfills the two assumed functions: it reflects genuine attention to politics, but also survey satisficing and social norm conformity (in the form of over-claiming). The key difference in understanding these effects lies in political knowledge; attention to politics can denote both low political knowledge and a tendency to over-claim, and high political knowledge and greater accuracy. The implications are important for how we understand the different meanings of attention to politics in surveys, and may be useful for understanding the relationship between sample composition and survey accuracy.

Accuracy in survey responses

There are several sources of inaccuracy in survey reporting: those that relate to contradicting someone's true behaviour (misreporting), neglecting to provide answers (under-reporting), providing biased answers due to motivated reasoning or to express political allegiances (expressive responding), and providing answers on topics or issues that do not actually exist (overclaiming). These kinds of inaccuracies matter because they lead to incorrect conclusions about associations between variables (Ansolabehere and Hersch 2012; Dahlgaard et al. 2019; Bernstein et al. 2001)¹, and incorrect assumptions about population levels of knowledge or preferences (Bullock and Lenz 2019; Fortin-Rittberger 2016).

At the core of many types of survey inaccuracies lies respondents' desire to present themselves in a positive light, maintaining a positive self-image. The consequent bias is often referred to as social desirability bias (see Holden & Passey 2009 for definitions) and can be seen as a type of virtue signalling. The desire to present oneself positively is particularly strong in surveys that ask respondents about sensitive topics or topics that have clear moral implications, for example, questions about illegal activities or attitudes such as sexism and racism (Krumpal 2013).

A different type of under-reporting also occurs: some respondents are less likely to answer survey questions. Various studies have found that women are more likely to respond 'don't know' to survey questions compared to men (Dolan 2011; Mondak and Anderson 2004; Frazer and Macdonald 2003;

¹ But see Cassel 2003; Cassel and Sigelman 2001.

Lizotte and Sidman 2009). This tendency occurs when respondents answer factual questions, but also when they answer questions about attitudes or opinions (Harteveld and Ivarsflaten 2015). Various explanations have been given for this divergence. Women might be more risk-averse and hence less likely to guess answers to factual questions (Lizotte and Sidman 2009), but differences may also emerge from different social norms about which behaviours or opinions are deemed acceptable (Mondak and Anderson 2004; Kenski and Jamieson 2000, Harteveld and Ivarsflaten 2015).

The opposite pattern also occurs. Instead of avoiding answering survey questions - or opting to say 'don't know' when not certain - some respondents report to have knowledge of concepts, objects or persons that do not exist. This tendency is referred to as "overclaiming" and has been studied mostly by psychologists (Paulhus et al. 2003; Atir, Rosenzweig and Dunning 2015; Petrocelli 2018). The tendency to overclaim knowledge is seen as a form of social desirability bias. In psychology, the tendency to overclaim is often used to identify respondents who are likely to provide socially desirable answers, in turn, to identify bias and unreliability in responses (Paulhus et al. 2003). Overclaiming has been linked to high levels of self-confidence and narcissism (Paulhus et al. 2003; Atir, Rosenzweig and Dunning 2015; Sturgis and Smith 2010). Mixed results are found with regard to gender, with some studies finding men are more likely to overclaim (OECD 2015; Jerrim, Parker and Shure 2019), but others finding no significant differences (Paulhus et al. 2003). Overclaiming may have cultural aspects too, since studies have found cross-national differences in the average levels of overclaiming in which respondents engage (Vonkova et al. 2018; He and van de Vijver 2016; Jerrim, Parker and Shure 2019).

Political inaccuracies

In the context of electoral surveys, greatest scholarly attention has been given to respondents' tendency to over-report voting. Using comparisons between reported and validated vote, research on overreporting finds that politically attentive and interested respondents, as well as those with higher levels of education and partisan attachment, are more likely to over-report voting (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012; Dahlgaard et al. 2019). This likely stems from self-enhancement behaviour and norm conformity (Karp and Brockington 2005). Importantly, this type of overreporting inflates associations between key political variables and voting because the over-reporting of voting artificially creates differences between voters and non-voters. Because those with higher levels of attention and interest in politics are more likely to overreport voting, differences between the highly interested and non-interested in voting behaviour appear greater than they are (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012; Dahlgaard et al. 2019; Karp and Brockington 2005, but see Cassel and Sigelman 2001).

Political surveys are also susceptible to gender-related differences in survey response (Frazer and Macdonald 2003). Women are shown to have lower levels of political knowledge compared to men, a

feature that is at least partially explained by women's greater tendency to use the 'don't know' survey response (Mondak and Anderson 2004; Lizotte and Sidman 2009; Fortin-Rittberger 2016). Others have argued that question content and format explain these differences across genders (Dolan 2011; Stolle and Gidengil 2010). Regardless of cause, gender differences in survey response result in potentially incorrect inferences about women's levels of knowledge of politics or their political attitudes.

A final source of inaccuracy in political surveys arises from respondents' partisan preferences (Taber and Lodge 2016; Lodge and Taber 2013; Bartels 2002). It is widely established that partisan preferences bias survey response, resulting in large divides amongst respondents in their evaluations of the performance of parties, party leaders and the economy (Evans and Anderson 2005; Evans and Pickup 2010; Bailey 2019). Although these divides may be perfectly reasonable when considering support for a party leader, they are more worrisome when applied to objective facts. Yet, there is widespread evidence of disagreement on objective facts across partisan voters, particularly in the US (Gaines et al. 2007; Schaffner and Lux 2018; Krosnick et al. 2014). This has resulted in concerns about the levels of political information in the electorate and its consequences for electoral democracy (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008). A key question remains whether respondents genuinely hold these inaccurate beliefs, or whether these beliefs are the result of partisan cheerleading or expressive responding (Bullock and Lenz 2019). Although some studies have found that these beliefs should be taken as a genuine reflection of beliefs and preferences (Berinsky 2017), other studies argue that misperceptions are expressions of partisan support (Bullock et al. 2015; Prior et al. 2015; Schaffner and Luks 2018). Regardless of interpretation, this behaviour has been shown to be more prevalent amongst those who are highly engaged with politics (Taber and Lodge 2006; Schaffner and Luks 2018), putting the validity or sincerity of the responses of these respondents into question.

Gaps in understanding

With the exception of some studies in the 1980's (Bishop et al. 1980, 1986; Schuman and Presser 1981), there is relatively little work that explores factual over-claiming in political surveys. In one more recent study, Sturgis and Smith (2010) explored respondents' tendencies to provide evaluations of non-existent policy issues in the UK. Up to 15% of respondents were willing to provide an evaluation of a non-existing policy, which Sturgis and Smith referred to as "pseudo-opinions". The tendency to report pseudo-opinions was positively correlated with self-reported interest in politics, but negatively correlated with political knowledge. Furthermore, those who report pseudo-opinions were more likely to be male and score higher on measures of self-confidence. The authors do not interpret the pseudo-opinions as meaningless or as noise, rather, in line with studies on over-reporting of turnout, Sturgis and Smith (2010) argue that reporting pseudo-opinions is a reflection of respondents' desire to adhere

to a norm or standard they hold themselves to. In other words, the politically attentive feel they are the type of person that *should* have an opinion about a particular policy. This work thus suggests that our understanding of ‘political attention’ as a proxy of political sophistication or knowledge is more complicated than often assumed. Sturgis and Smith (2010) show that attention and knowledge are inversely correlated with the tendency to provide pseudo opinions and may thus capture, partially, different things. The fact that politically attentive respondents were more likely to provide pseudo-answers suggests that high levels of political attention may not reflect actual interest levels, but rather reflect social norm conformity and survey satisficing.

A second study, by van Prooijen and Krouwel (2019), used responses to non-existent survey items and linked those responses to anti-establishment voting. Respondents were asked how familiar they were with a set of 25 persons, objects, ideas and places, some of which are fictitious and all of which were non-political. The authors found a positive association between overclaiming knowledge (i.e. claiming familiarity with non-existing items) and anti-establishment voting in the Dutch referendum on the EU association treaty with Ukraine. To explain this connection, the authors suggest that both overclaiming and anti-establishment voting are correlated with high levels of self-confidence.

Here we provide a number of extensions and contributions on the topic of over-claiming. First, we explicitly focus on respondents’ overclaiming of knowledge on political items, which is of particular interest for the reliability of responses about politics. Second, we focus on overclaiming knowledge about parties, rather than low-salience policy issues, since this is especially relevant to an understanding of potential vote-choice over-reporting. Third, in contrast to any previous study, we explore over-claiming in a high salience context; specifically, for parties associated with the question of ‘Brexit’ in the UK. In this way, our study – which took place in June 2019 – provides a strict test of overclaiming of familiarity, since we expect general levels of interest and knowledge of parties to be relatively high. It also allows us to assess the role of political attention alongside potential expressive reporting, given strong political polarisation and reported political identities around Brexit (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley 2020) and the potential for a high salience context to increase pressure to conform to social norms (Karp and Brockington 2005). Fourth, we examine the role of political attention both for over-reporting and also correct reporting, comparing recognition of fictitious political parties and new political parties, made possible by the unique context of the UK’s June 2019 European Parliament elections in the UK. These elections saw the emergence of two new parties, the pro-remain party “Change UK” in February 2019 and the pro-leave party the “Brexit Party” in March 2019. This allows us to further explore the role of political attention as a source of inaccuracy, and also greater accuracy.

Research design

We designed a survey instrument fielded to 9,426 respondents just after the May 2019 European Parliament elections as part of the British Election Study (BES) internet panel (wave 16, Fieldhouse et al. 2019). Since this instrument was fielded after these elections, with the results of that election broadly disseminated in politics and national media, correct identification of political parties should be expected to be relatively high (yet as we will see, over-reporting was still high).

The UK was not meant to participate in these European Parliament elections. However, due to the failure to pass the UK's Brexit Withdrawal Agreement in parliament, these elections proceeded and were contested by two new political parties, The Brexit Party, formed in March 2019 and led by Nigel Farage (the former leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP)), and Change UK, formed in February from the splintering of MPs from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. BES survey respondents were asked whether or not they had heard of different political parties, some of which existed but which were new and/or low in salience, and some of which did not exist but were plausible parties in the context of Brexit, also with non-Brexit names. This provided variance on potential over-reporting associated with EU attitudes and variation on salience, which may be important for accuracy.

The factual party names were: The Brexit Party and Change UK, with the following parties as benchmarks: The Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru, The Official Monster Raving Loony Party, The Women's Equality Party, and The Pirate Party.² The Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties gain representation within their respective political systems and at Westminster, but cannot be voted for in the rest of England. The three last parties compete in national parliamentary elections in a limited number of constituencies and have never had MPs. The fictitious political party names were: The Leave Means Leave Party, The Remain Party, The Pro-Business Alliance, The Men's Equality Party and Friends of the Environment. 'Leave Means Leave' was a phrase used by former Prime Minister Theresa May, but otherwise this party was the only 'leave' party in our list. While there was no other singular remain party in the UK at the time of the European Parliament elections, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and Change UK all stood on remain tickets in the election.³ The order of political parties was randomised.⁴

² The largest national parties were not included as this would not offer meaningful variance in recognition.

³ This was also the case for the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party.

⁴ Pilot data (N=420) showed that, provided we used a randomised party list, levels of recognition of fictitious parties were the same regardless of whether only fictitious parties or a combined list were shown to respondents. We therefore opted to optimize the research design by randomising and including real and fictitious parties.

Rates of party recognition

Figure 1 provides the percentage who recognised each party, with fictitious parties starred. Data are weighted for national representativeness to standard BES wave 16 weighting variables, which include – in case of the BES – political attention and 2016 EU referendum vote.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents recognising each political party

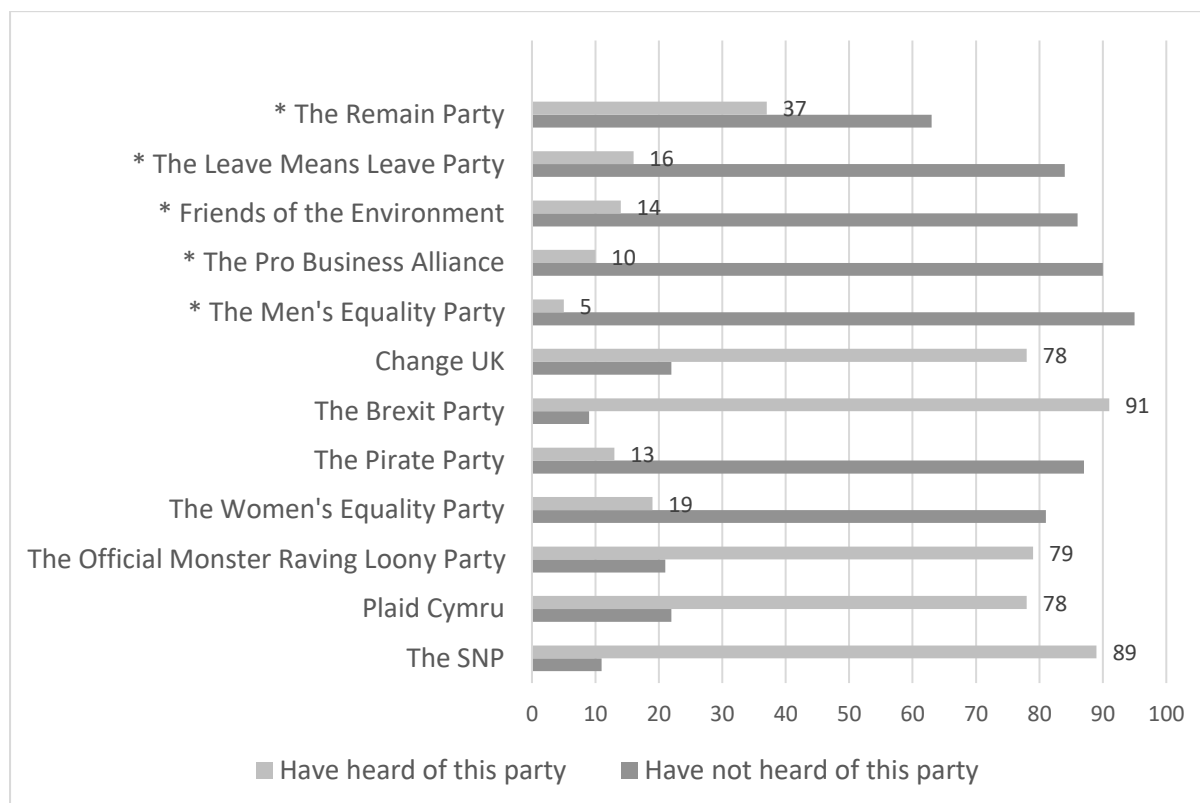


Figure 1 shows that recognition was lower overall for fictitious parties, with considerable variance. The Remain Party was recognised by 37% of respondents,⁵ and the Leave Means Leave Party by 16%. This difference is perhaps explained by the fact that, while there was a 'leave' party in the European Parliament elections (The Brexit Party), there was no official 'remain' party, despite those two sides of the debate dominating the election and dividing public opinion. The figure for the Leave Means Leave Party is on a par with other work which demonstrated that around 15% of respondents reported recognition of fictitious *policies* (Sturgis and Smith 2010). The figures are lower for the lower salience

⁵ Pilot data varying response format (tick all that apply) produced similar comparisons but slightly lower recognition of The Remain Party, at 31%.

examples; “Friends of the Environment” (similar in name to the charity ‘Friends of the Earth’), “The Pro-Business Alliance” and “The Men’s Equality Party” (there is a Women’s Equality Party).

Respondents recognised higher salience real parties (Brexit Party, Change UK, Plaid Cymru, SNP) in greater proportions, alongside the Official Monster Raving Loony Party. The Brexit Party was recognised by 91% whereas around a fifth of BES respondents (22%) said they had *not* heard of Change UK, even though Change UK had 11 MPs at the time of the European Parliament elections. This relatively low level of recognition is on a par with the Women’s Equality Party, the Official Monster Raving Loony Party and Plaid Cymru (which cannot contest elections in England and Scotland).

Predictors of party recognition

We next model recognition of the two new parties associated with Brexit; Change UK and the Brexit Party, and also the fictitious Leave Means Leave Party, Remain Party and remaining non-Brexit fictitious parties. We control for standard variables and use the BES measure of political attention which asks respondents how much attention they pay to politics, on a 0-10 scale. This measure is closely related to political interest, which is also often used as a predictor of overreporting voting (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012) and overclaiming (Sturgis and Smith 2010). To control for potential motivated reasoning or expressive reporting, we control for respondent EU integration preferences (higher values denoting greater euroscepticism), including the squared term to account for attitudinal polarisation and intensity. All variable information is provided in Table A1 of the appendix.

Table 1 provides an overview of the correlations between our independent variable(s) of interest (political attention and political knowledge) and the dependent variables (party recognition). In addition to political attention we conducted robustness checks with news consumption (time spent watching and reading political news) and general election interest, which are therefore also included in the table. Table 1 offers two key pieces of information. First; the correlations between independent and dependent variables are low. Second; reported political attention is distinct from political knowledge and news consumption. The fact that the associations between self-reported attention to politics and consumption of political news and actual knowledge of politics are low suggests to us that political attention is not a straightforward measure of paying attention to politics, nor does it necessarily reflect high levels of political knowledge. Rather, this measure may in large part capture something else entirely, such as survey satisficing and norm compliance.

Table 1: Correlations between political attention, knowledge, election interest, news consumption and party recognition

					Recognised party:			
	Political Attention	Political Knowledge	Election Interest	News Consumption	Remain	Leave Means Leave	Change UK	Brexit Party
Political Attention	-							
Political Knowledge	W16: 0.33 W15: 0.27 W10: 0.37	-						
Election Interest	0.64	W10: 0.27 W15: 0.20	-					
News Consumption	0.45	W10: 0.23 W15: 0.18	0.34	-				
Remain	0.02	W10: 0.05 W15: -0.07 W16: -0.09	0.04	0.06	-			
Leave	0.14	W10: 0.04 W15: 0.07 W16: 0.07	0.11	0.12	0.27	-		
Change UK	0.37	W10: 0.24 W15: 0.25 W16: 0.25	0.31	0.18	0.10	0.12	-	
BXP	0.24	W10: 0.19 W15: 0.11 W16: 0.13	0.17	0.10	0.11	0.05	0.43	-

The table presents correlations with knowledge variables from W10, W15 and W16, which are used at various points due to data availability. News consumption captures the time a respondent spends following politics on TV, radio, in the newspaper and online.

We now present results of our main prediction model of party recognition. As the first two columns in Table 2 show, age, political attention, education level and EU scepticism are all positively associated with recognising Change UK and the Brexit Party (the latter for those holding the most eurosceptic views). Women were less likely to recognize both of these parties, consistent with existing findings on gender and political knowledge (Frazer and Macdonald 2003; Kenski and Jamieson 2000; Mondak and Anderson 2004). However, as Table 2 also shows in models 3, 4 and 5, age, political attention and EU attitudes are also *positively* associated with recognising one or more party that is *not* real, with those reporting higher political attention being more likely to over-report recognition of all three party

types. The effect of EU attitudes (expressive over-reporting) is only in evidence for over-reporting recognition of the Leave Means Leave party.⁶⁷

Table 2: Logistic regression model of recognising real and fictitious political parties

	Real Parties		Fictitious Parties		
	(1) Recognized Change UK	(2) Recognized The Brexit Party	(3) Recognized Leave means Leave Party	(4) Recognized The Remain Party	(5) Recognized Other fictitious party
Age	0.01*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)
Gender	-0.51*** (0.08)	-0.30* (0.13)	-0.17* (0.07)	0.20*** (0.06)	0.03 (0.10)
Education: <i>base no qualifications</i> Below GCSE	0.16 (0.22)	0.05 (0.36)	-0.11 (0.20)	0.27 (0.17)	-0.61 (0.40)
GCSE	0.29* (0.15)	0.23 (0.22)	-0.05 (0.15)	0.19 (0.12)	-0.20 (0.25)
A-level	0.61*** (0.16)	0.47* (0.24)	-0.10 (0.15)	0.13 (0.12)	0.22 (0.25)
Undergraduate	0.76*** (0.15)	0.45* (0.23)	-0.18 (0.14)	-0.01 (0.12)	0.14 (0.24)
Postgrad	1.09*** (0.22)	0.53 (0.31)	-0.32 (0.18)	-0.32* (0.15)	0.54* (0.27)
Attention to Politics	0.31*** (0.02)	0.30*** (0.02)	0.14*** (0.02)	0.03* (0.01)	0.09*** (0.02)
EU attitudes	-0.16*** (0.04)	-0.10 (0.06)	-0.12** (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.05)
EU attitudes squared	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Constant	-0.46 (0.28)	-0.05 (0.42)	-3.06*** (0.26)	-1.95*** (0.19)	-3.36*** (0.33)
Observations	7620	7620	7620	7620	7620

⁶ For comparison, we ran the same model on earlier pilot data (see appendix Table A2). In the pilot we asked respondents who recognized the Remain party whether they could rate the party on a 0-10 likeability scale. We find a positive effect of political attention on recognition of the Leave party, and also on respondents' willingness to rate the Remain Party.

⁷ We replicated our main analyses (Table 2) with a measure of political interest instead of attention and find the same substantive results. This model is provided in Appendix table A4. We also conducted a robustness check where we add news consumption to the model shown in Table 2 as a more exogenous control for attention to politics. Our results are robust to this alternative specification, which is shown in Appendix Table A5.

Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients displayed are log odds.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Interestingly, education increases recognition of real parties but does *not* significantly decrease over-reporting. Predicted likelihoods of over-reporting are presented in Figure A1 of the appendix for political attention, EU attitudes and age.

How can we reconcile the fact that political attention both *increases* and *decreases* accuracy? We focus for the remainder of this article on understanding the dual effects of political attention, but also note the interesting symmetric effects of age on correct reporting of factual parties and over-reporting of fictitious parties.

The dual effects of political attention

Earlier work by Bishop et al. (1980; Bishop et al. 1986) and Schuman and Presser (1980) found that lower educated respondents were more likely to over-claim. While we find that this is not the case in Table 2 (models 3-5), it is possible that an education effect runs through age and EU attitudes. We examine whether increased political attention has a different effect for respondents who have high versus low levels of political knowledge. Knowledge levels are measured using a scale comprised of four factual knowledge questions about the EU,⁸ with the scale divided as high and low above and below the mean.⁹ The strength of this is that we compare objective political knowledge to self-reported political attention.

The correlation between political attention and political knowledge is low (see Table 1), suggesting either that knowledge fails to capture other types of attention to politics, or political attention is itself over-reported among people who have lower political knowledge. Splitting knowledge and attention at their means, 48% of respondents have low knowledge and attention, 21% high knowledge and attention, 15% high attention and low knowledge, and 16% high knowledge but low attention.

⁸ Respondents were asked whether the following statements were true or false:

1. "Each member state elects the same number of representatives to the EU parliament"
2. "Switzerland is an EU member"
3. "The ECHR only has jurisdiction over EU members"
4. "There are 15 EU member states"

⁹ We checked whether our results were sensitive to the use of different cut-off points for low vs. high political knowledge and found that they were not.

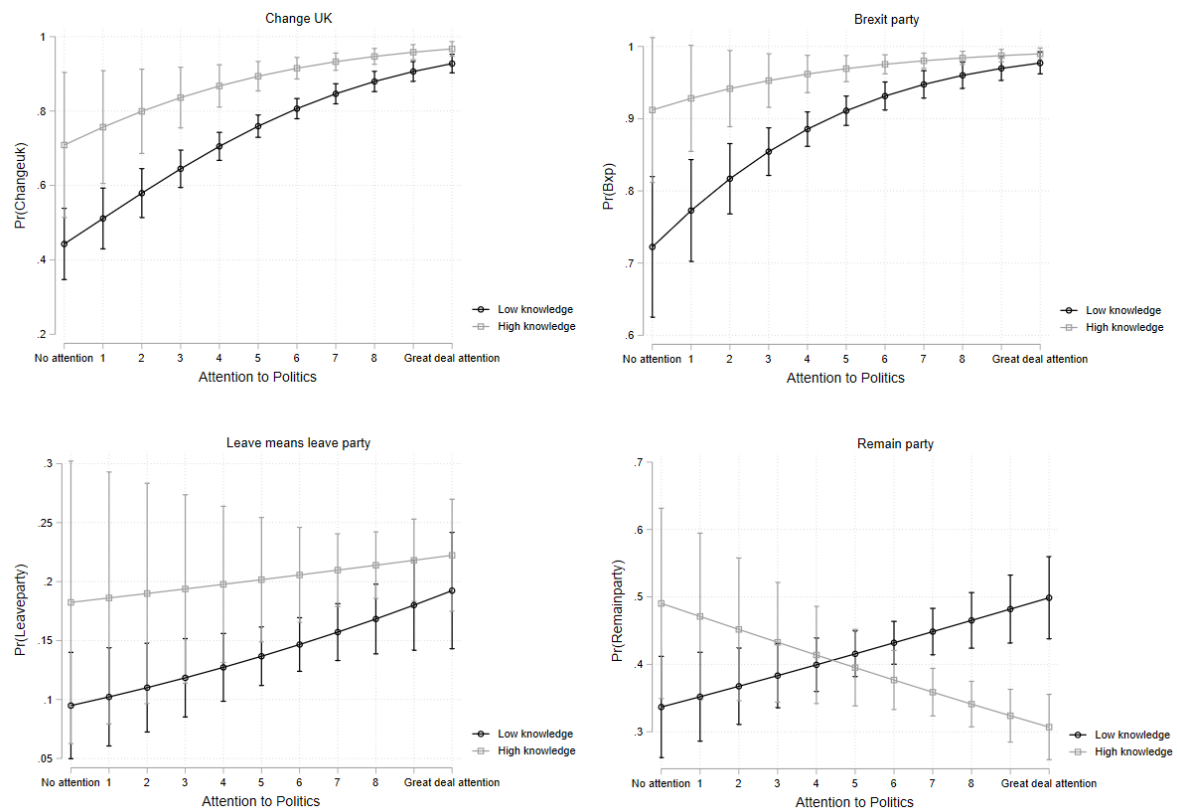
We replicate the analyses in Table 2 for leave and remain parties, adding an interaction term for political knowledge and political attention. Figure 2 presents the results based on models in Table A3 of the appendix. We see that, for high knowledge respondents (grey line), political attention makes little or no difference to recognition of factual political parties. However, for respondents with low political knowledge (black line), political attention increases recognition of factual parties. Turning to fictitious party recognition, we see that for high knowledge respondents, increased political attention either makes no difference (in the case of the Leave means Leave party), or increases *accuracy* (in the case of the Remain party). In contrast, attention to politics increases *inaccuracy* of fictitious party recognition for respondents with low political knowledge.¹⁰ This casts doubt over whether the recognition of factual political parties is real for these low knowledge-high and high attention respondents, or whether these individuals are more likely to report recognition of factual and fictitious political parties as a virtue-signalling device, since they are more likely to report higher political attention at lower levels of political knowledge. Focusing on those who reported they recognised the Remain party (37% of the sample), we find that the group of low knowledge-high attention over-reporters constitutes approximately 7% of the entire sample, giving an indication of the level of potential overclaiming within the survey.¹¹ Exploratory descriptive analysis of this group suggests that age is a significant predictor of over-reporting fictitious party recognition among low knowledge-high attention respondents.¹²

¹⁰ These results remain robust when we also control for reported political news consumption (Table A6 and Figure A1), which may serve as a more exogenous control for actual attention to politics, such that the remaining effect is likely to result from the overclaiming of political attention.

¹¹ As reported we find that 37% of respondents claim they have heard of the Remain party. Of this group 33% have self-reported high levels of political attention (above the sample mean), and just over half of this high-attention group have low levels of political knowledge (54%).

¹² Based on a logistic regression model where the dependent variable is Remain party recognition. The sample for the regression is low knowledge-high attention respondents. In addition to age the other independent variables were gender, education level and EU-referendum vote, none of these additional variables showed a significant association with Remain party recognition. Sample size for this analysis N = 333.

Figure 2: Predicted likelihood of recognizing new parties by knowledge and attention



These results collectively show that reported political attention has a role in survey over-reporting, but this is confined to respondents with lower than average knowledge about politics. For respondents with high political knowledge, political attention either makes no difference to reporting, or serves to increase accuracy. It appears that, insofar as political attention is an expression of a desire to present oneself as having a view about politics, and less a reliable measure of political sophistication, this is the case for respondents who have low political knowledge. Attention to politics means something quite different, then, to respondents with low and high knowledge about politics. We cannot know for certain whether reported recognition of real political parties is a form of accuracy or over-reporting among low knowledge-high political attention respondents. However, the findings on over-reporting of fictitious parties suggest that these errors may very well exist.

Conclusion

A substantial proportion – up to 37% of respondents – are willing to indicate they are familiar with a non-existing political party within the context of Britain’s debate over exiting the European Union, and following a national (European Parliament) election in which that party did not compete. Older respondents, respondents with anti-EU attitudes and in particular respondents with high levels of self-proclaimed attention to politics are most likely to display this behaviour. This is in line with existing studies of overreporting of turnout, as well as studies of both motivated reasoning and expressive responding (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012; Taber and Lodge 2006; Schaffner and Luks 2018) and it puts into question how we should understand measure of self-reported political attention. In line with expectations that political attention increases accuracy and political sophistication, we also identify a positive effect of political attention on recognition of real political parties. Political attention seems to be associated with both increased accuracy and inaccuracy of survey responses. We find that in order to explain this difference it is important to take respondents’ levels of political knowledge into account. Our results suggest that political attention increases over-claiming among low knowledge respondents, can increase accuracy among high knowledge respondents, and makes little difference to accurate reporting among respondents with high political knowledge. This suggests that researchers using measures of political attention should consider the possibility that this may have diverse effects for different types of respondents. To some respondents, declaring high levels of attention is likely a reflection of their genuine interest in politics. To others, reporting high levels of political attention is very plausibly a reflection of virtue signalling or abiding by social norms. We find that approximately 7% of our survey falls in the category of high-attention, low-knowledge and overclaiming – an important and meaningful level for survey researchers to understand.

The association between political interest and recognition of fictitious parties matters when considering the quality of survey data more generally. Politically attentive respondents are more likely to take political surveys, and hence are over-represented in most political surveys as well as opinion polls (Sturgis et al. 2015; Mellon and Prosser 2017). We find that political attention has, on the surface of it, both desirable and undesirable effects; it increases apparent accuracy of recognition of real parties, but it also increases recognition of fictitious parties. One key to understanding these two effects is the role of political knowledge. Given that 15% of our sample report high political attention but demonstrate low levels of political knowledge, and this figure – 15% - maps onto other research into the proportion of survey respondents who are willing to identify knowledge of other fictitious items in surveys (Sturgis and Smith 2010), this significant proportion of the electorate as measured in surveys should be given greater attention by researchers in electoral studies.

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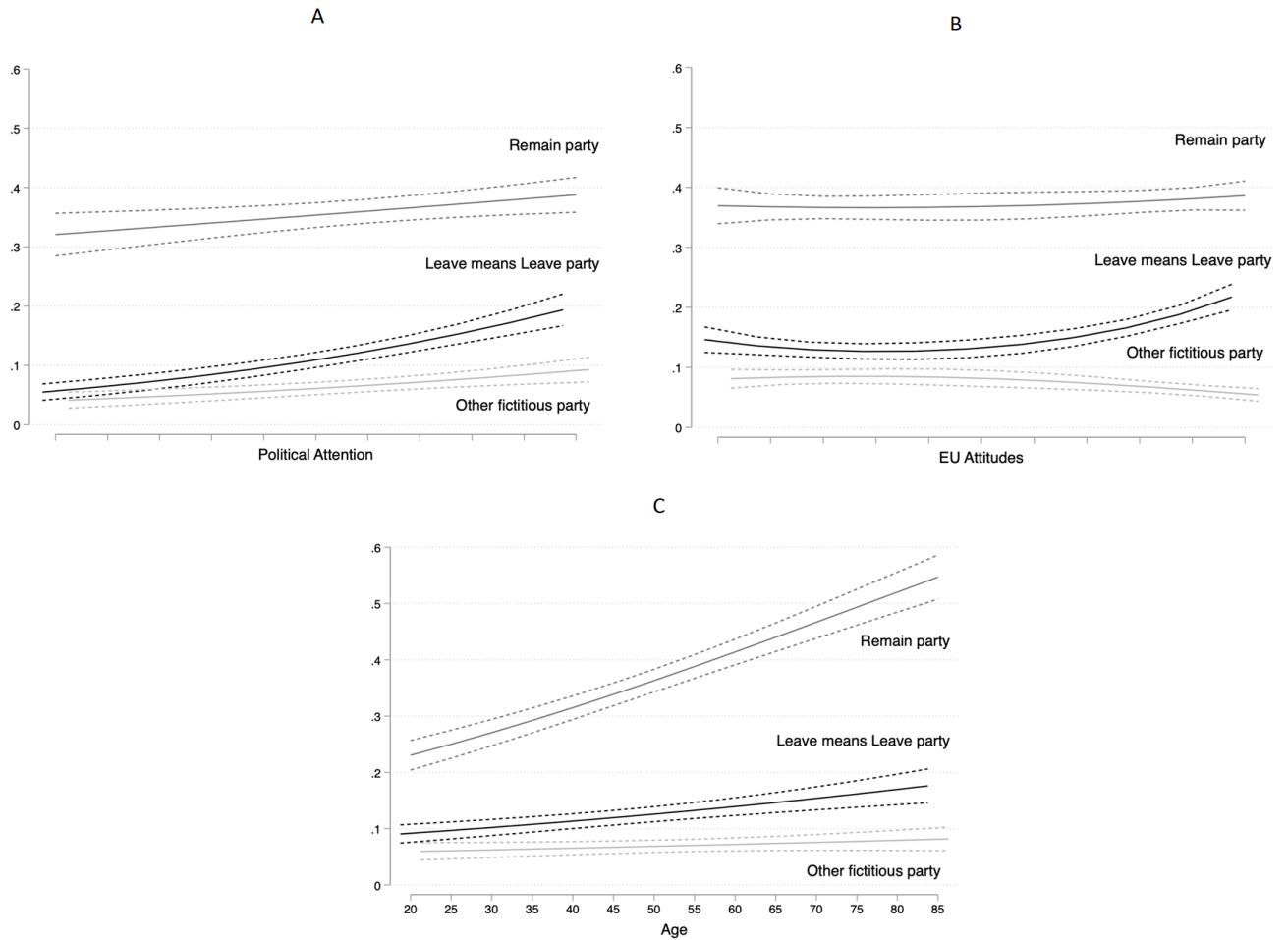
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Appendix

Figure A1: Predicted likelihoods of recognising fictitious parties



Notes: Predicted likelihoods using models 3, 4 and 5 in Table 1, all other variables set to their mean values. Higher values on the x-axis reflect higher levels of self-reported political attention (Figure 2A) and anti-EU attitudes (Figure 2B).

Table A1: variable codings and sample descriptives for variables included in Table 1 main text

Variable	Descriptives	Notes
Age	Range: 18-91 Mean: 48 SD: 17	
Gender	Binary variable 49% male 51% female	
Education	Categorical variable No qualifications: 7% Below GCSE: 4% GCSE: 21% A-level: 22% Undergraduate: 37% Postgraduate: 9%	Don't know responses coded as missing
Attention to politics	Range: 0-10 Mean: 6.19 SD: 2.69	Don't know responses coded as missing
EU attitudes	Range: 0-10 Mean: 5.40 SD: 3.61	Don't know responses coded as the midpoint of the scale (neutral position)

Dependent variables: the dependent variables are coded such that respondents who indicated they “had heard of” a party were coded as 1 and respondents who indicated that they “had not heard” of a party were coded as 0.

For the dependent variable “recognized other fictitious party” – respondents who indicated they recognized either the Friends of the Environment party; the Business Alliance Party; or the Men’s Equality Party were coded as 1, those who indicated they had not heard of this party were coded as 0. Respondents who recognised one of these three parties and also recognized the Leave or Remain party were coded as 0.

The British Election Study does not include a variable for self-confidence.

We also re-ran our main results (Table 1 in main text) with a different coding of EU attitudes. Instead of setting ‘Don’t Know’ responses to the mid-point of the scale, we treated them as missing. Using this alternative coding approach we still find a positive and significant association between EU attitudes and recognition of the Leave means Leave party, as reported in the main text. We do not, however, find a significant association between EU attitudes and recognition of real parties (Change UK and the Brexit party). Our substantive results on political attention are unchanged when using this alternative coding, those with higher levels of political attention are significantly more likely to recognize both fictitious and real parties.

Table A2: Pilot data – recognition of Leave and Remain Party – and ratings of Remain Party

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Recognized Leave party	Recognized Remain party	Recognized other fictitious party	Provided rating of Remain party
Age	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Female	-0.28 (0.37)	0.34 (0.28)	-0.42 (0.51)	-0.39 (0.69)
Education <i>Base: no qualifications</i>				
Below GCSE	0.48 (0.91)	-0.48 (0.82)	0.74 (1.04)	0.00 (.)
GCSE	-0.52 (0.70)	-0.35 (0.60)	-0.32 (0.86)	0.81 (1.07)
A-Level	-0.44 (0.73)	-0.35 (0.62)	-0.92 (0.86)	0.03 (1.03)
Undergraduate	-0.46 (0.71)	-0.60 (0.60)	-0.51 (0.72)	0.85 (1.12)
Postgrad	-0.53 (1.05)	-1.28 (0.91)	0.00 (.)	0.02 (1.29)
Political attention	0.17* (0.09)	0.05 (0.06)	0.03 (0.11)	0.49** (0.15)
Leave	0.60 (0.42)	-0.32 (0.30)	-0.50 (0.55)	-0.57 (0.60)
Constant	-2.84** (1.02)	-1.00 (0.83)	-1.00 (1.05)	-3.40* (1.52)
Observations	297	297	281	91

Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients are log odds

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: only those who indicated they recognized the Remain party (N = 136) were asked to then provide a rating of how much they liked this party.

Table A3: Logistic regression model political attention and political knowledge

	Real Parties		Fictitious Parties		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Recognized Change UK	Recognized Brexit Party	Recognized the Leave party	Recognized the Remain party	Recognized other fictitious party
Age	0.01*	0.02**	0.01**	0.02***	0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)
Female	-0.49**	-0.02	-0.18	0.16	0.27
	(0.17)	(0.25)	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.18)
Education Base: no qualifications					
Below GCSE	0.41	0.56	-0.69	0.45	-0.40
	(0.45)	(0.87)	(0.44)	(0.39)	(0.91)
GCSE	0.18	0.14	-0.38	0.04	-0.03
	(0.28)	(0.44)	(0.28)	(0.24)	(0.52)
A-level	0.41	0.75	-0.49	0.00	0.02
	(0.30)	(0.50)	(0.29)	(0.24)	(0.53)
Undergraduate	0.62*	0.83	-0.55*	-0.16	-0.18
	(0.29)	(0.46)	(0.28)	(0.23)	(0.53)
Postgrad	0.98*	1.09	-1.01**	-0.52	0.73
	(0.45)	(0.64)	(0.36)	(0.28)	(0.57)
High Knowledge	1.16*	1.48*	0.78	0.67	0.55
	(0.52)	(0.71)	(0.50)	(0.34)	(0.71)
Attention to Politics	0.29***	0.29***	0.09*	0.07*	0.09
	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.06)
High knowledge # Attention to Politics	-0.03	-0.06	-0.06	-0.15**	-0.03
	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.09)
EU attitudes	-0.07	0.01	-0.24***	0.01	0.04
	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.09)
EU attitudes squared	0.01	0.01	0.03***	0.00	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Constant	-0.96*	-1.22	-2.28***	-1.70***	-3.42***
	(0.44)	(0.64)	(0.50)	(0.37)	(0.57)
Observations	2152	2152	2152	2152	2152

Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients are log odds: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
 Political knowledge variable from wave 16.

Table A4: Replication of Table 2 in main text with political interest rather than political attention

	Real Parties		Fictitious Parties		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Recognized Change UK	Recognized Brexit party	Recognized Leave means Leave party	Recognized Remain party	Recognized other fictitious party
Age	0.01*	0.02**	0.02***	0.02***	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)
Gender	-0.69***	-0.46	-0.23*	0.26*	-0.09
	(0.14)	(0.24)	(0.12)	(0.10)	(0.18)
Education <i>Base: no qualifications</i>					
Below GCSE	0.10	-0.15	0.40	0.38	-0.84
	(0.30)	(0.46)	(0.27)	(0.24)	(0.60)
GCSE	0.27	0.13	0.04	0.15	-0.29
	(0.22)	(0.40)	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.37)
A-level	0.65**	0.79	0.26	0.18	0.23
	(0.24)	(0.45)	(0.23)	(0.20)	(0.36)
Undergraduate	0.89***	0.44	0.08	-0.08	0.09
	(0.23)	(0.39)	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.35)
Postgrad	1.26***	0.70	-0.16	-0.35	0.54
	(0.34)	(0.54)	(0.29)	(0.25)	(0.39)
Interest in General Election	0.83***	0.73***	0.35***	0.14*	0.03
	(0.07)	(0.11)	(0.09)	(0.06)	(0.13)
EU attitudes	-0.19*	-0.08	-0.02	-0.03	0.01
	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.09)
EU attitudes squared	0.02**	0.01	0.01	0.00	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Constant	-1.15*	-0.54	-3.94***	-2.43***	-2.96***
	(0.53)	(0.80)	(0.44)	(0.42)	(0.62)
Observations	3345	3345	3345	3345	3345

Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients are log odds. Political knowledge variable from W10; General Election Interest variable from W13.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A5: Replication of Table 2 – with news consumption added as control variable

	Real parties			Fictitious parties	
	Change UK	Brexit Party	Leave Means Leave party	Remain party	Other Fictitious party
Age	0.01** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.01** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)
Gender	-0.48*** (0.10)	-0.43* (0.17)	-0.20* (0.09)	0.19** (0.07)	0.04 (0.13)
Education					
Base: no qualifications					
Below GCSE	0.05 (0.27)	-0.07 (0.40)	0.12 (0.25)	0.25 (0.20)	-0.82 (0.48)
GCSE	0.30 (0.19)	0.19 (0.28)	0.15 (0.18)	0.20 (0.15)	-0.42 (0.29)
A-level	0.72*** (0.21)	0.37 (0.30)	0.10 (0.19)	0.17 (0.16)	0.26 (0.28)
Undergraduate	0.75*** (0.20)	0.30 (0.28)	-0.02 (0.18)	-0.01 (0.15)	0.14 (0.27)
Postgrad	1.11*** (0.29)	0.32 (0.42)	-0.13 (0.24)	-0.26 (0.20)	0.33 (0.32)
Attention to Politics	0.31*** (0.02)	0.32*** (0.03)	0.13*** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	0.06 (0.03)
News consumption	0.02 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)
EU attitudes	-0.17**	-0.15	-0.06	-0.01	0.00

	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.07)
EU attitudes squared	0.02***	0.02*	0.01*	0.00	-0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)
Constant	-0.60	0.59	-3.63***	-2.38***	-3.38***
	(0.39)	(0.55)	(0.32)	(0.24)	(0.44)
Observations	4519	4519	4519	4519	4519

Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients are log odds. Political knowledge variable from W15; News consumption variable measures time spent reading and watching political news.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table A6: Replication Table A3 with news consumption added as control variable

	Real parties		Fictitious parties		
	Change UK	Brexit Party	Leave Means Leave party	Remain party	Other Fictitious party
Age	0.01** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.02** (0.01)
Female	-0.19* (0.09)	0.15* (0.07)	0.09 (0.14)	-0.35*** (0.11)	-0.37* (0.17)
Below GCSE	0.13 (0.25)	0.25 (0.20)	-0.82 (0.48)	0.07 (0.27)	-0.08 (0.41)
GCSE	0.15 (0.18)	0.21 (0.15)	-0.43 (0.29)	0.28 (0.19)	0.19 (0.28)
A-level	0.09 (0.19)	0.20 (0.16)	0.23 (0.28)	0.64** (0.21)	0.34 (0.30)
Undergraduate	-0.04 (0.18)	0.03 (0.15)	0.09 (0.28)	0.63** (0.20)	0.23 (0.29)
Postgrad	-0.15 (0.24)	-0.19 (0.20)	0.25 (0.32)	0.82** (0.29)	0.15 (0.42)
Political Knowledge W15	0.70* (0.35)	0.52* (0.23)	-0.11 (0.54)	0.85** (0.31)	0.93 (0.48)
Attention to Politics	0.16*** (0.03)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.03 (0.04)	0.27*** (0.02)	0.31*** (0.04)

Knowledge # Attention	-0.09 (0.05)	-0.11*** (0.03)	0.05 (0.07)	0.03 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.08)
News Consumption	0.05*** (0.01)	0.03* (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
EU attitudes	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.07)	-0.17** (0.06)	-0.14 (0.09)
EU attitudes	0.01* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)
Constant	-3.80*** (0.34)	-2.59*** (0.25)	-3.25*** (0.44)	-1.01** (0.35)	0.12 (0.47)
Observations	4519	4519	4519	4519	4519

Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients are log odds. Political knowledge variable from W15; News consumption variable measures time spent reading and watching political news.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure A1: Replication Figure 2 with news consumption added as control variable (based on Table A6)

