Under friendly fire: An experiment on partisan press, fragmented opposition and voting behavior

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A B S T R A C T

Statements in which a one-sided partisan media source criticizes a politician aligned with it—friendly fire—are particularly persuasive. This literature assumes a bipartisan context. We argue that when there is a dominant party on one side of the political spectrum with a strong link with a media outlet, voters treat attacks against a co-partisan candidate as friendly fire. But when there is a fragmented opposition, we expect that the strength of the signal conveyed by the friendly fire is diminished. Based on a survey experiment conducted in Argentina, we find the fragmented nature of the opposition changes the dynamic of friendly fire. Only partisan and sophisticated opposition voters treat attacks on opposition candidates as friendly fire. These voters are better able to overcome the lack of clear partisan link with the opposition newspaper and punish their co-partisan candidate.

Research on media effects in the United States has shown that people selectively expose themselves to media messages (Groeling, 2013; Levendusky, 2013a,b), often relying on ideologically congenial news sources (Dilliplane, 2014; Arceneaux and Johnson, 2013). Partisan media outlets provide one-sided messages that advance political agendas and voters—especially the more partisan and politically engaged—use cues from these like-minded sources when making political judgments. This literature generally assumes a bipartisan context, in which partisan news outlets send out cues that neatly map on to two opposing partisan options. What happens to accusations made by partisan outlets in fragmented party systems?

This paper relies on experimental data from Argentina to examine the effect of partisan press on voting behavior in the context of a multiparty system where an incumbent party dominated one side of the political spectrum while the opposition was split into several political parties. We investigate the dynamics of "friendly fire", understood as the criticisms and accusations made by partisan news outlets against politically aligned individuals or groups. In the case where the connection between a political party is clear and direct, we find that accusations made by a friendly partisan media source increase the likelihood that voters aligned with that outlet's partisan or ideological orientation will punish their co-partisan candidate, which is in line with previous research on partisan media effects (Baum and Groeling, 2009; Chiang and Knight, 2011). In contrast to accusations made by media

outlets that openly signal an opposing ideology—which are dismissed as politically motivated—congenial media messages are perceived as credible and affect the likelihood of voting for a co-partisan candidate. However, the fragmented nature of the opposition in Argentina results in a muted "friendly fire" among opposition voters. Only the most partisan and sophisticated opposition voters take advantage of the informational cue from the opposition newspaper and treat accusations from politically aligned media outlets as "friendly fire", and consequently, punish their co-partisan candidate. In our experiment, respondents with lower levels of political sophistication or partisan strength do not discern "friendly fire" when it occurs and, if anything, respond more strongly to the "incorrect" media outlet.

This paper contributes to our understanding of how voters make up their minds when receiving information from biased media sources and how partisanship influences which messages the public regards as credible. While the literature on media effects has mostly focused on contexts in which news outlets are linked to a particular political party, our study relaxes this assumption and examines media effects in a setting in which the partisan alignments of media are more difficult to identify. Our findings show that amidst party system fragmentation, citizens in the opposition are less likely to rely on reports about candidates' malfeasances to inform their opinions. Comparative studies of media effects should pay close attention to the configuration of the party system and how it, in combination with politicized media

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environments, may affect voters' responses to information.

This study also sheds light on how features of the party system and of the media environment condition voters' propensity to hold politicians accountable for corrupt behavior. Despite the recent increase in the number of studies that investigate how voters respond to corruption accusations (e.g., Botero et al., 2015; Boas et al., 2019; Chong et al., 2015; Ferraz and Finan, 2008; Pavão, 2018; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2013), more attention need to be paid to media effects and the role of partisan media on electoral accountability for corruption. Our study contributes to increase understanding of the conditions that make voters more likely to punish corruption.

We focus on partisan printed press, a phenomenon that is understudied, but not uncommon in today's world: more than half of European countries alone rank as having above medium or highly politically biased newspapers (Popescu, 2012). Similar data for other regions is lacking, but there is no reason to expect partisan news sources to be less prevalent in other democracies, particularly in emerging and developing countries where private and public interests tend to collude and media outlets are often closely intertwined with dominant political groups. Thus, understanding the conditions under which politically slanted news sources influence voters' evaluations sheds light on an important link in the larger process through which citizens hold politicians accountable at the ballot box.

1. Partisan media sources and fragmented political environments

Partisan media environments are characterized by the presence of news outlets that do not simply report the news or cover both sides of the story but take a position on it, emphasizing a one-sided partisan outlook on politics (Levendusky, 2013a,b). In the contemporary United States, for example, party polarization (Layman and Carsey, 2002; Layman et al., 2006) and the segmentation of the media outlets—particularly cable news and internet sites—have added more distinctively partisan voices to the long-standing, and traditionally centrist, major news outlets (Baum and Groeling, 2008; Morris and Francia, 2010; Prior, 2013), creating partisan audience niches (Coe et al., 2008; Prior, 2007). Previous research suggests that the presence of biased media can have noteworthy effects on the perceptions and attitudes of voters, especially partisan voters (e.g., Levendusky, 2013a,b; Morris and Francia, 2010; Turner, 2007; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009). Partisan newspapers in particular have been found to play a significant role in informing the electorate (Druckman, 2005), agenda-setting (Larcinese et al., 2011), aligning candidate evaluations with partisanship (Dalton et al., 1998), and changing voter behavior (Coombs, 1981). In fact, media outlets' labels—and their reputations—serve as important informational shortcuts or heuristics that voters rely upon for making political judgments (Baum and Groeling, 2009).

The credibility of a source can be a function of its perceived incentives for providing accurate information (Alt et al., 2016; Baum and Groeling, 2009; Botero et al., 2015; Chiang and Knight, 2011; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters, 2017). For example, a media outlet that is clearly aligned with a political party can be easily perceived as having incentives to provide information that preserves or reinforces a positive image of its co-partisan politicians, while it also has incentives to harm the image of its political opponents. Because messages that go against the sources' own political allies are costly to the source, they tend to be perceived as more credible than praise of one's own candidate or criticism of an opposing candidate (Spence, 1973). Research has shown that statements where a partisan media source questions or denounces one of their own, what we refer to as "friendly fire", are particularly persuasive to voters (Baum and Groeling, 2009; Chiang and Knight, 2011), whereas accusations made by oppositional media are dismissed as politically motivated. "Friendly fire" is especially damaging because congenial media messages are perceived as credible since the news outlet and the politician have common political interests, and because it

is known that the media outlet does not want the other side to win. In addition, the perceived costliness of the accusation from a friendly source signals to like-minded voters the newsworthiness and importance of the attack contributing to the credibility and persuasiveness of the information.

The expectations about media effects from biased sources are straightforward in bipolar configurations such as the U.S. party system (Arceneaux and Johnson, 2013; Chiang and Knight, 2011; Dilliplane, 2014; Groeling, 2013; Levendusky, 2013a,b), where ideology and partisanship are functionally interchangeable: conservative press generally supports the Republican Party and the liberal press largely supports the Democratic Party. In more abstract terms, we can think of such media environments in terms of a continuum where each side of the ideological spectrum is claimed by one of two parties. Placing media outlets along this continuum, partisan news sources align with one of the parties and hold worldviews away from the political center and centrist news outlets fall somewhere near the median voter. In the United States, neither Fox News nor MSNBC are affiliated with the Republican and Democratic Parties explicitly, but the ideological slant of the news coverage of each channel naturally leads itself to promoting the interests of a political party and voters come to recognize the *de facto* alliance. This bipolar dynamic can even appear in multi-party settings when only one party dominates their side of the ideological spectrum. For example, Spain has over ten significant political parties along with two main political parties, which creates a media environment that aligns in two poles: on the one side, the socialist party PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*) with friendly newspapers like *El País* and *Público*, and, on the other side, the conservative PP (*Partido Popular*) aligned with newspapers ABC and *La Razón*.[1] This bipolar set-up defines, automatically and in a symmetrical manner, what the oppositional party and aligned media sources are.

It is not rare for a single party to anchor one side of the ideological spectrum while the other side is more fragmented or fluid (usually the opposition). In these instances of asymmetrical fragmentation, the partisan nature of many media sources with regards to the dominant party is clear to voters. For example, in Brazil, during the polarizing election of 2014, an extremely fragmented party system was anchored to the left by the Worker's Party, while a multitude of parties competed on the right. Media conglomerates such as "Grupo Globo" and "Grupo Abril," owner of the weekly magazine "Veja," were harshly critical of the Workers' Party government, but did not have clear ties with any specific opposition party. To the left of the political spectrum, media outlets were far less powerful and consist mostly of online publications and weekly magazines in relatively limited circulation. Two configurations could be found: a clear partisan connection between the weekly magazine "Carta Capital" and the center-left government (temporarily removed from power due to an impeachment process against then president Rousseff), as well as a myriad smaller magazines and websites that broadly represented left wing social movements and political parties, but who could also be critical of the party in power. Another example is Argentina. Even though, between 2003 and 2015 a myriad of medium-sized similarly influential parties coexisted on the opposition side of the political spectrum, the former Kirchnerismo incumbent strongly dominated the left side of that spectrum,[2] and was, since 2008, politically linked to the newspaper Página/12. In these bipolar scenarios, the political incentives of media sources are clear to voters with regards to the party dominating a side of the ideological spectrum.

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[1] With the recent emergence of two new political parties, Podemos (on the left side) and Ciudadanos (on the right side), as well as the weakening of PSOE and PP, it is expected that the media environment will evolve in the next years.

[2] Kirchnerismo was, and still is, broadly recognized as a "leftist" coalition, even though its umbrella included some parties that were not necessarily left-wing.

Applying the logic of how the partisan press operates in two-party environments to multi-party settings leads to the following expectation: when a political party dominates one side of the political spectrum, news outlets are more likely to establish a clear, unambiguous partisan alignment with it. In this scenario, "friendly fire" is especially damaging because the news outlet that more strongly shares the political leanings of the politician it is criticizing is not interested in benefiting the other side. Thus, the perceived costliness of the accusation from a friendly source will decisively contribute to the credibility and persuasiveness of the accusation. Therefore, when the media outlet has clear partisan ties with one specific political group, we expect that voters will regard the "friendly fire" message as credible and, thus, punish the co-partisan candidate.

> Hypothesis 1a (Friendly Fire - perceived costliness): On average, accusations made by a media outlet with clear partisan proximity to a single party will increase the likelihood of voters punishing their co-partisan candidate.

However, political fragmentation—either of the entire system or of a relevant group such as the opposition or a specific side of the ideological spectrum—is likely to change the configuration of politically biased media environments and friendly fire effects. When the partisan spectrum is split among multiple viable parties, the alignment between the media outlet and a specific political party may not be clearly observed. In other words, the fragmentation of the opposition side complicates the information cues provided and makes voters less able to identify "friendly fire" when it occurs. As a simple example, imagine a setting where the opposition is split into two political parties. Just as in the binary party system, when an opposition media outlet attacks the incumbent party, supporters of the incumbent are unlikely to be persuaded by the attack, which may be dismissed as politically motivated. What happens, however, when the opposition media outlet attacks a politician from one of the two opposition parties? We hypothesize that the effect of "friendly fire" within a fragmented opposition is muted. While they share an ideological affinity (and are located on the same side of the ideological spectrum) the connection between media outlet and parties is necessarily diminished.

There are two primary reasons behind this expectation. First, in fragmented multiparty systems the link between the opposition parties and an oppositional media outlet is unlikely to be as tight as in environments where a single party represents a side of an ideological spectrum. In a binary political environment, it is extremely unlikely that a partisan or an ideologically motivated media outlet will prefer a politician from the other side of the spectrum, so all attacks on ideological allies are viewed as "friendly fire" because there are no realistic alternatives. When multiple parties coexist in the opposition, like-minded media outlets are likely to favor particular opposition factions, even if they appear to appeal to the entire opposition by downplaying these preferences and touting their common enemy. Thus, opposition "friendly fire" cues are objectively not as strong in these settings and it becomes more difficult for voters to identify "friendly fire."

Second, collections of political parties with their idiosyncratic issues and different ideological positioning lead to less ideological coherence than what is typically found in two-party systems where each party represents a side of the ideological spectrum. Even within a single party, internal divisions appear and politicians vie for control and support, so attacks from ideologically aligned publications can be dismissed as arising from competing factions.[3] This same dynamic is magnified in settings where the politicians are not even members of the same party. In fact, the rise of a fragmented opposition is often the result of ideological or personal disagreements, so the potential for

disagreements and attacks is very real. Voters need to make an assessment of the ideological position of the media outlet, the candidate, compare the two, and then make the additional assessment of whether there is a single-issue disagreement between the outlet and the political party. Creating this linkage is cognitively taxing and requires more knowledge than the typical voter will possess.

Combined, these reasons make identifying opposition "friendly fire" from motivated attacks far more difficult for voters in a fragmented partisan environment. Thus, a natural extension from Hypothesis 1a would be:

> Hypothesis 1b (Muted Friendly Fire): On average, accusations made by a media outlet with weak or ambiguous partisan proximity to a single party will not affect the likelihood of voters punishing their co-partisan candidate.

This muted effect of friendly fire in fragmented systems may also be contingent on some individual-level factors rather than uniform across all voters. We investigate two factors that might affect the ability of voters to identify "friendly fire" when it occurs in fragmented systems: partisan strength and political sophistication. These variables also moderate the effect of the accusation source in bipolar systems with a 1-to-1 match between party and media outlet, but the moderating effect will be more pronounced in multiparty systems because of the increased difficulty of interpreting signals in cases with a less clear match.[4]

Political affinity between the media source and the recipient is expected to facilitate media effects since strong partisans are more likely to accept and store information if it is consistent with their existing worldviews and political predispositions (Conover and Feldman, 1981; Lodge and Hamill, 1986; Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994; Zaller, 1992). In fact, people selectively expose themselves to media outlets that reinforce their partisan predispositions (Zaller, 1992; Mutz and Martin, 2001; Stroud, 2007). As media outlets become narrowly specialized, the match between voter's political predispositions and media's political allegiances becomes closer, facilitating media effects. In this case, we expect that "friendly fire" will be maximally persuasive to a politician's supporters.

Conventional wisdom would suggest that partisans presented with information about corruption of their co-partisan candidate may not believe the accusation (Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Anduiza et al., 2013). According to this logic, since their prior beliefs are reinforced when faced with new information (Taber and Lodge, 2006; Nir, 2011), they would support their "partisan team" and dismiss the accusation (Green et al., 2002). However, if a friendly partisan outlet is the source of the accusation, we argue that such source will facilitate media effects. The perceived costliness of the accusation from a friendly source is vital and contributes to the credibility of the information. In this scenario, strong partisans will regard the corruption accusation as credible, and will punish co-partisans in response to politically aligned media accordingly. These expectations are consistent with findings from studies on misinformation that show that corrective information is more persuasive when it originates from ideologically sympathetic sources (Berinsky, 2015,[5]).

> Hypothesis 2 (Partisan strength): Strong partisans will be more likely to recognize cues as friendly and more likely to punish their co-partisan candidate.

Finally, political sophistication can also help interpret media

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[3] For example, during the 2016 Democratic primary it was possible for supporters of Clinton and Sanders to view criticisms of their preferred candidate from left-wing media as predictable attacks from a hostile wing of the party.

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[4] In Appendix B, we also include trust as a third hypothesis: *the more voters trust friendly media outlets, the more likely the voters are to punish their co-partisan candidate.*

[5] Refuting a rumor with statements from an unlikely source – a person who makes proclamations that run contrary to their personal and political interests – can increase respondents' willingness to reject rumors, regardless of their own political predispositions.

signals. Sophisticated voters are the ones that pay close attention to politics, have at hand banks of information about it, and are better able to make sense of the political world (Sniderman et al., 1991). Attentive consumers of political news may be able to correctly determine "friendly fire" when it occurs, but less attentive or sophisticated consumers may not recognize the difference. We expect a "reception gap" (Zaller, 1996) in which the persuasiveness of the source should be present among only those respondents that "actually get the message" (Price and Zaller, 1993), i.e., those sophisticated opposition voters that would be aware of a link between media outlets and political parties. Meanwhile, lower levels of political sophistication may decrease voters' capacity to assess a media's partisan link with political parties. The sophistication gap would be especially important on settings where the party system is fragmented and there is no perfect match between media outlets and parties, as in two-party systems, so the strength of the signal conveyed by the "friendly fire" is necessarily diminished.

Hypothesis 3 (Political Sophistication): High-sophistication voters will be more responsive to cues provided by their friendly media outlet and will be more likely to punish their co-partisan candidate.

The next section applies this theory of partisan media cues in fragmented party systems to the Argentinian case.

2. The argentine partisan media environment

Argentina is an ideal setting to test these hypotheses and explore how the political fragmentation of the ideological spectrum affects how voters' respond to "friendly fire." During the 1980s and 1990s, Argentina had a moderately institutionalized two-party system led by the *Partido Justicialista* (PJ) and the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR) (McGuire 1995). During the 2000s, however, it underwent a deep transformation. PJ remained central for national and subnational politics, but UCR collapsed (Lupu, 2014)[6] and the system became increasingly more fragmented[7] (Gervasoni, 2018).

During the 2000s, Argentinian politics became very polarized between Kirchneristas and non-Kirchneristas. The Kirchnerista faction (*Frente Para la Victoria* or FpV) held the presidency between 2003 and 2015, first led by Nestor Kirchner (2003–2007) and later by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015). It represents the most important faction of the Justicialista Party.[8] During the Kirchnerista era, the opposition side of the spectrum was composed by three medium-sized parties—*Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR), *Coalición Cívica* (CC), and *Propuesta Republicana* (PRO) (Levitsky and Murillo 2008)—and other small parties,[9] which were personalistic and short lived for the most part.[10] In addition, a faction of the PJ—Federal Peronismo—was also part of the opposition pole. This dissident faction was more traditional and conservative than the dominant Kirchnerismo and was composed of governors and legislators identified by their opposition to Kirchnerismo. In

other words, there was a dominant party[11] on one side of the political spectrum (Kirchnerismo) and a myriad of middle and minor parties on the other side (opposition) in Argentina, which allows us to examine friendly fire for both unified and fragmented cases within the same country.

Like other Latin American countries such as Brazil or México, Argentina has a politicized media environment where news outlets have a tradition of political mobilization (Mauersberger, 2012; Pinto, 2009). In Argentina, newspapers in particular have historically played a major role as political agenda-setters (Pinto, 2008) and are subject to the same polarization exhibited by the political parties in recent years (Balan, 2013). We focus on the two most important, well-known national newspapers in this media environment: *Página/12* and *Clarín*, as exemplars of politicized newspapers. During Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's administration, these two news outlets became major and very vocal representatives of opposing forces in the Argentine political arena, namely, Kirchnerismo and its opposition.

Página/12 is a major newspaper that became openly associated with Kirchnerismo.[12] *Página/12* was founded in 1987 representing a new wave of independent investigative, high-quality reporting that surfaced after the fall of the military regime. In its origins, this newspaper was the poster child for what is known as "watchdog journalism" (Waisbord, 2000). Towards the end of Néstor Kirchner's presidency, *Página/12* underwent a shift towards Kirchnerismo most clearly expressed in a sharp decline in its critical coverage of the executive between 2005 and 2015 (Pinto, 2008). In this context, we expect that an accusation from *Página/12* of a co-partisan, Kirchnerista candidate would be a costly signal and treated as "friendly fire". Kirchneristas will be more willing to punish the co-partisan candidate when the information comes from the more congenial partisan source, namely, *Página/12*. The "friendly fire" effect should be maximally persuasive among those respondents with strong partisan attachments and high levels of political sophistication.

The second newspaper that we focus on is *Clarín*.[13] This newspaper is part of the largest media conglomerate in Argentina,[14] akin to Grupo Globo and Televisa in Brazil and Mexico, respectively. Clarín was interlocked in open political confrontation with Kirchnerismo since 2008,[15] particularly with regards to this government's attempts to regulate media ownership (Mauersberger, 2012; Mastrini and Becerra, 2011) and its selective use of media advertising to benefit certain outlets (Becerra, 2011; Rafsky, 2012). Former President Fernandez de Kirchner publicly denounced *Clarín* for wanting to "twist the government's arm" and lying to the people (Repoll, 2010, 52). *Clarín* fought back, positioning itself as the lead opposition newspaper (Rafsky, 2012); studies of news coverage confirm the widely held perception of a slant against the Kirchnerista executive (Repoll, 2010). Although *Clarín* is oppositional and shares an ideological affinity with opposition parties, it has no one-to-one partisan link with a specific party. In this context, the connection between media outlet and parties is less than

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[6] Since 1999, the other traditional party, Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), has performed very poorly in national and subnational elections (Lupu, 2014).

[7] Along with increasing fragmentation, Argentina's party system has also undergone growing denationalization, factionalization, personalization, and fluidity (Gervasoni, 2018).

[8] Although FpV is dominated by PJ elites, FpV and PJ are not one and the same. FpV includes non-PJ parties and, in some provinces its candidates compete against the official PJ candidate (Gervasoni, 2018).

[9] These minor parties—Socialist Party and/or Frente Amplio Progresista, República Igualitaria, or Proyecto Sur (formerly Frente Grande)—place themselves towards the far left. Although independent of the Kirchnerista governments, in some cases, they endorsed Kirchnerista bills in Congress. For example, the Socialist Party supported the gay marriage bill as well as the media outlets bill targeting Clarín. The handful of respondents supporting these parties are excluded from the analysis because they cannot test our theory.

[10] UCR, CC and PRO formed an electoral alliance that eventually defeated Kirchnerismo in 2015.

[11] Although Kirchnerismo associated, mostly, with FpV, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner often incorporated leaders from other parties/factions including some members of the UCR (Radicales-K) into their governing coalition (Gervasoni, 2018).

[12] Página/12 has a substantially smaller circulation than Clarín but is large enough that it is known to most voters.

[13] Clarín was not the only newspaper that opposed the Kirchner administration. La Nación opposed both Néstor and Cristina Kirchner as well. Because of its size and wide distribution, however, Clarín was the leading voice against the administration (Kitzberger, 2011).

[14] The *Clarín* group, a major media conglomerate, controls the newspaper with greatest circulation in the country (and in Latin America), *Clarín*, TV channels in Buenos Aires and in the provinces, radio stations and several cable TV channels, among others (Mastrini and Becerra, 2011).

[15] Prior to 2008, the relationship between Clarín and Kirchnerismo was more cordial (Mauersberger 2012).

party sponsored media, but still present. Given the visibility with which the Kirchners targeted the credibility of *Clarín*, "friendly fire" may be muted, but the political proximity between *Clarín* and the opposition is likely to be perceived by strong partisans and respondents with high levels of sophistication. The next section describes the experiment we conducted to test these expectations.

3. Experimental strategy and data

We fielded a nationally representative telephone survey experiment in Argentina with 2472 respondents between July 26th and August 10th of 2012. The sample, fielded by *ISONOMIA Consultores*, was divided into eight randomly assigned groups of roughly 300 individuals, which appear balanced across observed covariates (see table A1 in the Appendix).[16]

Corruption allegations are a common type of newsworthy negative pieces of information that a friendly news source may decide to publicize despite the political downside. Credible corruption allegations should drive down support for a candidate, so our experiment randomly varied the newspaper source of the corruption allegation made against a candidate. Respondents in each treatment condition were presented with the profiles of two hypothetical candidates. The profile of both candidates contained information on the candidates' profession, marital status, previous work, and public service experience. The first hypothetical candidate was a clean candidate from the respondent's non-preferred party, while the second candidate was a co-partisan accused of corruption.[17] The corrupt candidate was always assigned to the respondent's preferred political party in order to create an incentive for the respondent to support the hypothetical corrupt candidate since few respondents would support corrupt candidates from less preferred parties.

We chose this design for several reasons. First, based on prior studies (e.g., Ferraz and Finan, 2008; Botero et al., 2015), we assume that allegations of corruption are politically damaging, and we are interested in understanding the relative loss of electoral support a candidate experiences when he is faced with accusations coming from different sources. This is why our study randomly attributes these accusations to one of the two partisan newspapers that represent the two poles of the main political cleavage in Argentina. Second, we designed the experiment so the candidate accused of corruption always shares the partisanship of the respondent, while the clean candidate always belongs to a party different from that of the respondent. We intentionally chose to match the partisanship of the corrupt candidate with that of the respondent to create an incentive for respondents to ever choose this hypothetical corrupt candidate. Our goal is to understand how the share of support for that candidate changes in the different experimental conditions. Respondents would have absolutely no reason to choose a hypothetical corrupt candidate that does not share his/her partisanship over a clean hypothetical candidate who belongs to his/her preferred political party. Also, rejecting a corrupt politician from a party that one does not identify with is not a puzzling attitude. Finally, while our sample size is much larger than most lab and survey experiments, we needed to preserve statistical power to detect heterogeneous treatment effects for theoretically interesting subgroups. Given resource constraints, we ultimately decided that the ability to address heterogeneous

treatment effects was more important than including sparsely populated treatment cells such as clean co-partisan or opposition candidates accused of corruption or two clean candidates (control group) which are substantively irrelevant scenarios.

We used the main political cleavage in Argentina at the time—the very polarized conflict between Kirchner and the anti-Kirchner opposition—when deciding the partisan affiliation of the two candidates. For example, if the respondent's party identification is *Partido Justicialista*,[18] then the clean candidate will be from the major opposition party, the *Unión Cívica Radical (UCR)*, and the corrupt candidate will be matched to the respondent's party identification – the Partido Justicialista. In table A2 in the Appendix, we explain the matching combinations depending on different scenarios of the respondent's party identification.[19] Independents were matched according to their self-reported vote in the last presidential election.[20] However, given their lack of partisan attachments—and thus the likely absence of a "friendly" newspaper—we do not expect to find friendly fire effects among this portion of the sample.

The experiment randomly varies whether the accusation comes from the pro-Kirchner *Página/12* or the pro-opposition *Clarín*. Every other aspect of the profile of the candidates remains the same with only the name of the newspaper attached to the accusation changing. The profiles are typical of candidates running in Argentinean elections (see Appendix C for the entire questionnaire in English and the original wording in Spanish).

> **Clean candidate:** Marcos Pérez is an engineer. He is married and has a daughter. His political party is [Respondent's OPPOSING POLITICAL PARTY]. He was Secretary of Sports in his town. He obtained high performance evaluations and awards for his efficiency and competence on the job. Based on reports from [SOURCE OF INFORMATION], it was concluded that no irregularities were found while he was in public office.

> **Corrupt candidate:** Sebastián González is a lawyer. He is married and has two children. His political party is [Respondent's POLITICAL PARTY]. He was mayor in his town. He obtained high performance evaluations and awards for his efficiency and competence on the job. Based on reports from [SOURCE OF INFORMATION], the newspaper [Pagina12/Clarín] accused him of [TYPE OF CORRUPTION].[21]

After reading the candidate profile, the respondent was asked to answer four different questions with a four-category response scale ("very likely", "likely", "unlikely", "very unlikely"). We inquired about which candidate was the most prepared, trustable, the closest to the people and who was perceived to be the best legislator. Finally, we included a question to measure vote choice between these two candidates if the elections were held tomorrow. These five questions of support for the candidate are very highly correlated (Cronbach's

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[16] The sample is representative of the population with landline telephones in Argentina and includes a subsample of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area (random digital dialing). The respondents were geographically distributed as follows: 817 in Ciudad de Buenos Aires; 1198 in greater Buenos Aires; 112 in other cities of the Buenos Aires Province; and, 425 in other provinces outside Buenos Aires.

[17] An additional experiment was also embedded in this survey and varied the type of corruption the candidate was accused of. This additional treatment did not affect our estimates of the partisan nature of the accusations. Please see the complete survey instrument in Appendix C.

[18] If respondents considered themselves closer, in broad terms, to the "Partido Justicialista", we included a follow-up question asking which faction inside the PJ the respondent identified with.

[19] Around 50% of the respondents in our survey reported identifying with a political party: 27% identifies with the Partido Justicialista, 9% with Unión Cívica Radical, 7% with Propuesta Republicana, 1% with Coalición Cívica, and 7% with minor political parties. Among voters who identify with the PJ, 65% identifies with the Kirchnerista faction, 16% with Peronismo Federal (dissident justicialismo) and 16% identifies broadly as justicialista.

[20] For example, if a respondent voted for Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, the vignette presented a corrupt Justicialist candidate versus a UCR candidate following the same criteria as explained in Table A2 in the Appendix.

[21] Two other treatments are included in the vignette 1) Source of information (Opposition or Court #5 in Capital City) and 2) Type of corruption (clientelistm or illicit enrichment). Both the source and type of corruption were randomized. Table A5 and A6 in the Appendix report the results of this paper controlling for the two additional treatments. The results do not change significantly.

alpha = 0.92) and the results do not differ meaningfully across measures. For expositional clarity, we use a dichotomous measure of vote choice (1 = vote for the corrupt candidate; 0 = vote for the clean candidate/none[22]) for the analysis presented in the text, but the results for each dependent variable can be found in Figure A1 in the Appendix.

Randomization guarantees that all of the treatment groups in the sample were equivalent on average for both observable and unobservable characteristics. Accordingly, any systematic difference in the answers to each of the five questions used to measure candidate evaluation and vote choice across groups provides an estimate of the differing impacts that the source of information—the newspaper—has on a respondent's evaluation of both candidates and the likelihood of punishing corrupt politicians.

To test moderators that might amplify or mute the friendly fire effect, we evaluated partisan strength by collapsing the five-category original variable[23] into a three-category variable (weak, neither weak nor strong, strong). To evaluate political sophistication, we created an index based on respondents' level of education, socioeconomic status, and attention to campaigns. While many studies rely on a batter of "quiz" items measuring citizen knowledge of politics (Zaller, 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993, among other), several studies rely on alternative measures (Luskin, 1990) such as respondents' level of conceptualization (Converse, 1964; Goren, 2004; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008), political interest (Chaiken, 1980; Guo and Moy, 1998), levels of education (Sniderman et al 1990; Enns and Kellstedt, 2008) or composite measures that combine some of these variables (Stimson, 1975; Rahn et al 1990; Macdonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug 1995). Since our instrument did not include a battery of political information,[24] we rely on the composite measure including variables that are part of the political sophistication equation (Luskin, 1987, 1990; Guo and Moy, 1998). In that index, we included along with political interest and education, a variable of socioeconomic status that was provided by the polling firm[25] since levels of education are a less accurate measure of socioeconomic status in middle income countries (e.g. it is possible for high status people to be politically inattentive). Moreover, a higher proportion of citizens do not have college degree, hence, there is less variation across levels of education). In the next section, we present the results of the survey experiment.

4. Results

Experiments often show "top-line" results[26] comparing the mean response of the overall sample to each treatment condition. Given that responses to each newspaper treatment are expected to differ across partisanship, for ease of interpretation our analysis presents the percent of voters who vote for the corrupt candidate by treatment condition for each political group separately: the incumbent Kirchneristas, the opposition (Dissident Peronismo, UCR, Propuesta Republicana, and Coalición Cívica), and independents. The opposition category excludes voters who identify with minor leftist parties (5% of the sample e.g.

Socialist Party, Frente de Izquierda, etc) since they represent marginal opposition groups on the left side of Kirchnerismo and do not have a partisan proximity to the opposition-newspaper Clarin.[27]

Fig. 1 presents the proportion of respondents voting for the corrupt co-partisan candidate. As we expected, citizens rely on cue sources when forming judgments about political candidates when the cues are unambiguous. Among *Kirchneristas*, who receive an unambiguous friendly cue from Página/12 and unambiguous hostile cue from *Clarín*, we find voters punishing the corrupt candidate much more when the accusation comes from the friendly source. The perceived costliness of the accusation from a friendly source decisively contributes to the credibility of the accusation. When the hostile *Clarín* attacks the Kirchnerista candidate, 49% of Kirchnerista respondents said they would vote for the corrupt candidate compared to 34% when the attack came from the ideologically friendly Página/12. This difference of 15 points is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). In fact, a majority of *Kirchnerista* voters are willing to cross party lines and vote for a UCR candidate when the corruption allegation comes from Página/12. The friendly fire effect of the pro-Kirchner newspaper attack against affiliated candidates on *Kirchnerista* voters is clear and dramatic (hypothesis 1a).[28]

This signaling effect is only apparent for the group with least ambiguous partisan signal: the *Kirchneristas*, the faction inside the PJ that actively supported Cristina Fernández's government and was politically closer to Página/12. Since *Clarín* has no unambiguous party referent, it serves as a considerably weaker cue for voters to rely on when forming political judgments. As predicted in hypothesis 1b, opposition supporters and independents' responses do not differ on the basis of the source (hypothesis 1b).[29]

To better understand the effect of friendly fire, we now examine two factors that can moderate it: strong partisan identification and high levels of political sophistication. The first one might facilitate media effects, while the second one is expected to allow voters to correctly identify "friendly fire" when it occurs. We expect the effect of the Kirchnerista candidate accused of corruption by *Página/12* rather than *Clarín* to be largest among strong partisans (Hypothesis 2). This expectation is largely borne out among strong Kirchneristas (see Fig. 2, upper panel). The gap between *Clarín* and *Página/12* is only statistically significant among strong partisans (19 percentage points, $p < 0.01$). This finding is consistent with the way the literature describes the process by which citizens get exposed to media communication. Citizens differ greatly in their levels of exposure, but their political predispositions affect their willingness to accept or resist external messages. In this particular case, partisan strength influences which messages Kirchnerista voters accept and regard as credible, and, consequently, whether they punish co-partisans in response to attacks from politically aligned media, or not.

An interesting pattern emerges when we examine the partisan strength of voters who support the anti-kircherista opposition (lower panel, Fig. 2). Although it does not reach statistical significance, opposition voters with weak partisan attachments take advantage of the "wrong" newspaper, namely Página/12, and punish their co-partisan candidate ($p < 0.10$, 19 percentage points difference). In contrast, voters with strong partisan attachments are able to take advantage of the informational cues and punish co-partisans more harshly in re-

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[22] Results do not differ if we use a categorical dependent variable (vote for a corrupt candidate, vote for a clean candidate, none of the candidates).

[23] Partisan strength: very weak, weak, neither weak nor strong, strong, very strong.

[24] Due to budget considerations, our questionnaire did not include a battery to measure respondents' level of political information.

[25] The index provided by the polling firm based on respondent's possession of goods, characteristics of their job, and level of education.

[26] Table A3 in the Appendix reports the overall effect of "friendly" v. "antagonistic" accusations with all partisan identities grouped together ($p < 0.05$). For ease of interpretation, we present the results across partisan groups. Table A3 also include the results when analyzing the complete sample (including independents). The results are not statistically significant. As expected, independents do not report any friendly effect since they do not have a partisan attachment and/or friendly newspaper.

[27] Table A4 in the Appendix reports the percent of voters who vote for the clean candidate/none of the candidates for each partisan group and subgroup.

[28] Probit Models can be found in the Appendix (Table A5 and A6).

[29] Figure A2 in the Appendix presents the results for each partisan group in the opposition. The results remain the same. Supporters of opposition parties do not change their behavior whether the accusation is attributed to Clarín or Página/12. The differences are not statistically significant in any case.

Across partisan groups
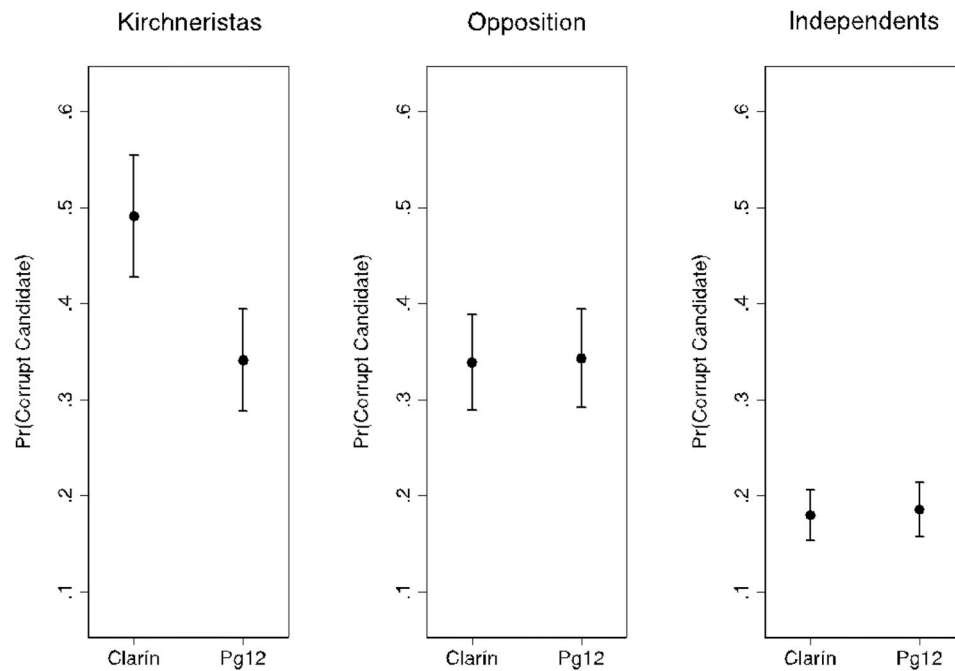
Note: Table A4 of the Appendix reports percentages for each subgroup (vote for corrupt and vote for clean candidate/none). Probit Models can be found in the Appendix (Table A5 and A6).

Fig. 1. Vote for corrupt co-partisan candidate.

sponse to attacks from politically aligned media (p < 0.05, 13 points)[30] and strongly supports hypothesis 2.

We also confirm our expectations about levels of political sophistication among Kirchneristas (see Fig. 3, upper panel). Highly sophisticated voters are able to take advantage of the informational cues and punish their co-partisan candidate, with a dramatic 30 percentage points difference (p < 0.01). The gap between *Clarín* and *Página/12* among the high sophisticated is larger than among the low sophisticated (18 percentage points, p < 0.10), and among Kirchneristas with medium levels of sophistication (7 percentage points, p > 0.10). The large difference between the low and high sophisticated Kirchneristas is consistent with the hypothesis that political sophistication allows partisans to interpret the cue given by the source of the corruption allegation more clearly (hypothesis 3).

The lack of a clear partisan referent for *Clarín* and the ideological heterogeneity among the opposition makes it considerably harder for opposition voters to interpret the signal, indicating that political sophistication can play an important role among this group. The lower panel in Fig. 3 breaks out the effect of the news cue by level of political sophistication for the opposition. As expected, only the more sophisticated voters were able to understand the role played by *Clarín,* and treat their accusations as friendly fire. Among these respondents, we find that highly sophisticated respondents are 36 percentage points less likely to vote for corrupt opposition candidates when the allegation comes from the anti-Kirchner *Clarín* than the pro-Kirchner *Página/12* (p < 0.01) and supports hypothesis 3.

In contrast, the low and middle sophistication opposition respondents appear to take the cue from the wrong news source although the treatment effect is not statistically significant (p > 0.10). These estimates among the low and middle sophistication opposition

respondents underscore the notion that only politically sophisticated observers on the opposition side can make effective use of the source cue. Simply having a "likeminded" news source is not enough to overcome the lack of a clear partisan link between *El Clarín* and the opposition, and thereby take advantage of the cues sent by this "like minded" newspaper to punish corrupt candidates.[31]

Overall these results suggest that the moderators play a less pronounced role among Kirchneristas, since there is clear match with their friendly newspaper, making it easier for voters to interpret their signals. Instead, the moderators tend to play a major role among opposition voters. Given the fact that signals from their friendly newspaper are more difficult to interpret, partisan strength tends to facilitate media effects and a high level of political sophistication allows voters correctly identify "friendly fire" when it occurs.

5. Conclusions

While politics is undoubtedly a lived experience, most voters gather information about candidates and the state of the world through media outlets. This information is filtered through a lens that can shape opinions. Our results are in line with studies that show voters are able to adjust and properly weight information provided by different sources, but also suggest that strong partisans and politically sophisticated voters are better at this task. More importantly, our study demonstrates

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[30] The interaction is large and statistically significant (see Table A8, column 6).

[31] In Table A7 in the Appendix, we present models with interactions terms. Overall, models with interaction terms largely confirm what is observed in the graphs of the mean responses presented in Figs. 1–3. Neither strength of partisanship nor sophistication is significant for Kirchneristas, but both are highly significant and substantively large for respondents supporting opposition parties. This implies that these moderators matter for more for members of the opposition than Kirchneristas, for whom interpreting media signals is clearer and less cognitively taxing.
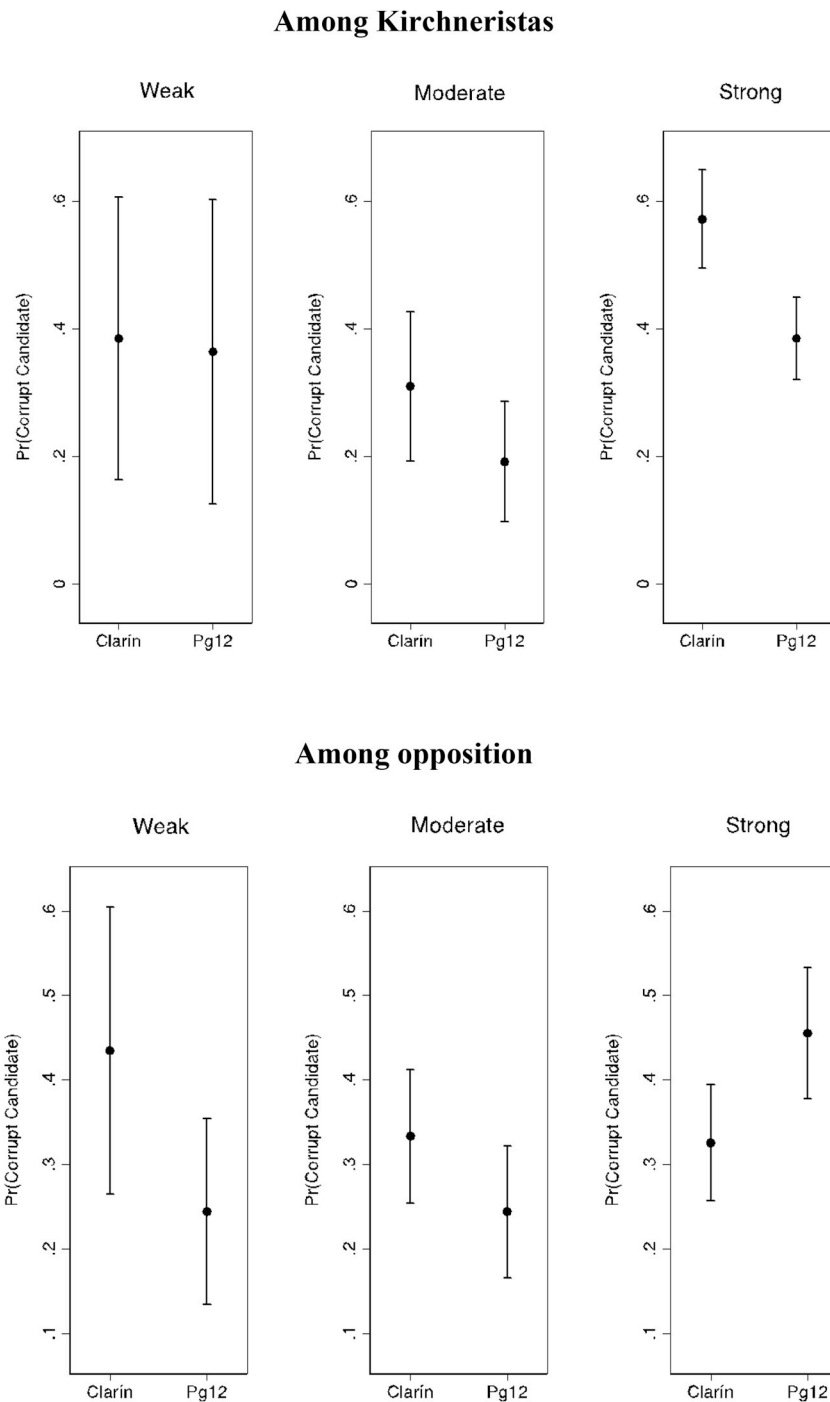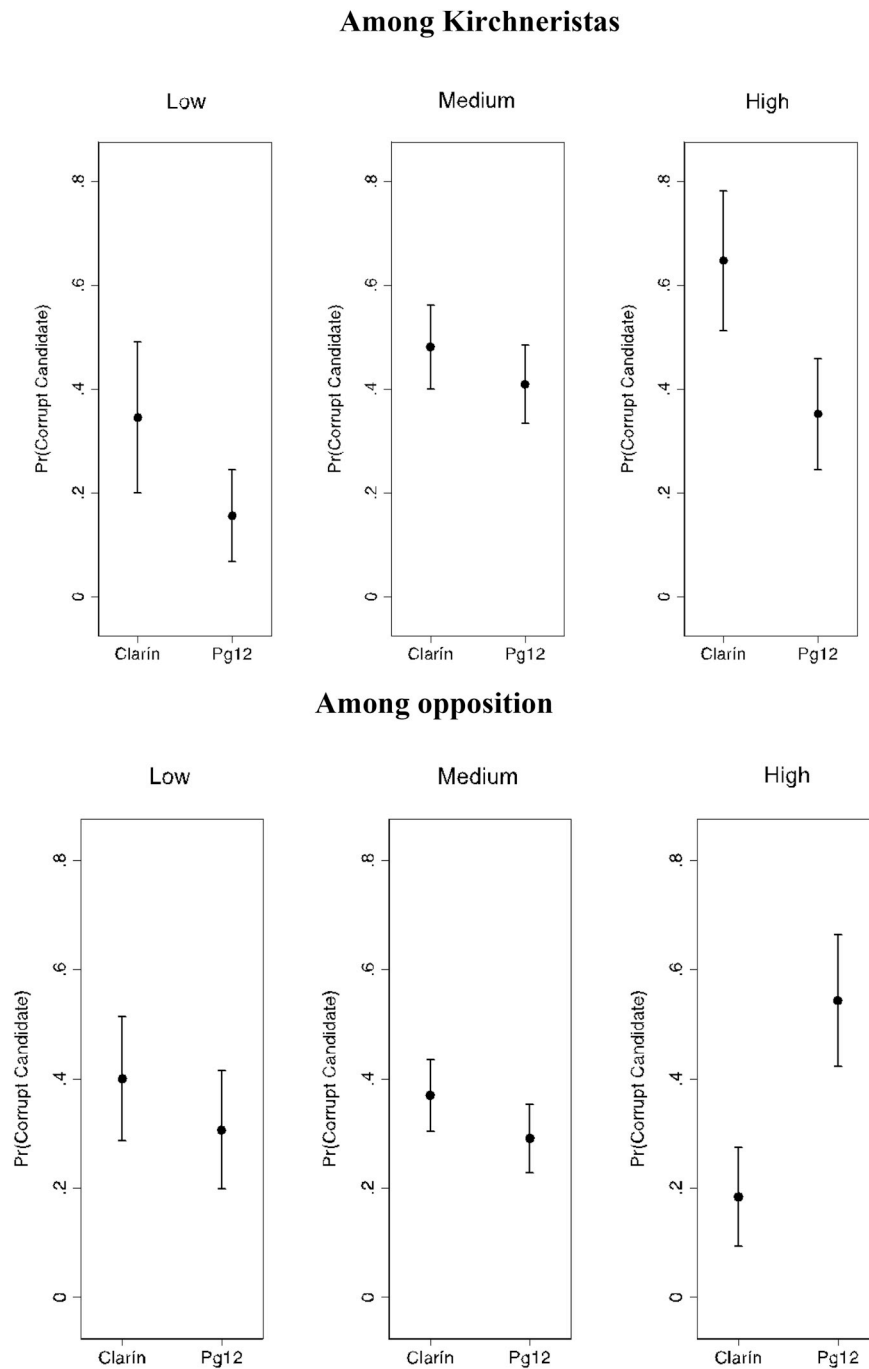
Among Kirchneristas

Among opposition

Note: Table A4 of the Appendix reports percentages for each subgroup (vote for corrupt and vote for clean candidate/none). Probit Models can be found in the Appendix (Table A5 and A6).

Fig. 2. Vote for corrupt co-partisan candidate.

that understanding partisan media cues is much more difficult when a media outlet caters to a fragmented and heterogeneous group.

Given the large number of countries with multiparty systems, our results suggest that partisan media may be less effective than the largely U.S. based literature on media effects would imply. At the same time, they also indicate that a nuanced understanding of the configuration of media markets is central to dissecting those dynamics. While Argentina was an ideal case for our purposes because it features both a clear pairing—a respected media outlet with a major political faction—and a media outlet associated with a fragmented opposition side, it is

obviously not representative of most countries. The fact that the Justicialista party is split into Kirchner and non-Kirchner factions may cloud the picture for members of the opposition as to how to interpret media slant. In settings with more internally stable parties, "friendly fire" may be even more damaging because supporters will know that there is no possibility that the newspaper supports a candidate in the other faction. The relatively recent evolution of the media sources may also have hurt their brand awareness for many voters. In countries where the partisan identity is longstanding and well known, voters from the opposition may be better able to weight and assess accusations

Among Kirchneristas

Among opposition

Note: Table A4 of the Appendix reports percentages for each subgroup (vote for corrupt and vote for clean candidate/none).
Probit Models can be found in the Appendix (Table A5 and A6).

Fig. 3. Vote for corrupt co-partisan candidate.

stemming from the outlets. Thus, we strongly encourage replication of our findings in other partisan media contexts.

In Latin America there are other cases in which the opposition is divided and the media environment is politicized. For example, Brazil has one of the most fragmented party systems in the world (Mainwaring et al., 2018). Like Argentina until 2015, it has a dominant party on one side of the spectrum (Workers' Party)—in government until 2016—with a clear friendly media outlet,[32] and various parties on the other

side. The opposition groups to the right and to the left of the former government both have friendly media outlets that do not display clear ties with any specific political party. Another relevant case is Mexico in which each major political party has friendly media outlets. In contrast to Argentina, Mexico provides a case with internally stable and more institutionalized parties, which hold longstanding alliances with media outlets. In this media environment, "friendly fire" may be even more damaging than our research on the Argentinean case suggests, since voters would be more aware of the link between opposition parties and the media outlets, and the ideology they share. In other words, in comparative perspective, the central dynamic of voters giving greater

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[32] Albeit with limited reach compared to the pro-Kirchner *Página/12*.

weight to media outlets with whom they align politically remains unchanged but the electoral consequences may vary depending on the internal stability of parties, their ideological placement vis-à-vis the governing party, and the strength of their link to media outlets.

As with all survey experiments, the external validity of our findings needs to be considered. With regards of the ability of other survey experiments to recover our results, our estimates may be conservative. Our sample relies on landlines, which tend to include more urban respondents with higher levels of information and education. If our study is replicated in a fully nationally representative study (e.g. including respondents without telephones), the gap between lower and highly sophisticated voters might be larger.

Our findings are informative for how voters think about accusations of corruption and can guide "real-world" studies, but the treatment effects estimated in the real world are likely to be much smaller (Boas et al., 2019). While voters are likely to take accusations of corruption seriously, personal attachment to particular politicians (e.g., charisma, familiarity, etc), policy preferences, partisanship, and counter-framing can mute the treatment effects found in this experiment. Moreover, contexts in which there is a tight connection between party and media outlet are less likely to produce "friendly fire". In that sense, our experiment where Página/12 exposes a corrupt Kirchnerista, while it may mirror real world processes, it will be observed infrequently. Similarly, in contexts where a direct connection between media outlet and party is harder to establish, we would expect corruption accusations to have a smaller impact, particularly in countries with party systems even more fragmented than Argentina's.

To better understand some of these dynamics, future work should investigate the effects of a variety of media sources and type of attacks. First, the sources of the accusation in our vignette were newspapers. In general, there is no theoretical reason to expect that partisan affiliated media cues would work very differently on newspapers than TV or radio or the Internet. However, it is possible that less sophisticated voters are less familiar with newspapers than television stations and are therefore less able to properly account for the source of the accusations.[33] If true, we can expect that media effects from partisan television stations will be stronger—since usage is larger and their reputations may be better known among the public—and low sophistication voters may look more like high sophistication voters when confronted with media they use more regularly.

Second, accusations of corruption are far more black and white than many political attacks. Whether a candidate has the wrong policies or even passed a law to please a donor can be interpreted in different ways. In contrast, using government funds for campaign activity or pocketing money is fairly clear cut. Either the money was embezzled or not—and if it did happen, the newsworthiness of the activity is rarely in question. Accusations on less black and white issues may exhibit much starker treatment effects across partisan cues than we find here.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2019.04.008.

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[33] In our sample, low sophistication voters do not trust radio more than newspapers, but that does not speak to their ability to interpret the sources.

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