

# Psychological Cues to Political Stands: An Experiment with Italians on Regional Autonomy

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The human mind is not necessarily willing to assess costs and benefits every time it faces a decision. It often prefers to rely on cognitive shortcuts (i.e., heuristics) enabling it to decide rapidly and satisfactorily. Most literature on heuristics and biases suggests that a common cognitive shortcut individuals take is looking at what is close to judge what is far. An experiment involving 300 Italian citizens used a questionnaire to test whether it may work the other way around when it comes to politics. This paper investigated whether citizens might use mere exposure to information on a foreign issue as a heuristic to express an opinion on a similar issue at the domestic level. Furthermore, it strived to test whether this occurs more frequently when the individual considers the two cultures involved to be relatively close to each other. Results show data can only partially confirm the expectations.

*Keywords:* regional autonomy, independentism, heuristics, mere exposure, cultural distance

L'esprit humain n'est pas toujours disposé à évaluer les coûts et bénéfices des décisions à prendre. Il a souvent recours à des raccourcis cognitifs (heuristiques) permettant de décider de manière rapide et satisfaisante. Plusieurs publications sur les heuristiques suggèrent qu'un raccourci cognitif fréquent consiste à juger ce qui est accessible afin de juger ce qui est distant. Une étude basée sur un questionnaire rempli par 300 citoyens italiens a évalué si ce processus fonctionnait dans le sens inverse lorsqu'il est question de politique. L'intérêt était de savoir si la simple exposition à de l'information sur un problème à l'étranger pouvait servir de base à une heuristique pour exprimer une opinion sur un problème similaire au niveau national. De plus, cette étude tente de vérifier si cela se produirait davantage lorsque l'individu considère que les deux cultures impliquées sont relativement similaires. Les résultats confirment seulement partiellement les hypothèses.

*Mots-clés :* autonomie régionale, indépendantisme, heuristiques, simple exposition, distance culturelle

Lately, Italy has been the theatre of several notable political events particularly related to national powers going against local powers: a referendum for constitutional reform in favor of centralization held in 2016, two consultative referendums in two regions in 2017 and the formation in 2018 of an Italian government comprising a formerly secessionist regional party. This would suggest that the issue of regional autonomy is salient in the Italian political agenda (Clemente, De Chiara, & Martini, 2017; Morelli, 2017; Salerno, 2017). How are Italians taking a stand on this issue? Are their opinions affected by their exposure to information about similar issues in other countries? Investigating the role that exposure to international politics has on position-taking in Italy might give us interesting insights on the potential

impact of the huge amount of news we are exposed to on a daily basis in the globalized world of the 21st century that we live in.

According to behavioral science (Kahneman, 2011; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), when something important is at stake, people are willing to undertake a cognitively-demanding decision-making process. Gathering information toward an imminent necessary choice is, in fact, an example of a cognitively-demanding decision-making process. On the other hand, when our brains feel the need to go for cost-effective mental processes—which is actually what happens most of the time—they rely on heuristics (i.e., cognitive shortcuts that avoid us the costly effort of gathering information and conducting a meticulous analysis of costs and benefits before taking a sound decision). Human beings use heuristics in a variety of situations. An example might be them being unwilling to go through the history of a country or a region in order to decide whether to stand for unity rather than independentism in that area. Looking for shortcuts is what helps us take decisions anyway—provided that it is a shorter way.

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The question this paper wants to tackle is whether the shorter way might indeed be a thousand miles away from the decision maker. Could having an opinion on an issue at the international level be helpful to us in forming an opinion on a similar issue at the domestic level? What are the odds of individuals looking at their perception of a phenomenon occurring abroad and at their perception of the country involved, in order to figure out how to side when the same issue occurs in theirs?

The following analysis constitutes an attempt to evaluate whether referring to opinions on foreign political issues could influence one's political stands on similar issues at the domestic level. A first expectation is that this is possible. So far, the literature on the topic has shown that our positions at the national level might help us figure out how to take positions at the international level. Clark and Rohrschneider (2009) supported the idea that in some cases, a mechanism of transfer applies, where individuals operate evaluations of domestic-level phenomena at the international level. This idea actually goes back to Campbell et al. (1960); they showed that political party identification served as a shortcut to evaluate political issues in foreign policy. A clear example of that would be the vote choice at the European elections for EU citizens, which sometimes mirrors voters' expectations and opinions more strictly related to the national rather than to the European-level (Clark & Rohrschneider, 2009). Thus, by looking at the literature, we could say that, so far, what has been mainly shown is how domestic politics can be used as a proxy to judge events occurring in the international scenario, rather than the other way around. However, there is no reason to believe that the two processes should be mutually exclusive. It is indeed reasonable to think that and interesting to test whether it can work the other way around, too. Nevertheless, if the theory of national politics as a proxy to judge international issues is supported by the literature, the same cannot be said for the international political scenario used as a proxy to judge facts at the national level. In fact, this question has remained so far unanswered, and it will be the aim of this study to contribute by starting to fill this gap.

Besides this first intuition, one should consider how close individuals feel about the foreign object they are trying to evaluate. In particular, using evaluations of international facts to judge national ones might occur more evidently when the two cultures are taken into account—the individual's and the one the subject is looking at as a reference—and considered to be somewhat similar by the respondent. In other words, the more similarities exist between the cultures, the more one could expect individuals to use their perception of the foreign to judge the domestic.

## Theoretical Framework

Research shows how common it is for citizens to lack political knowledge in general (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991). In particular, it has been noted that this is more likely to occur when individuals have to deal with complex, unfamiliar issues that would require a significant mental effort in order to collect new information about it, process it, and eventually form an opinion on it (Hooghe & Marks, 2005).

However, lack of political knowledge does not act as a deterrent for people to express a preference—be it in the form of casting a vote or simply taking a stand on a given issue. Indeed, citizens' use of cues and heuristics to form opinions is well documented in the literature (Brady & Sniderman, 1985; McDermott, 2005; Sniderman, 2000; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991), evidencing how individuals, instead of engaging in in-depth examinations of issues regarding policy contents, rather rely on external cues that help them overcome their information shortfalls and get to a satisfying final decision (Baldassarri, 2005; Baldassarri & Schadee, 2006; Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Hobolt, 2007; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Torcal, Martini, & Orriols, 2018; Tucker, De Sio, Paparo, & Brader, 2014).

**Mere exposure effect.** Although relying on external cues might include the possibility of relying on one's peers opinions, there are differing opinions among a similar group of peers. A reason why people belonging to the same group end up taking at times opposite stances can be found in the different perceptions people may have of the same object. A theoretical rationale behind this is the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968), also known as the familiarity heuristic (Park & Lessig, 1981). By mere exposure is meant “a condition making the stimulus accessible to the individual's perception” (Zajonc, 1968, p. 1) and what has been attested to this regard is that such a condition of exposure of a person to an object enhances their attitude toward it. In other words, the mere act of encountering something makes individuals familiar with it, and that familiarity, in turn, makes them have a more positive attitude toward it than they did before they encountered it (Hansen & Wänke, 2009; Zajonc, 1968).

It has been empirically verified that the link between the exposure and the consequent attraction is not generated by a conscious process of information (Monahan, Murphy, & Zajonc, 2000). Indeed, for this to happen, the individual does not even have to be conscious of being exposed to the stimulus (Zajonc, 2001), which would explain why, in the literature, a significant amount of application of this theory can be found in the areas of marketing strategy and brand elaboration for the construction of advertisements

(Atkin & Heald, 1976; Dawar & Lei, 2009; Kent & Allen, 1994; Lee & Ganesh, 1999). Building on this, this paper aims at testing whether mere exposure can also work when it comes to taking a stand on a political issue such as supporting various extents of regional autonomy vis-à-vis various extents of centralization.

**Psychic distance.** Although mere exposure can be related to our decision-making process, according to international business literature, another concept that could also be related to the influence of others' opinions on decision-making processes is the concept of psychic distance, often treated as a synonym of cultural distance<sup>1</sup>. It was first used in a study on international trade (Beckerman, 1956) and tended to be defined in terms of the disturbing factors which hinder the relationship between a supplier and a customer when they happen to come from two foreign environments (Nordstrom, Vahlne, & Landeck, 1994; O'Grady & Lane, 1996; Vahlne & Wiedersheim-Paul, 1973). However, just like Evans and Mavondo (2002) pointed out, the etymology of the word psychic relates to the semantic area of mind and soul, which would suggest that psychic distance cannot be determined solely by external factors but is instead formed at the mental level of the individual, stemming from the personal perception of cultural differences. In fact, it has subsequently come to be defined as the perceived socio-cultural distance between the home and the target countries in terms of language, religion, education, business practices, and legal and political systems (Dow & Karunaratna, 2006; Lee, 1998).

Borrowing this concept from the international business literature, this study attempts to see whether cultural distance may affect the extent of the mere exposure effect on political stands once the stimulus is associated to a foreign country or culture. The reason why this could be the case can be found in the literature on social comparison and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). As proposed by Festinger (1954), people make large use of comparisons with others in order to realize what their position in society is. According to social identity theory, feeling part of a social group is fundamental for these comparisons to take place. When human beings think in social rather than individual terms, they tend to associate themselves to a certain group and not to others. This helps people in setting a more or less clear line, dividing us from them, and allows them to differentiate the groups they consider as their in-groups (i.e., those sharing certain characteristics) from those they see as their out-groups (i.e., those lacking those common features), and behave accordingly toward both (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Sharing the same nationality, the same religion, and the same

leisure preferences has been shown to be a remarkable basis for individuals to identify themselves with other individuals and feel a sense of belonging to some groups and not to others (Evans & Mavondo, 2002; Stets & Burke, 2000). Similarly, the same reason that would make individuals feel a given culture as close to their own might also make them perceive both cultures as belonging to the same group, as opposed to distant cultures that are falling out of the group. Thus, this type of mental process may constitute a shortcut and facilitate the expression of preference if two different groups are involved and the subject perceives one of them as closer than the other.

Building on all this, the analysis of this paper stems from the idea that, given citizens' diffuse lack of political knowledge and tendency to take political stands through the use of heuristics, they might indeed be influenced by mere exposure to information on a foreign issue. Mere exposure might be used as a cognitive shortcut that enables them to express an opinion on a similar domestic issue – especially if they consider the two countries or cultures involved to be close enough.

The hypotheses to be tested throughout this analysis are the following:

- (1) Mere exposure to arguments in favor of regional autonomy could enhance the exposed subject's supporting opinion on regional autonomy of the country, compared to a subject who was not exposed to arguments in favor of regional autonomy or to a subject who was exposed to another stimulus (e.g., another argument on another topic).
- (2) Mere exposure to arguments against regional autonomy could enhance the exposed subject's anti-autonomist position in the country, compared to a subject who was not exposed to arguments against regional autonomy or to a subject who was exposed to a different stimulus.
- (3) The mere exposure effect is stronger when the stimulus is associated to a culture that subjects perceive as culturally close to theirs.

### Method

There are several reasons to consider Italy a relevant case for the purpose of this research. Since the objective is to investigate whether issues in a foreign country can be used as a proxy to judge similar issues in the domestic country, it is true that the same experiment could potentially be conducted with any other population. However, in this case, Italians have been selected as the sample and Spain as the reference country. This is due to the fact that Italy and Spain, besides being close to each other, happened

to be dealing with the same issue (i.e., regional autonomy) at the very same time—which made them the perfect couple of countries to run the tests this research required. The choice of Italy and Spain therefore allowed to take advantage of the current events to test whether being exposed to them at the international level affected the way people perceived similar issues in their home country. Why Spain and Catalonia can both be perceived as close or far from Italy and how, at the time of the experiment, Spain was facing similar political challenges to Italy's will be explained in the next section.

### Context of the experimental design

Firstly, “Italy and Spain represent the prototypes of the so-called ‘Mediterranean’ or ‘southern European’ societies” (Coppola, 2004, p. 225): Spanish and Italian populations underwent similar socio-demographic processes, which led them to have strong similarities that go from family formation processes to welfare systems, from institutional settings to labor markets and education systems—a diffuse similarity that becomes even more evident when compared to other European countries (Eurostat, 2018). This common background is mainly what lays behind the expectation that Italians would feel much closer to Spanish culture than to other cultures.

As for the formulation of hypotheses in this research, a key element lays precisely in the distinction between Spanish and Catalan culture. The rationale for using this distinction is that, on the one hand, the very fact that Catalan culture belongs to one particular autonomous community (out of seventeen) in Spain makes it less likely for Italians to feel closer to that culture in particular rather than with Spanish culture in general. Indeed, as Murphy, Diaz-Varela, and Coluccello (2002) pointed out, Catalonia represents for Spain what only Padania<sup>2</sup> is for Italy—namely, a privileged enclave where the development of capitalism and the flourishing of industrialism were possible and paid the regions back through time. However, although some Italians live in those Northern areas that have common aspects with Catalonia and might for this reason have formed a positively biased attitude toward Catalan culture, other Italians might well have inherited an opposite attitude toward it (i.e., the legacy of old merchants working on the Mediterranean who saw Catalans, as well as Southern French people, as their main competitors and, therefore, enemies; Abulafia, 1990). In other words, it is reasonable to think that those who sympathize with the features that characterize Catalan culture are outnumbered by those who sympathize with the more general features of Spanish culture.

Secondly, a hint on why Spain, at the time of the experiment, was facing similar political challenges to

Italy's was partly given above when Catalonia was juxtaposed to Padania as exceptional cases for economic development in their respective countries. This common feature led to similar political repercussions that probably peaked in both countries right before this experiment was conducted, although to different extents and according to different modalities.

In Italy, on December 4, 2016, a constitutional referendum rejected a reform aimed at, among other things, increasing the extent of centralization and changing the degree of regional autonomy of most Italian regions (Clemente et al., 2017; Salerno, 2017), precisely the single most disliked point in the content of the reform (D'Alimonte, 2016). Then, on October 22, 2017, two consultative referendums were held in the Northern (Padanian) regions of Lombardy and Veneto (Morelli, 2017), questioning residents on whether they wanted to ask the central government for an increased and differentiated degree of regional autonomy. On June 1st, 2018, the current Italian government was formed, constituted by the alliance of the Five Star Movement and the League, formerly known as the Northern League—an extreme-right party well known for its history of secessionist claims. This series of recent events clearly shows how the issue of regional autonomy and centralization has come to play a role in the Italian political agenda, making it relevant, nowadays, to investigate this issue.

As for Catalonia, an important starting point in the last few years is definitely September 27, 2015, when, during regional elections, independentist parties got 72 out of 135 seats in Parliament. These parties then started to move in the direction of what they called the disconnection from Spain, which, since 2016, entered the Catalan political agenda and, on October 1st, 2017, turned into a unilaterally announced and internationally unrecognized consultative referendum for Catalan independence (Turp, Caspersen, Qvortrup, & Welp, 2017). Beyond the results of the vote and the immediate consequences of that political action, what is of interest for the purpose of this research is the centrality of the issue of regional independence vs. centralization in the recent Spanish political agenda (Cetrà, Casanas-Adam, & Tàrrega, 2018). In fact, this shows how there are regions—in both Italy and Spain—that in the past few years have undergone a process to further increase their regional autonomy; that this process reached its peak right in the months that preceded the analysis, although to different degrees of intensity; and that the demarcation between regional autonomy and centralization was definitely a concern in the political agenda of both the countries when the experiment was conducted.

**Participants and Procedure**

The study was conducted online as a between-subject survey experiment, involving three hundred Italian citizens coming from all the twenty regions of Italy. Participants (119 males and 181 females) received a link to the study through e-mail or text message. Participation was voluntary. The collection of data stopped once the rhythm of responses slowed down and no further responses came in. Data was collected through five days. At the moment of stopping the collection of data, the actual number of participants involved was 336. However, 36 respondents had not completed the task and their questionnaire could therefore not be used for the purpose of the study. The participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental groups and asked to fill in a questionnaire online.

Questionnaires were identical across the three group conditions. They were all structured as follows: a first block of questions, followed by a text section, and then a second block of questions. The only distinctive element between the three questionnaires was the short text included between the first and the second block of questions. The length of the texts in the first, second, and third group was respectively of 153, 216, and 165 words in the original Italian version. All three texts consisted of a seven-point summary on a different topic. In the first treatment group, this summary consisted of a list of seven reasons why Catalonia should become independent, exposing respondents in that group to arguments in favor of increasing the level of autonomy of a certain region (first treatment condition). In the second treatment group, seven reasons were displayed against Catalan independence, exposing its respondents to arguments favoring Spanish national unity and centralization instead (second treatment condition). Finally, in the third control group, a general and neutral classification of party systems was presented, without exposing the participants belonging to this group to any kind of information related to issues of regional autonomy, centralization or independentism

(control condition), yet assuring that all the respondents taking part to the study were required the same extent of mental effort to complete the task.

Immediately after the text section, the dependent variable was tested in the second block of questions: participants were asked to declare the extent of their approval on a set of statements concerning the degree of centralization and level of regional autonomy in Italy. This allowed us to test whether—compared to those in the control condition—respondents exposed to arguments in favor of Catalan independentism (first treatment group) showed a higher propensity to support regional autonomy and/or a lower propensity to favor centralization; likewise, to test whether—compared to those in the control condition—respondents exposed to arguments against Catalan independentism (second treatment group) showed a lower propensity to support regional autonomy and/or a higher propensity to favor centralization.

**Measurement**

**Regional autonomy and centralization.** As per what has just been introduced, participants were asked to assess their level of agreement with seven statements in the second block of questions. They could *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree* or *strongly agree* with them. The item included four statements favoring different extents of regional autonomy in Italy, plus three statements supporting ideas of national unity and centralization (cf. Table 1).

A seven-item index indicating an overall attitude toward the issue was created and Cronbach’s alpha coefficient (.59) was computed to measure its internal consistency, thus assessing how closely the seven items were related as a group. The coefficient was computed for the different attitudinal statements concerning regional autonomy in Italy. It revealed that the scale indicating the attitude in favor of Italy as a centralized and united country was better off ( $\alpha = .62$ ) once the mildest and most moderate statement was dropped. Citing from the translated version of the questionnaire: *Italy, despite its differences at the*

Table 1  
*Factor 1 loadings for each of the seven items on regional autonomy and centralization in Italy*

Statement	In favor of	Factor
Italy is too centralized a country	RA	0.43
The new government should increase the extent of autonomy of Italian regions	RA	0.78
All Italian regions should be more autonomous	RA	0.77
Some Italian regions should be more autonomous	RA	0.49
Centralization is a good thing	C	-0.48
Italy, despite its differences at the regional level, is a country that has its own national unity	C	-0.17
Centralization should be fostered	C	-0.53

Note. RA = regional autonomy; C = centralization.

*regional level, is a country that has its own national unity.*

Precisely after realizing that not all the items of the dependent variable were contributing to a coherent and valid index of attitude toward regional autonomy and centralization, a factor analysis was conducted, which allowed us to measure the ratio of each item's unique variance to its shared variance. What emerged from the factor analysis was a confirmation of the inconsistency of the statement *Italy, despite its differences at the regional level, is a country that has its own national unity* with respect to the index as a whole. Factor eigenvalues smaller than 1 were excluded from the analysis, which mainly looked at the factor loadings for Factor 1 (eigenvalue = 2.16). Item loadings were examined to remove any item which did not load equal to or above 0.40. As shown in Table 1, the above-mentioned mild statement was the only one that did not load enough.

A potential explanation to this lack of fit to the index could be found in the fact that its content somehow calls upon more affective values, rather than proper stances on specific policies. The divergence can, in other words, be explained by the fact that only six out of the seven statements, originally selected to create one single index, seem to be suitable for it; while one of them arouses a different type of reaction in the respondents, probably because it is worded in such a way so to immediately recall affective values more than policy stances.

As a matter of fact, at the time of constructing the questionnaire, the original idea was to use all seven items as a whole and create an index of propensity to support regional autonomy to use as the dependent variable of the analysis. Those statements indicating a negative attitude toward regional autonomy had actually been worded as in favor of centralization and national unity, so they needed to be reversed before including them into the index. However, the mismatch of one of the seven items required to drop it from the index. Nevertheless, considering what has just been said about the reasons why that particular statement could not fit, it could be interesting to run the same regression with two different dependent variables: on the one side, the (six-item) index, as conceived in the original idea; on the other side, the dropped-from-the-index statement. In this way, it would be possible to see how different—if anyhow—the effects of the independent variable are with respect to statements strictly related to policy measures and a statement more connected to personal values. The treatment condition, which is the main independent variable, was treated as a categorical variable and its effects were tested controlling for age and gender.

**Psychic distance.** Finally, two crucial cultural distance variables were included in this study: the one between Italian and Spanish cultures, and the one between Italian and Catalan cultures. They were built out of a specific survey battery asking respondents how distant from their own culture they considered a set of 10 national and regional cultures, including Spanish and Catalan. Responses were measured on a scale from 0 (*very close to my culture*) to 10 (*very distant from my culture*). Adding this further variable to the model allowed us to see whether it strengthens or weakens the association between the outcome variable(s) and the main independent variable in this analysis.

For this purpose, psychic distance from Catalan culture and psychic distance from Spanish culture were unified into a single variable, generated by subtracting psychic distance from Spain to psychic distance from Catalonia. Therefore, values in this new variable range from -10 to 10. The lowest value (-10) indicates those who perceive Catalan culture as very close to their own and Spanish culture very far from it; whereas the highest value on the scale (+10) indicates those who perceive Catalan culture as very far from their own and Spanish culture very close to it. Hence, the higher the value on this scale of psychic distance, the closer to Spanish culture and farther from Catalan culture, while the opposite applies to the lowest values on the scale. The closer one gets to zero, the smallest the difference respondents perceive between those two cultures with respect to theirs.

## Results

### Regional Autonomy and Centralization

Regressions were run both for the index and for the abovementioned “mildest statement” according to which Italy is a country with its own unity notwithstanding the differences at the regional level.

Although at a first look, no relevant finding seems to be detected, an interesting Table 2 shows results from the first regression. Setting the control group as the reference category, neither being in the treatment group condition in favor of Catalan independentism, nor being in the treatment group condition siding with Spanish national unity would make any significant difference on the way respondents assessed both the statements included in the index and the single statement alone. Figures 1 and 2 show this even more clearly—being in one of the treatment groups rather than in the control group did not significantly impact participants' attitudes as measured by the index and by the single statement. However, being in one of the treatment groups rather than in the other one had an impact on the way they answered the single statement (cf. Figure 2). In other words, those who were exposed

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Table 2

Regression Results on the Effect of the Two Treatment Conditions with Respect to the Control Condition on the Index and on the Single Statement, Controlling for Age and Gender

Condition and control variables	$\beta$	SE	$p$	$F$	$df$	$P$	$R^2$	$n$
Six-item Index (model 1)				0.95	4, 289	.434	.01	294
Constant	2.93	0.47	.000					
Gender	-0.51	0.28	.074					
Age	0.00	0.01	.970					
Pro Spain treatment	0.07	0.33	.823					
Pro Catalonia treatment	0.25	0.34	.451					
Single Statement (model 2)				1.70	4, 293	.149	.02	298
Constant	2.08	0.20	.000					
Gender	0.05	0.12	.651					
Age	0.00	0.00	.165					
Pro Spain treatment	0.11	0.14	.424					
Pro Catalonia treatment	-0.19	0.14	.182					

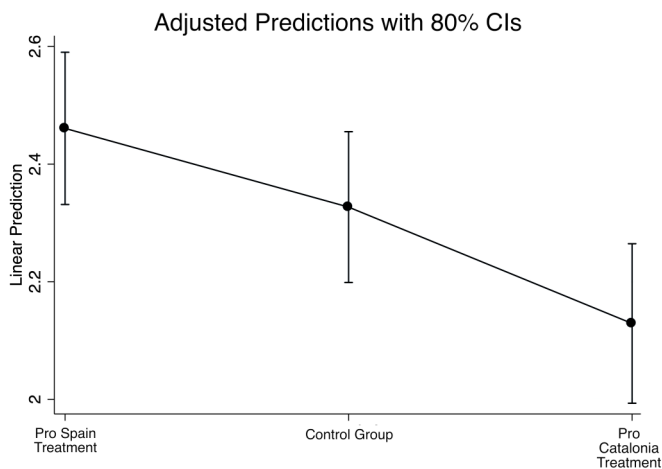


Figure 1. Predicted probabilities for participants belonging to different group conditions for the six-item index of attitude toward regional autonomy and centralization.

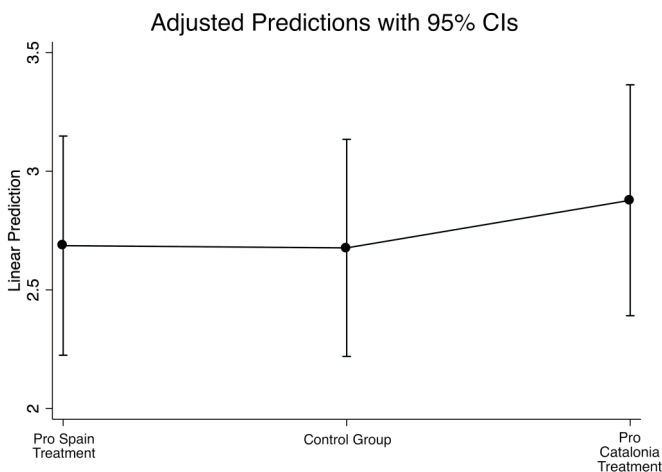


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities for participants belonging to different group conditions for the single statement “Italy, despite its differences at the regional level, is a country that has its own national unity”.

to arguments in favor of Catalan independentism evaluated that statement in a significantly different way than those who were exposed to arguments in favor of Spanish national unity (cf. Table 3).

What data shows here is that there is a statistically significant relation between having been merely exposed to a text in favor of Catalan independentism and having the tendency to disagree with the fact that Italy maintains its own unity at the national level in spite of all the discrepancies at the regional level. In other words, the participants who had read seven reasons why Catalonia should be independent tended to show their disagreement more evidently and significantly to the idea that national unity in Italy can win over its historical regional fragmentation, compared to those participants who had read seven reasons why Catalonia should be a dependent part of Spain. Uniquely for this case (cf. model 4), the mere exposure hypothesis can be said so far to find confirmation in data<sup>3</sup>.

**Psychic Distance.** Contrary to our expectations, participants did not perceive, on average, Catalan culture as significantly more distant from their own than Spanish culture. However, what is interesting here is to look at the individual level, and to see how the perceived distance between the respondent’s culture and those two cultures affected their attitude toward regional autonomy in Italy. Indeed, it is interesting to see the extent to which the effect of this perceived distance depends on the treatment condition the respondent was assigned to.

For this purpose, a regression was run, including in the previous models, the independent variable measuring psychic distance and the interaction between psychic distance and the treatment condition. Besides psychic distance having no significant effect by itself on the index or on the statement, once again

the regression revealed that there was no significant effect of the interaction of psychic distance with the two treatment conditions with respect to the control condition (cf. Table 4).

However, to have a more immediate sense of the effect of this interaction, we may look at the plot of predicted probabilities for the combination of the categories of our variable (cf. Figures 3 and 4). If we look at both the index and at the single statement, what we notice from the graph is that belonging to the treatment group in favor of Spanish national unity did not, at any level of psychic distance, increase the

predictability of the respondent's preferences. On the other hand, in both cases, belonging to the treatment group in favor of Catalan independentism, happened to be relevant in terms of predicted probabilities, when the respondents placed themselves at the extremes of the psychic distance scale (i.e., when they considered either Spain very close and Catalonia very far from Italy or Spain very far and Catalonia very close to it).

More specifically, Figure 3 shows how those in the pro-Catalan independence treatment condition who also considered Catalan culture as very close to Italian culture and Spanish culture quite far from it, tended to

Table 3

*Regression Results on the Effect of Being in the Pro Catalonia Treatment Condition or in the Control Group with Respect to the Pro Spanish Unity Treatment Condition on the Index and on the Single Statement, Controlling for Gender and Age*

Condition and control variables	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$R^2$	<i>n</i>
Six-item Index (model 3)				0.92	4, 289	.454	.01	294
Constant	3.38	0.50	.000					
Gender	-0.50	0.28	.077					
Age	0.00	0.01	.885					
Placebo	-0.09	0.33	.771					
Pro Catalonia treatment	0.13	0.34	.691					
Single Statement (model 4)				1.70	4, 293	.149	.02	298
Constant	2.19	0.21	.000					
Gender	0.05	0.12	.651					
Age	0.00	0.00	.165					
Placebo	-0.11	0.14	.424					
Pro Catalonia treatment	-0.31	0.15	.035					

Table 4

*Regression Results on the Interactive Effect Between the Psychic Distance and the Treatment Condition on the Index and on the Single Statement, Controlling for Gender and Age*

Condition and control variables	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$R^2$	<i>n</i>
Six-item Index (model 5)				1.19	7, 253	.310	.03	261
Constant	2.96	0.50	.000					
Gender	-0.49	0.30	.104					
Age	0.00	0.01	.998					
Pro Spain treatment	0.07	0.36	.853					
Pro Catalonia treatment	0.11	0.37	.750					
Psychic distance (PS)	-0.01	0.11	.951					
Pro Spain treatment X PS	0.06	0.15	.674					
Pro Catalonia treatment X PS	-0.24	0.15	.112					
Single Statement (model 6)				0.84	7, 255	.557	.02	263
Constant	2.10	0.21	.000					
Gender	0.03	0.13	.790					
Age	0.00	0.00	.256					
Pro Spain treatment	0.96	0.15	.537					
Pro Catalonia treatment	-0.17	0.16	.280					
Psychic distance (PS)	-0.03	0.04	.501					
Pro Spain treatment X PS	0.03	0.06	.644					
Pro Catalonia treatment X PS	0.08	0.06	.213					



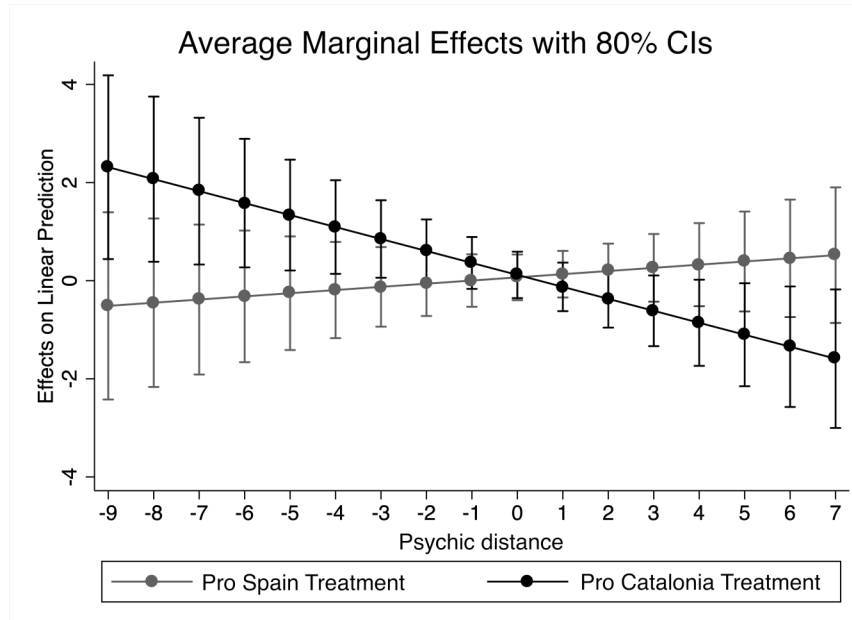


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities for participants belonging to different group conditions for the six-item index of attitude toward regional autonomy and centralization at different levels of psychic distance.

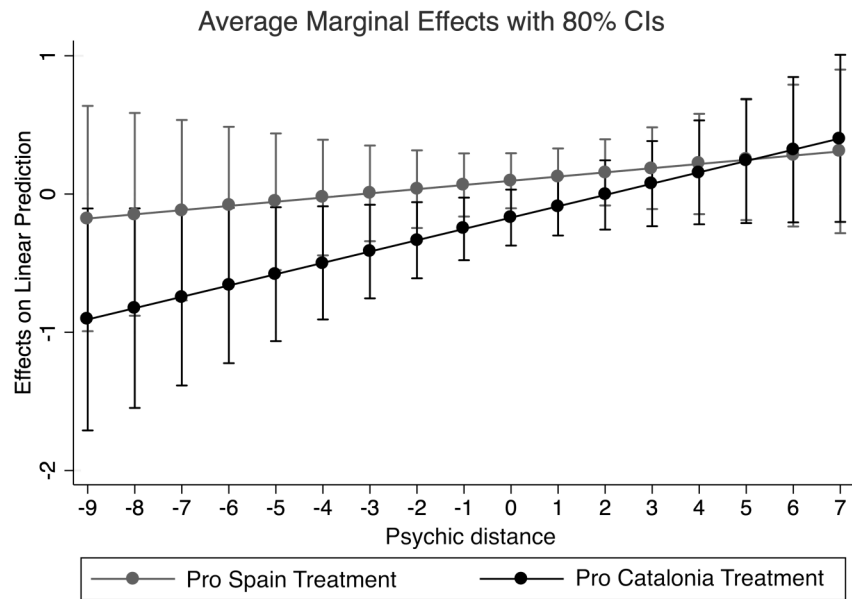


Figure 4. Predicted probabilities for participants belonging to different group conditions for the single statement *Italy, despite its differences at the regional level, is a country that has its own national unity* at different levels of psychic distance.

have a more positive attitude toward regional autonomy in Italy, as measured by the six-item index. On the other hand, those in the same treatment condition who considered Catalan culture far from them and Spanish culture closer, would not support regional autonomy against centralization in Italy.

On the other side, Figure 4 displays how, among those treated in favor of Catalan independentism, those who felt Catalan culture closer to them than Spanish culture tended to disagree more with the idea that Italy can overcome regional discrepancies and

still maintain its national unity. Contrariwise, those in the same group who felt Spanish culture closer to them than Catalan culture would stand in favor of the image of Italy as a country that is not disrupted by its regional fragmentation.

**Discussion**

Given the level of connections available, what happens within the national borders nowadays does not stay within the national borders. It is reasonable to believe that our perceptions of national and

international dimensions somehow affect each other, even though so far, the most accredited theory is that individuals tend to transfer their evaluation of national-level issues to the international scenario (Campbell et al., 1960; Clark & Rohrschneider, 2009).

This paper aimed at investigating whether the opposite was a possible pattern of decision-making, as guided by the mere exposure heuristic, according to which just by getting exposed to something, people enhance their attitude toward it. This hypothesis was tested on the issue of regional autonomy by means of an experiment conducted with Italians. The relevant political events Italy has been through in the past two years suggest that the issue of regional autonomy has become increasingly salient in the Italian political agenda, which made Italy a good case for the development of this analysis. Hypotheses 1 and 2 of the analysis were that being exposed to arguments in favor or against regional autonomy and centralization in a foreign country would make the participants more inclined to adopt the view they were exposed to when came similar issues in their own country. The experiment had three groups, including two different treatments, and a placebo. The treatments were directly linked to, respectively, Spanish culture and Catalan culture, to check for the potential mediating factor of the cultural distance in the realization of the mere exposure effect that had been hypothesized (as formulated in Hypothesis 3).

Results did not confirm the hypotheses to the extent that was expected, as no statistically significant predictor was found when the reference category for the treatment variable was the control group. In other words, according to our results, being given a certain treatment, as opposed to the control condition, doesn't seem to explain the variation in attitudes toward regional autonomy. However, when taking the groups exposed to the different treatment conditions, our results indicate that the difference in treatment does explain a percentage of the variation in attitudes. Along this line of reasoning, the effect of mere exposure was found on one of the statements meant to form the index of support to regional autonomy; it was the statement that was eventually dropped from the index as it happened to be different from the others, probably because it sounded more moderate and did not convey the idea of a strong political stand in the centralization vs. regional autonomy arena. It was more of a value-related statement, not strictly connected to an idea of policy measures to be applied. In other words, it did not have the prescriptive and normative nature that could be found in the other six statements.

As for why the outlined expectations could not find strong confirmation in the data, we identified more

than one potential explanation. A first option is the nature of the experiment itself. Given that the topic had been discussed a lot in Italy and that the respondents might already have had an opinion on the issue before taking part in the experiment, the results obtained may suggest that mere exposure to the treatment was not enough to affect their stands, maybe to avoid falling in a situation of cognitive dissonance with respect to the previously formed opinion. In this case, a conceivable alternative path for future research in this direction could be opting for a distinct procedure and type of experiment, maybe by providing a stronger and more lasting exposure to the treatment, and/or by identifying a more effective way of wording the statements, in order to make the respondents perceive all of them as moderate, or as proper value-judgement rather than policy prescriptions. This could also avoid the risk of having them answering following other kind of shortcuts.

A second option is the choice of the reference cultures for the treatment. Choosing the dichotomy Spain-Catalonia allowed us to identify two cultures without having to select two countries, so avoiding the risk that participants would have a different level of knowledge about them, which in turn could affect their degree of biased-thinking. However, a potential issue might have been precisely the fact that Catalonia belongs to Spain. One may doubt that people actually perceive it as something different or separated. What if Spanish culture is part of the Catalan culture? Isn't Catalan culture sort of embedded in the Spanish one? Far from attempting to answer rather complex questions like these, the point here is that the fact that one's perception of foreign cultures tends to be intrinsically subjective might be the very reason why the results did not go consistently in the direction expected.

Nonetheless, a mere exposure effect was found on the reaction to a statement that somehow managed to distinguish itself from the others, for its moderate and mild nature. Six statements out of seven happened to be worded in such a way to present the respondent to an aut-aut situation. Declaring that centralization should be fostered or that some regions in Italy should be given more autonomy can be associated to some of the political stands that actors take in the everyday political scenario in Italy nowadays when covering the issue. Those sentences resemble the kind of sentences that one might happen to listen to in a politician's speech or read in a party's manifesto. They seem to have either a prescriptive (suggesting a course of action) or normative nature (clearly expressing a value judgement on whether a given situation is desirable or not). Eventually, they sound like strong political stands and it might be that the respondents' opinion on them was not to be affected because it was already

well-formed and firm in that sense. On the other hand, the statement for which an effect was found could actually be perceived just like a no-strings-attached opinion that one is free to agree or disagree with, notwithstanding one's previous political stands on centralization and regional autonomy. That statement might be the one which shows that there is not always space for mere exposure to affect people's attitudes, especially if other forces are acting in people's minds—cognitive dissonance, for instance.

Finally, the analysis of interaction between treatment conditions and perception of cultural distance between Catalonia, Spain and Italy revealed some interesting findings. Although, once again, comparing the treatment conditions to the control group did not reveal any statistically significant results. The graphic representation of predicted probabilities for this interaction was crucial to highlight how being exposed to arguments in favor of Catalan independentism and, at the same time, considering Catalan culture relatively close and Spanish culture relatively far, translated into support to regional autonomy in Italy; and being exposed to the same arguments but having opposite sentiments of closeness to those two cultures reverted the attitude toward regional autonomy. The same mechanism applied for the single statement: solely among those who read seven reasons why Catalonia should be independent, sympathizing for Catalan culture more than for Spanish culture made the respondent deny that Italy keeps its national unity despite its regional differences; while those in the same group, who sympathized more with the Spanish culture and less with the Catalan one, were more inclined to support this argument.

### Conclusion

Sentiments of independentism and regional autonomy are shaking several European countries nowadays, making us wonder how people get to feel the need to challenge the status quo and strive to get something that requires substantial effort. And once the challenge is settled by those who wanted it, how do all the others react to this? How do they take a stand?

This analysis stemmed from the idea that, given citizens' diffuse lack of political knowledge and their tendency to take political stands through the use of heuristics, they might indeed use mere exposure to information on a foreign issue as a mental shortcut to express an opinion on a similar domestic issue—especially if they consider the foreign country or culture involved to be quite close to their domestic reality.

The question was investigated by means of an online survey experiment conducted with 300 Italian adult citizens, randomly exposed to three different stimuli. The experiment showed that (1) mere and short-lasting exposure in the form of a brief text only had the hypothesized effect for a mild statement more similar to a value judgment, suggesting that in front of a potentially firmer political stance on a policy issue, either a more effective and enduring exposure is needed or other types of heuristics are more likely to dominate the human mind; and that (2) psychic distance might mediate the effect of mere exposure, when people sympathize strongly to one culture at the expense of the other.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>A study conducted by Sousa and Bradley (2008) clearly shows how these two concepts tend to be used interchangeably with no clear distinction and a large number of studies actually fail at outlining the different properties of both.

<sup>2</sup>Alternative name for Po valley, a plan in Northern Italy, that includes parts of some Northern regions and the most developed areas of the country.

<sup>3</sup>Considering this as a preliminary study, it might be useful to collect further information in order to add to *gender* and *age* other control variables aimed at measuring participants' claimant tendencies or personality traits that might have an influence on the way they assessed the statements.

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