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Improving the Measurement of Policy Preferences in Surveys: Bringing the Status-Quo back in

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Abstract

One of the fundamental uses of surveys is the measurement of policy preferences. We can ask voters how they locate themselves on policy dimensions of substantive interests, and we can ask them how they perceive the positions of political parties. Likewise, we can use surveys to get political elite to reveal their policy positions or experts to judge the positions of parties on a set of salient policy dimensions. Increasingly, such surveys present respondents with issue scales defined as trade-offs between different policy goals. Surprisingly, scholars have not paid much attention to the fact that such scales are directional and include an implicit reference point: the status quo. We examine the effects of indicating an explicit status quo midpoint in trade-off issue questions using an experimental setup in an online survey that was part of the German National Election Study in 2009. We show that status quo labeling has three major effects. First, the indication of the status quo significantly reduces item non-response. Second, issue scales with status quo indication change respondents' self-placement and the perception of political parties due to the provision of an explicit reference point. Third, individually perceived ideological distances between a voter and her preferred party are smaller when a status quo is indicated. This leads to a slightly stronger predictor of ideological distance in a conditional logit model of vote choice. The findings have implications for designers and users of voter and expert surveys.

1 Introduction

One of the fundamental uses of surveys is the measurement of policy preferences. We can ask voters how they locate themselves on policy dimensions of substantive interests, and we can ask them how they perceive the positions of political parties. Likewise, we can investigate how the ideology of party supporters matches the perceived position of parties. Likewise, elite surveys ask political candidates or members of parliament about their policy positions. Finally, an increasing number of comparative scholars use expert surveys to generate data on party positions on several substantive policy dimensions. Increasingly, these surveys ask respondents about their spatial location, or that of political parties, on issue scales defined as trade-offs between different policy goals. For example, one of the most commonly used scales in voter and expert surveys asks about the trade-off between taxation and public spending. For the most part, survey researchers as well as scholars using the estimates in secondary analysis have not paid much attention to the fact that such scales are directional and include an implicit reference point: the status quo. This omission is surprising because the theoretical and empirical implications of taking the status quo seriously are manifold.

We examine the possible effects of the status quo indication through a survey experiment, a random split, within an online pre-election study module of the German National Election Study conducted in 2009. All respondents were presented with a common 11-point issue scale formulated as a trade-off between taxation and spending, in which only the endpoints of the scale were defined as “prefer lower taxes even if this implies reduced social spending”, and “prefer more social spending even if this implies increasing taxes”. The treatment group was additionally provided with a labeled midpoint explicitly verbalizing the status quo (“things should remain the same”).

We show that simple status quo labeling has three major effects. First, the indication of the status quo significantly reduces item non-response. More respondents answer the question when the reference category is labelled. Second, issue scales with status quo indication change respondents’ self-placement and the perception of political parties. These two points

suggest that the omission of a status quo label may actually result in measurement error on the issue scales. We demonstrate the presence of an observable implication of measurement error: on average party identifiers indicate a significantly smaller distance to their preferred party. We show that the differences in ideological distances between voters and parties affect secondary analyses by examining vote choice as a function of ideological proximity to political parties. Our results suggest that ideological distance is a slightly stronger predictor of vote choice using distances calculated from measures from a scale that includes a status quo.

Our results have implications for expert surveys on party positions as well. We examine how respondents that know the status quo perceive party positions. The results indicate that the party system as a whole seems to be perceived more polarized with the status quo indicated. This means that the status quo serves as an important reference point and that results from expert judgments on party positions may actually generate more variation in party positions that is otherwise possible.

Our paper is structured as follows. We first discuss examples of voter and expert surveys that attempt to measure policy positions on trade-off dimensions. Subsequently, we describe our survey experiment and investigate item non-response, self-placements of party identifiers, perceived party positions among all respondents and among those who (partially) know the status quo. Finally, we compare the ideological distances between the control and treatment group and show the effects of using such distances in a vote choice model.

2 Policy Trade-offs and Issue Scales in Surveys

Politics is the art of compromise and much of policy making involves making tough choices under a budget constraint. One of the most essential trade-offs is the one between taxation and spending. How much such government spend and how much such these efforts cost? At the heart of such a trade-off lies the notion of non-separability of preferences: an individual's

preference for the outcome on one issue depends on the outcome of other issues. In other words, agreeing to increase public spending means one is also willing to raise taxes to pay for it. Conversely, pushing for lower taxes implies that one agrees that some public spending programs should be cut.

In an effort to measure the positions of voters and politicians it has become a widespread phenomenon to include issue questions formulated as a trade-off between different alternatives in surveys. In a pilot study for the 1996 American National Election Study, respondents were asked several separate questions in order to detect non-separability across preferences for tax decreases, deficit increases, or defense cuts in order to increase spending on domestic programs (Hansen 1998, Lacy 2001). In an ideal world, we would want to examine all possible combinations of issue to detect nonseparability, but practical limitations resulting from limited survey time make such an approach impossible (Lacy 2001, p.254). Thus, much more common in voter and expert survey research are issue questions providing respondents with a scale that allows them to place themselves and others on the policy dimension of interest. Such questions define the endpoints of the scale as one extreme trade-off and the other endpoint as the other extreme. Typically, the questions come with 7-, 11-, or 20-point scales. A typical presentation of the taxation versus spending trade-off defines one endpoint as “promotes raising taxes to increase public services” and the other as “promotes cutting public services to cut taxes” (Benoit & Laver 2006).

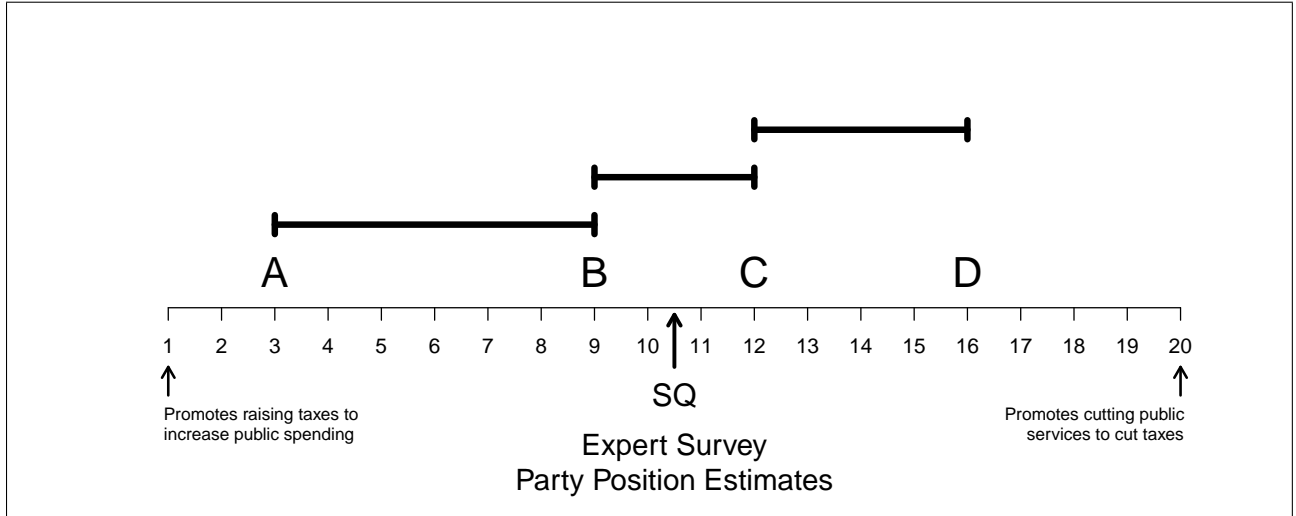
To our knowledge, one aspect of the scales has remained completely underappreciated in the literature: the implicit assumption that respondents know the location of the status quo. In fact, due to the directional nature of the trade-off (e.g. “raise taxes”, “increase public services”), respondents are expected to be able to give an estimate of their own position or that of a political party relative to the reference point of no change. Such a reference point, however, is not indicated in the question. If one takes the directional issue scales seriously, several theoretical and empirical challenges ensue. First, respondents are supposed to identify the precise location of the status quo on the scale. This is crucial because some voters or

parties are likely to prefer the way things are, and would propagate the status quo over change. Second, even if all respondents are factually aware of the status quo and locate this point identically, policy making theories and vote choice theories alike need to take into account that estimates can only be interpreted *relative to the status quo*.

There are several potential problems when using positions derived from scales formulated as trade-offs. Over time comparison is, in fact, impossible. If the status quo is indicated and the question is repeated in the same country, the two measurements are not comparable because the status quo might have changed. Because placements are relative to the status quo, we do not know whether the status quo has changed (or not) or whether the positions have changed (or not). Suppose a party is estimated to promote raising taxes to increase public spending in a voter or expert survey at t_0 . The party then enters a government coalition and changes policy to its desired level of taxation and increases spending in various policy areas. Then another survey is taken at t_1 asking for the position of the party on the same scale again. Now, the party position should in fact be located on the status quo. It has reached its policy goals. The party should neither want to raise taxes to increase spending nor should it want to cut spending to cut taxes. If one ignores the change of the status quo over time, the researcher, however, would conclude that the position of the party has changed, even though the position has remained constant and the status quo changed instead. Without knowing how the status quo changes, we are, in fact, unable to make any comparison across time using survey data on issues questions like these. This applies to voter surveys, elite surveys, and expert surveys on party positions alike.

Even if estimates are not used as time series, there are other survey-specific effects that deserve attention. First, if the issue question is formulated as a trade-off and the status quo is labelled, we may expect that more respondents answer the question because the reference point is indicated. Second, an explicit indication of the status quo may furthermore affect the self placement and the perceived location of parties. As we show later, this may have consequences in secondary analyses.

Figure 1: Consequences of SQ Indication in Surveys of Party Positions



Take the example of expert surveys on party positions. Such expert surveys have become a prominent source of party ideology in comparative politics. Expert surveys that formulate policy issues as trade-off questions have become ubiquitous (e.g. Laver & Hunt 1992, Benoit & Laver 2006, Benoit & McElroy 2007, Rohrschneider & Whitefield 2007, Steenbergen & Marks 2007, Wiesehomeier & Benoit 2009). One way to use expert estimates is to calculate the ideological range of multiparty governments to predict the extent of policy change produced by the government (e.g. Tsebelis 2002). Figure 1 shows the range of three possible government coalitions whose positions are derived from a hypothetical expert survey. The scale corresponds to the trade-off between raising taxes while increasing public spending and cutting services to cut taxes. Suppose the expert survey yields the positions of four political parties (A, B, C, and D). If the status quo is not known, veto player theory would predict that, *ceteris paribus*, coalition BC would produce more laws, coalition CD slightly less, and coalition AB even fewer laws. In a statistical model, ideological range would be expected to have a negative effect on law production. This ignores, however, the theoretical insight that we would expect no change if the status quo is inside the *pareto set* of a government coalition. As the issue scale already implicitly defines the location of the status quo, assuming that it is located at the midpoint of the scale, then the coalition BC would not be able to agree

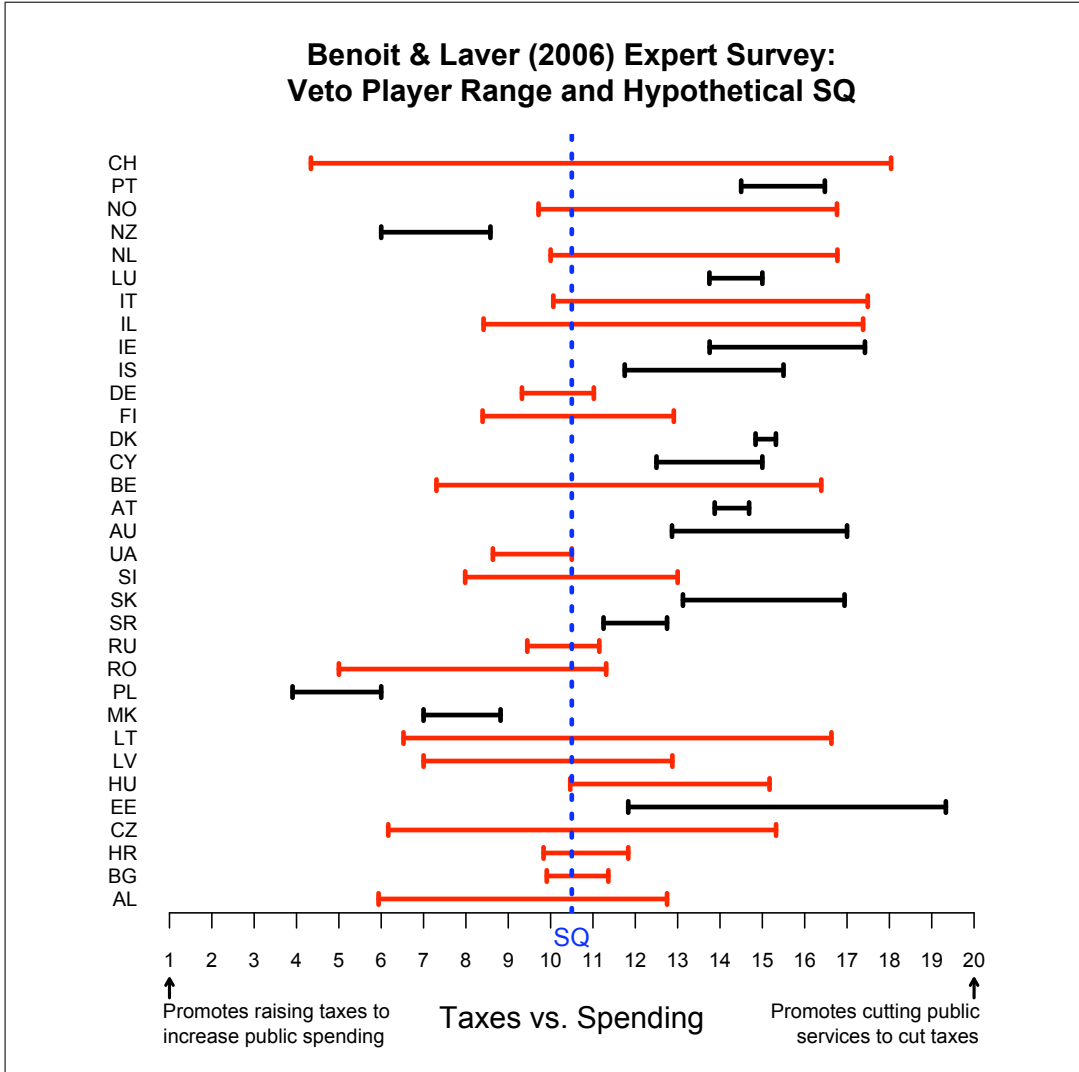
on change. While having the smallest ideological range, this government coalition should produce no significant law.

The example demonstrates that surveys may contain information that needs to be incorporated in theoretical predictions. In this example, it means that trade-off issue scales should probably not be used to simply generate estimates of ideological polarization of governments to make predictions about policy change, coalition formation or other phenomena *given that they contain an implicit location of the status quo*. Some may argue that this is an unlikely phenomenon and that the status quo ought not to be included in too many government coalitions. This supposition is false. Figure 2 plots the ideological distances of multi-party governments on the important taxes versus spending dimension using party position estimates generated by the expert survey of Benoit & Laver (2006). Assume the implicit status quo is located at the midpoint of the scale (10.5), shown as a dotted blue line. Countries whose government range includes the status quo are highlighted in red.¹ Out of 33 countries, over half (19) of governments have an ideological range that includes the status quo. If we are faithful to our theoretical concept, then such governments should produce no change, independent of their range. We are not aware that this information has been incorporated in secondary analysis using the data.

The issue is not just limited to expert surveys. Voter surveys include issue questions as trade-offs as well (e.g Adams & Merrill 2008). The European election study in 1999 and 2004 used an item on European integration formulated as a trade-off: “Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far”. In addition, elite surveys ask such questions as well Scully & Farrell (2003).

¹Government parties were identified using the information provided in the appendix in Benoit & Laver (2006). The data are for 2002-2003.

Figure 2: Theoretical Implications of SQ in Issue Scales



3 A Survey Experiment

What then is the impact of explicitly indicating the status quo when measuring policy preferences of voters and parties? We address this question by conducting a survey experiment, a random split, within an online pre-election study module of the German National Election Study in 2009. This experiment allow us to explore the effects in a multiparty system with two large parties (SPD and CDU/CSU) and three small parties (FDP, Greens, The Left). All respondents were asked the following question:

*Some prefer lower taxes even if this implies reducing social spending. Others prefer more social spending even if this implies increasing taxes. In your opinion, where do the parties stand on this? And what is your position on this issue?*²

Respondents were presented with an 11-point response scale to, first, locate parties and subsequently locate themselves on the same scale. An additional “Don’t know” option was provided on the screen as well. The layout of the response scale was experimentally manipulated. Two forms were administered randomly. While for the control group ($n_c = 496$) only the endpoints of the scale (1 and 11) were labeled (1 indicates *lower taxes even if this implies reducing social spending*, 11 indicates *more social spending even if this implies increasing taxes*), the respondents for the treatment group ($n_t = 489$) also were provided with a labeled midpoint at 6 explicitly verbalizing the status quo as “*things should remain the same*”.³

To sum up, all respondents are using the same response scale — either with or without an explicitly labeled status quo midpoint — to locate parties and themselves on this particular policy dimension. Thus, we can investigate the consequences of including the status quo on the respective response scale on the *type* as well as the *degree* of the individual responses. Given that respondents can opt out by clicking on the “Don’t know” option, we will first analyze the effects on item non-response as a different type of answer before we analyze the effects of including a status quo on location of party positions as well as the respondents’ self-placements. The respective causal effect is then estimated by comparing the mean ratings across the two experimental groups.

²The actual German question reads: “*Manche wollen weniger Steuern und Abgaben, auch wenn das weniger sozialstaatliche Leistungen bedeutet. Andere wollen mehr sozialstaatliche Leistungen, auch wenn das mehr Steuern und Abgaben bedeutet. Wie stehen Ihrer Meinung nach die Parteien dazu? Wie ist das bei Ihnen? Wo stehen Sie bei dieser Frage?*”

³The status quo indication in German: “*Es soll so bleiben wie bisher*”.

3.1 Effects on Item Non-Response

In this section we investigate to what extent the indication of the status quo position on issue scales affects the level of item non-response. When asked to locate the party on our policy item, respondents could either provide a substantive answer and locate the party somewhere on the response scale or they could opt out and register a “Don’t know” answer. Under what conditions are respondents more likely to register a substantive answer? And if they do not: what are the effects of item non-response?

According to theories of survey response (Krosnick 1991, Tourangeau & Rasinski 1988, Zaller & Feldman 1992), respondents might not be motivated to come up with an answer based on a comprehensive memory search, even when they are willing to cooperate. The notion of cognitive miser suggests that respondents are attracted to cues or other simple heuristics. They are likely to use them in order to find accessible considerations with which they can justify their response if necessary. Thus, respondents sample over the most recent considerations that are accessible to them after interpreting the survey question, in order to provide a meaningful answer to the question. If the context of a survey question is complex, and not relevant to the respondents, they are less likely to respond to it and, consequently, are more likely to register a “Don’t know” answer. Hence, based on this literature we expect that the more respondents are motivated to deal with such a policy item and the more respondents are sophisticated to be able to comprehend the survey question the more likely they are to provide a substantive response instead of choosing the “Don’t know” option.

This expectation is derived from the theories of survey response and should hold in both samples, the treatment as well as in the control group. What are the particular effects, though, of explicitly labeling the midpoint of the response scale - as it is done in the treatment condition - on item non-response?

There are at least two conceivable mechanisms at work when respondents encounter scales with a labeled midpoint (Tourangeau, Rips & Rasinski 2000, p.244). First, a label might simply make a particular response option more salient. Second, a label might facilitate the

comprehension of a response option. Thus instead of a non-response, i.e. a “Don’t know” answer, survey respondents are more likely to locate parties on the response scale if the scale is easier to comprehend. Including an labeled midpoint in the layout of the response scale should facilitate comprehension. Specifically, the midpoint provides a reference point for making a clear directional statement in either direction. Thus we expect respondents to be more likely to locate a party on the response scale and less likely to provide a “Don’t know” answer if they are in the treatment rather than the control condition.

Following the literature in political behavior, sophistication is operationalized as the level of factual knowledge a respondent has about politics. We will construct an additive political knowledge scale based on two knowledge items. These items ask the respondents to provide the status quo regarding the marginal as well as top income tax bracket using a closed-ended format (four different tax rates as well as an “Don’t know” option). Summing up the correct answers we get a political knowledge score ranging from 0 (for 65% of all respondents) to 2 (for 11% of all respondents).

Moreover, in order to operationalize motivation we need a measure that indicates the relevance a survey respondent attaches to locating a particular party on the response scale rather than opting out and providing a non-response. We assume that if someone identifies with a particular party she should be particularly motivated to locate this party on the 11-point response scale. Thus we measure motivation to locate a party on the response scale through a dummy variable that indicates whether respondents identify themselves with the party they are asked to locate.

We investigate whether the indication of status quo position on issue scales affects the level of non-response by examining respondents’ location of political parties. We pool all observations from both treatment and control group and estimate probit models for every party predicting whether or not respondents locate this party on the 11-point response scale. Three out of four respondents locate the two large parties in Germany, CDU and SPD, on

Table 1: Effects of Item Non-Response on Party Positions

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens	Left
<i>Experimental Treatment</i>					
SQ Indication	0.178*	0.130	0.161+	0.175*	0.231*
	(0.090)	(0.089)	(0.088)	(0.086)	(0.086)
<i>Control Variables</i>					
SQ Knowledge	0.457*	0.409*	0.451*	0.436*	0.410*
	(0.076)	(0.074)	(0.073)	(0.070)	(0.069)
Party ID Dummy	0.264*	0.336*	0.674*	0.374*	0.567*
	(0.111)	(0.112)	(0.195)	(0.155)	(0.188)
Constant	0.387*	0.407*	0.302*	0.235*	0.177*
	(0.072)	(0.071)	(0.067)	(0.066)	(0.066)
Observations	985	985	985	985	985

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$

this scale.⁴ Slightly less respondents locate the remaining three parties in parliament (FDP 73%, Greens 70%; Left party 69%) on the response scale instead of providing a non-response.

Our expectation is that respondents in the treatment group should be more likely to locate a party. In other words, the coefficient for the dummy variable *SQ Indication* that indicates whether or not a respondent got the treatment should be positive. This should hold independent from alternative explanations, including a respondent's level of motivation, measured as party identification for a particular party, and sophistication, measured through a political knowledge scale.

Table 1 provides an overview of the results estimating whether respondents provide party positions as a function of political knowledge, party identification and our experimental treatment.⁵ Our results provide support for all expectations. Across all parties, we find

⁴Respondents from Bavaria locate the CSU instead because the CDU is not on the ballot there.

⁵The dummy for party identification is 1 if the respondent indicated the respective party in the identification question. Further robustness checks show that the experimental randomization worked as it should. With the exception of party identification for the Left party, no covariate in the models we estimate can

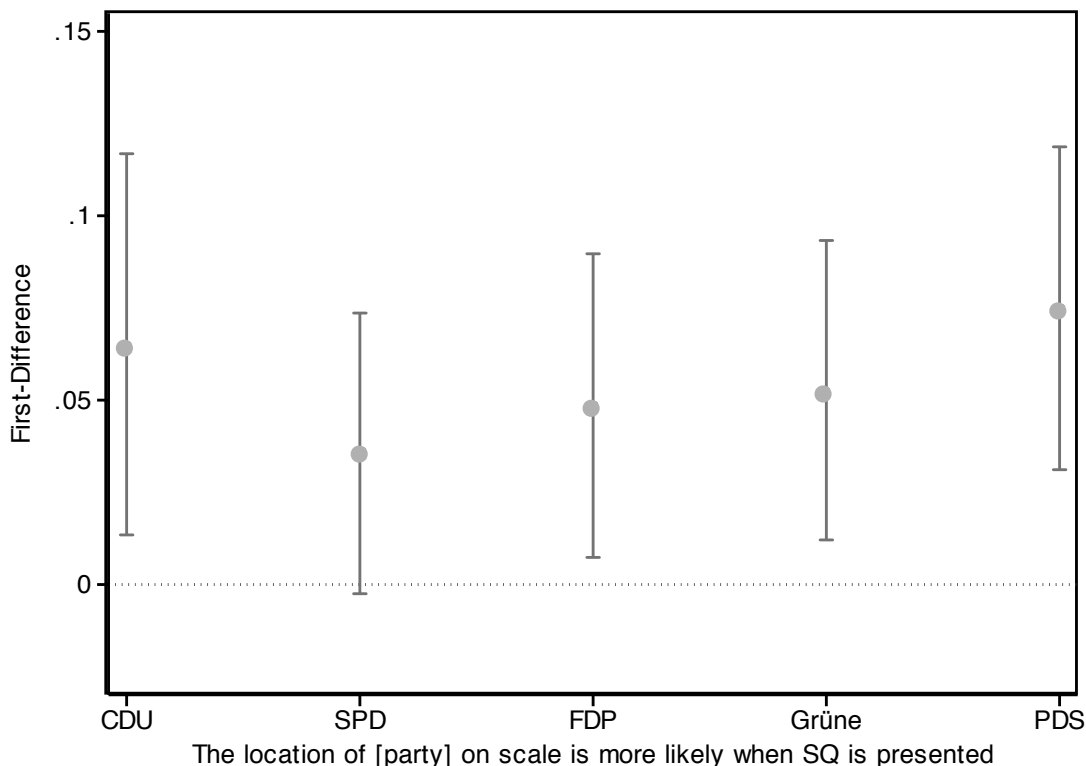
that including a labeled midpoint increases the likelihood that respondents provide a party position on the respective issue scale. And this effect holds even if we control for political knowledge or whether a respondent identifies with the party that she is asked to locate. The respective coefficients are all positive and, with the exception of the SPD, significant.

In order to provide a measure of the causal effect of providing a labeled midpoint indicating the status quo of this issue on the likelihood of providing a substantive response instead of “Don’t know” answer we calculated first-differences. The causal effect we are interested in is the predicted difference in the probability to locate a particular party on the scale across the two experimental groups. Given that the probit model is non-linear and non-additive we specify *a priori* values for the remaining independent variables in the model. In Figure 3 we provide the estimated size of these differences together with their simulated 90% confidence intervals for respondents without any partisan anchors (i.e., PID = 0 for all parties) and minimum value on our political knowledge scale.

The figure provides an overview over the estimated sizes of the causal effect of providing an additional label for the midpoint that indicates the status quo on this issue on the likelihood to locate that party on the same scale. Providing such a label makes respondents in our chosen scenario between 5 to 8 percentage points *more* likely to locate a respective party on the scale than without labeling the status quo. Again, merely for the location of the SPD on the scale we do not find a significant difference between treatment and control group even if the point prediction of the difference is positive as expected. Those results seem to suggest that providing a label for the status quo facilitates the comprehension of such an issue scale. More respondents have to be dropped from further analysis due to non-response if we continue with the current practice in mass surveys to *not* label the status quo of such issue scales. Note that in both experimental groups respondents have the possibility to opt out, but fewer actually do so when the status quo is explicitly provided. We have reason to

be systematically predicted by our experimental manipulation. Finding more Left party identifiers in the control group than in the treatment group we suspect that the low number of party identifiers for such a small party is responsible for that.

Figure 3: Estimating the Causal Effect of Providing a labeled Midpoint on the Likelihood to locate a Party on the Issue Scale.



believe that a similar conclusion applies to the analysis of issue scales with elite and expert surveys as well.

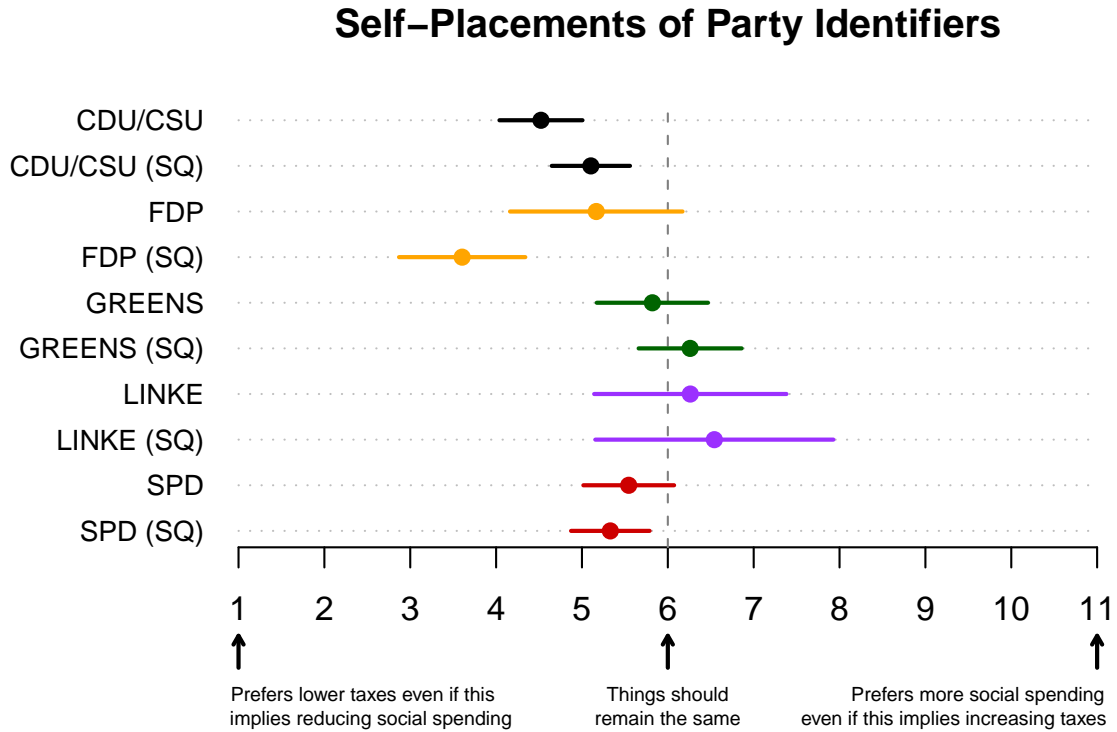
If survey respondents seem to understand issue scales with a labeled status quo better than without it, we will next discuss the potential consequences of this result for the self-placement of respondents as well as their placements of parties. We will focus in particular on the placements of two types of respondents that should be particularly likely to provide a substantive response: “expert respondents” defined in terms of political knowledge as well as the group of partisans as the die-hard supporters of a particular party. In addition to examining differences at the aggregate level across both treatment and control group, we also expect to find effects that should play out at the individual-level in the way how partisans perceive the individual distances to the party they identify with. Given that there is significant item non-response on the indication of a party position on the issue scale, this

result suggests that the substantive placement of parties may also be perceived differently between the two groups. If this is the case, one may have to be concerned with potential measurement error effects. In the following, we examine the effects of the status quo labeling treatment on the self-placements of party identifiers, the perceived party positions, as well as on those who actually know the status quo.

3.2 Effects on Self-Placements

We investigate whether the question framing affects how party supporters in the sample perceive their position on the issue scale. Party supporters are those respondents who answered a question asking whether they identify with a particular political party. Figure 4 plots the average position of party identifiers for each party, separating those respondents whose scale included the status quo from those whose scale excluded it. In addition, the figure plots the 95% confidence interval for each point estimate. The results show interesting differences between treatment and control group. First, positions are perceived to be more extreme (away from the midpoint) when the status quo is indicated. The most blatant example is the position of the FDP. While the FDP is often known as a centrist party - it has switched coalitions back and forth with the CDU/CSU and the SPD during German post-war history -, research has shown its consistent neoliberal stances on economic issues. The position of the FDP varies quite drastically. In the random split excluding the status quo, we would conclude that the positions of FDP party identifiers is located centrally on the scale. In fact, the confidence interval includes the (hypothetical) value of the status quo, so we cannot reject the hypothesis that FDP identifiers would prefer the status quo over change. Compare this to party identifiers of the FDP when the status quo is clearly indicated. The average position is now much more extreme (3.6) than before (5.2), and the confidence interval no longer includes the status quo. Thus, we might be tempted to claim that the FDP, based on the placements of its supporters, is a centrist party in one sample, but a more extreme party claiming lower taxes and reduced social spending in the sample with the status quo.

Figure 4: Self-Placements on scales with and without status quo indication.



The results are equally interesting for the other parties. Take, for instance, the position of the CDU/CSU. Whereas the FDP is more centrist than the CDU/CSU in the version without the SQ, it is clearly - and significantly - more extreme than the CDU/CSU in the version with the SQ. In other words, the simple question framing resulted in the parties to leapfrog positions on the issue scale, painting a drastically different picture of the German party system. The other positions of party identifiers reveal other insights. The Greens perceive themselves on average more center-right without the status quo (average position smaller than SQ), and more center-left with the status quo (average position greater than SQ). Similarly, the identifiers of the Left Party are slightly more left with the status quo than without it. Finally, the SPD, the party that has ideologically transformed itself the most in Germany during the last decade, is perceived centrist without the status quo and slightly to the center-right with the status quo. For each party, the confidence intervals between the random splits overlap due to the small sample size resulting from limiting the analysis

to party identifiers. Nevertheless, we believe the results indicate an interesting pattern in the data that should be of relevance for scholars of individual political behavior and party politics alike.

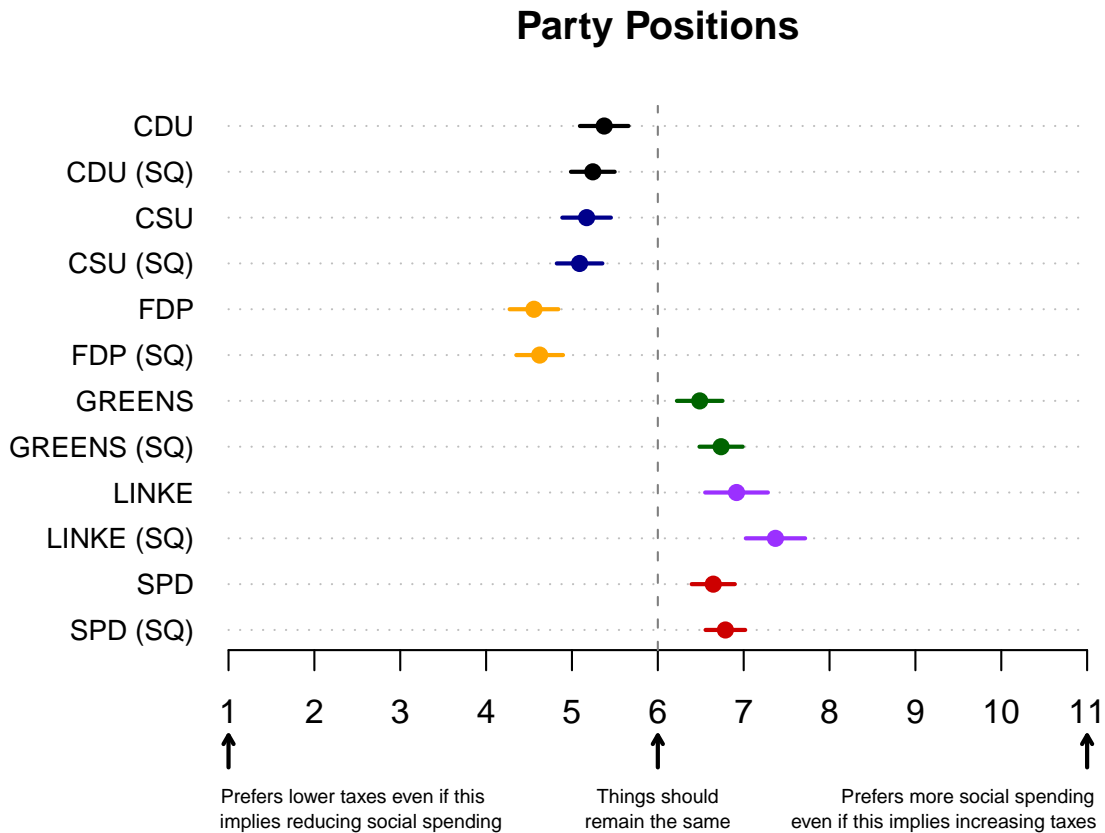
3.3 Effects on Party Positions

Another way to analyze the effects of the question framing is to compare the party positions as perceived by *all* respondents. To do so, we analyze the question regarding the placement of the parties rather than the self-placements. Figure 5 plots the average party positions and the corresponding confidence intervals. For this question, the aggregate results remain remarkably stable. The ordering of the parties does not change, with the FDP, CSU, and CDU perceived to be on the right of the status quo, and the Greens, SPD, and the Left Party on the left of it. There is an indication that positions are perceived more extreme when the status quo is indicated, in particular for the Left Party. But the confidence intervals in all instances overlap and the difference of means is not statistically significant. Note that the party positions that are perceived in the population are rather centrist, ranging on average from 4.5 for the FDP to 7.4 for the Left on an 11-point scale.

One valid criticism that can be made about survey questions like this is that respondents are overwhelmed in having to locate themselves and six party positions on a trade-off issue scale like the one used here. In fact, effects between the two samples should be most apparent only if respondents actually *know* what the status quo means (“things should remain the same”). We therefore limited our sample to respondents who could answer an additional knowledge question in the experiment. While we ideally would like to ask a question regarding the levels of the trade-off, framing this trade-off in an understandable way in a survey context is difficult. We therefore resorted to a second best alternative, asking for the current level of the lowest income tax bracket, assuming that those respondents have a notion of current levels of taxation giving their perceived level of public services.

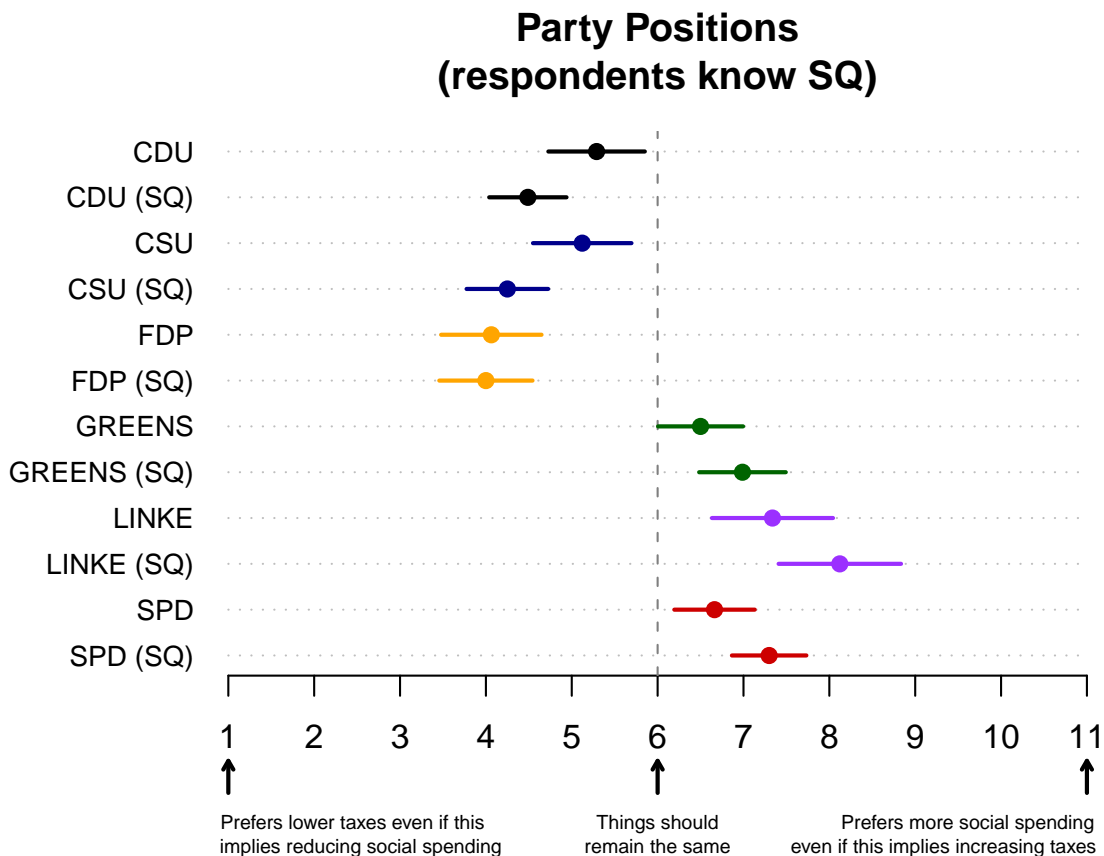
Figure 6 plots the perceived party positions for the subset of respondents who answered

Figure 5: Party Placements on scales with and without status quo indication.



this knowledge question correctly. The results indicate a much stronger deviation between the two samples. Note how the political parties are perceived more extreme when the status quo is indicated. This is true for the CDU and CSU, who are perceived more to the right, and the Greens, SPD, and Left Party who are perceived to stand more on the left. There appears to be no change for the FDP, which is already located on one extreme of the political spectrum. Thus, the party system appears somewhat more polarized on this issue when the status quo is indicated. Another way to look at this is to consider the subset of respondents knowing the status quo as *experts*. Thus, survey respondents that partially know what the status quo means are more able to differentiate between the parties when such a status quo is labelled in the question. This may have implications for expert surveys on party positions as well, an issue we take up again in the conclusion.

Figure 6: Party Placements of respondents who know SQ on scales with and without status quo indication.



3.4 Effects on Perceived Ideological Distances

Ideology in general, and policy preferences in particular, are widely considered to be a major determinant of party choice in multiparty systems (e.g Adams & Merrill 2008, Bargsted & Kedar 2009). In order to operationalize respondents' reliance on policy considerations scholars typically start by calculating the distance $d_{ij} = v_i - c_{ij}$ between the self-placement v_i of voter i on a particular policy scale and where she perceives the placement c_{ij} of party j to be on this issue. In the previous section, we highlighted potential implications of our experimental treatment on those constituent concepts from which typically squared (or absolute) distances are calculated. In this section, we will focus on further consequences of the previous findings.

Table 2: Perceived Distance of Party Identifiers across Treatment and Control Group

	DV: d_{ij}^2
SQ Indication	-3.173* (1.502)
Constant	9.733* (1.078)
Observations	433

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$

An explicit reference point apparently helps respondents to locate the parties on this scale. Given that respondents' self-placement and the perception of political parties also changed, we expect to find more measurement error in the substantive responses of respondents in the control group without the status quo indication. If this argument is valid it would imply that trade-off issue scales with status quo indication are simply preferable measures. What are observable implication of this assertion?

We assume that measurement error might have two consequences we are able to observe and test. We are focusing here again on the group of partisans. Partisans, of all respondents, should locate "their" party ideologically close to themselves. Measurement error arising from harder-to-use answering scales should artificially increase the distances of partisans' self-placement and where they locate their party on this scale. In short, we can expect smaller distances with status quo indication. Moreover, measurement error should add another degree of uncertainty to the measurement of the distances. Thus, we expect larger variances indicating larger amounts of uncertainty within the perceived distances between partisans and their party if the status quo label is omitted. Conversely, we expect a smaller variance across the perceived distances for partisans in the treatment group. Table 2 provides an overview over the estimation result of regressing the respective status quo indication dummy on the squared perceived distances for party identifiers.

A typical partisan in the treatment group does in fact place her her party systematically

closer to herself when they get a labeled status quo as a reference point. The size of the effect amounts to about 1.8 units on the issue scale. Thus partisans in the control group without such an reference point place their party on average 1.8 scale units further away from them than their counterparts in the treatment group would do. This supports the idea that providing labels for the status quo of such issue scales can reduce a significant amount of measurement error in these items.

Furthermore, Levene’s robust test statistic for the equality of variances between the treatment and control group is highly significant ($W0 = 10.7$ $df(1, 431)$ $Pr > F = 0.001$) - as well as a standard test on the equality of standard deviations (treatment group:12.307, control group: 18.49). Thus we have two independent tests that support our expectation that measurement error increase the uncertainty how partisans perceive the distance to their party and consequently have larger variance.

3.5 Secondary Effects: Perceived Policy Distance and Vote Choice

In the previous section we have shown that providing a label for the status quo does actually reduce the measurement error that is inherent in the perceived distances between respondents and where they place the parties on our issue scale. Finally, we further examine the effects of the treatment by examining vote choice as a function of perceived policy distance between voters and parties. If our distance measure is actually plagued by measurement error, and more so in the control than in the treatment group, then we should expect to find a larger coefficient in the random subsample that got the treatment. We predict the vote choice for five parties (CDU, SPD, FDP, Green, Left Party) separately for treatment and control group based on the perceived policy distance of all voters.

In addition to the perceived policy distance we control for potential non-policy factors in a voter’s utility function by including a candidate differential that subtracts the popularity ratings (another 11-point scale ranging from -5 to $+5$) of the two chancellor candidates (Angela Merkel, CDU – Frank-Walter Steinmeier, SPD). Given that we include independent

Table 3: Conditional Logit of Multiparty Vote Choice

	DV: Vote Choice
<hr/>	
Treatment Group	
<i>distance</i> ²	-0.044* (0.008)
constant(SPD)	0.596* (0.208)
candidate differential SPD vs.CDU	-3.636* (0.684)
constant(FDP)	0.047 (0.239)
candidate differential FDP vs.CDU	-0.126 (0.547)
constant(Green)	0.337 (0.222)
candidate differential Green vs.CDU	-1.754* (0.596)
<hr/>	
Control Group	
<i>distance</i> ²	-0.029* (0.006)
constant(SPD)	0.316+ (0.187)
candidate differential SPD vs.CDU	-3.432* (0.575)
constant(FDP)	-0.241 (0.220)
candidate differential FDP vs.CDU	-0.656 (0.492)
constant(Green)	0.106 (0.202)
candidate differential Green vs.CDU	-1.653* (0.530)
<hr/>	
Observations	2620
<hr/>	

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$

variables that vary across the voters (*candidate differential*) as well as parties (*distance²*) we estimate conditional logit models for the voters in each experimental group. We take the CDU as reference group.

Table 3 provides some support for our expectations. It comes as no surprise that policy considerations matter for vote choice - as well as non-policy factors. While a smaller ideological distance between a voter and a party increases the probability of voting for this party in both samples, the *distance²* coefficient in the treatment sample is larger, supporting our expectation. The coefficient of the control group is about 30 percent smaller than the one in the treatment group. Thus it seems to make a difference for the importance of policy considerations as basis for individual vote-choices decisions as well. For the non-policy factors our estimation results suggest, that SPD voters and voters of the left have apparently similar candidate differential effects. The more they prefer the SPD candidate over the CDU candidate the less are they likely to cast a vote for the CDU.

Furthermore, we perform a Wald test for the equality of the *distance²* coefficients. Given that the two conditional logit models are fit on independent samples generated through our experimental design our estimators are stochastically independent. The test rejects the null hypothesis of equal *distance²* coefficients across the two experimental groups at least marginally. Further interpretations about the substantive impact of the difference between treatment and control conditions will have to rely on predicted probabilities and simulated confidence intervals that will be provided in the next iteration of this paper.

4 Conclusion

Why should researchers be concerned with the question framing of policy issue scales in surveys? We examined the effects of indicating an explicit status quo midpoint in trade-off issue questions using an experimental setup in an online survey that was part of the German National Election Study in 2009. We believe that a simple change of question wording has

several positive consequences for research on party positions and voter ideology.

Increasing item response. A direct consequence of the simple improved question wording was a significant increase in item response. This may be beneficial not only in surveys with thousands of respondents, but also in expert surveys in which the number of respondents is often small. Our alternative question wording might therefore be not only be more truthful to the underlying directional theoretical concept, but it may also help experts — typically political science scholars — place a large number of parties on a large number of dimensions.

Reducing measurement error. Two findings support the notion that measurement error can be decreased. First, more respondents participate with a status quo indication. Second, respondents that do answer indicate significantly smaller ideological distances to the party they identify with.

Increasing variation. The implication for expert surveys is that the status quo might help the expert — who may well be able to interpret the substantive meaning of the issue scale — discriminate better between the positions of parties. In our setup, knowledgeable respondents were more likely to place the parties away from the status quo. Therefore, party systems may appear more polarized in surveys with the status quo indication, yielding in more variation in the party positions.

Staying faithful to theoretical concepts. The final conclusion is more of a cautionary advice. Deriving ideological distances for parties from trade-off issue scales in surveys may be problematic because they contain an implicit status quo. Therefore, a government range used to predict a political outcome may be substantively different if it includes a status quo because spatial models would predict a negative outcome if the status quo is present in the pareto set. We have shown that this may be problematic in expert surveys. However, only a full replication of existing analysis will reveal the extent of the potential problems.

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