

# A Survey-Embedded Experiment on the Effect of Coalition Signals\*

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## Abstract

A number of recent works has shown how coalition signals and expectations on the likely post-election coalition-building behavior of parties can influence citizens voting behavior and, more specifically, foster strategic voting in multiparty PR systems. In this paper we build on this recent literature and present the results of two survey experiments run in the context of a regional level real election campaign in Spain. We use the experimental approach to assess to what extent the emission of coalition signals in either direction has the ability to influence party image, its perceived left-right placement, and voting intention both for old and new parties. Our design provides us with the ability to robustly test some recent theories on coalition-directed voting in an experimental framework embedded in a real campaign. Results show how coalition signals can influence the party image and vote intention, especially for new parties.

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# 1 Introduction

How do the coalition signals’ parties often send prior to the election influence their image, perceived ideological position and electoral prospects? Do voters use these signals as shortcuts to where the party stands, and does this influence their voting intentions? In order to address these questions, we present a survey-embedded experiment that manipulates the coalition signals of two different parties in the context of a real election campaign –the 2015 regional election in Valencia, Spain)–. We presented respondents with randomly varying vignettes in which different suggestions for a party post-election coalition preferences were offered, and measured reported probability of voting, perceived left-right placement and party images (in terms of honesty and office-seekingness relative to policy-seekingness).

The experiment takes advantage of a highly uncertain political scenario in which several post-election coalitions could be presented as plausible to the survey respondents. Moreover, the emergence of new parties in the Spanish party system allows us to compare the effect of coalition signals for an established party (PSOE) and for a new one (*Ciudadanos*). Eventual differences shall be illuminating in terms of the underlying mechanisms through which voters assess different parties in response to coalition signals.

Therefore, the contribution of this paper is threefold. First, from a methodological point of view, we propose to identify the effect of pre-electoral coalition signals through a survey experiment embedded in a real election campaign. This strategy allows to construct the relevant counterfactual to coalition signals while simultaneously maintain a greater external validity than studies that use alternative experimental settings.

Second, unlike other works, in order to evaluate the effect of coalition signals we do not restrict our attention to voting behavior only. Information over which partners do parties favor is likely to influence voters’ perceptions over various party images, regardless of whether or not the voter is willing to change his vote choice in the short run. The effect of pre-electoral information of coalitions-to-form might be underestimated if voting behavior is the only dependent variable being assessed.

Third, literature on coalition signals has not considered the possibility that the effect

of coalition signals is heterogeneous across parties. In particular, we focus on new vs traditional parties. The intuition is that voters' opinions about new parties will be more sensitive to receiving coalition signals that refer to these parties because previous information of their political commitments is scarce.

Results give support to this intuition. The manipulations have a clearer effect in almost all relevant outcomes on the new party than the established one, whose image seems, in general, less volatile. Coalition signals seem to have an effect on the perceived position in the left-right dimension for both parties and, for *Ciudadanos*, also on its image of honesty and office-seekingness and propensity to vote for the party.

In the next section, we present our expectations in the context of the literature on the topic. Section 3 is devoted to the presentation of the empirical strategy and experimental design. In section 4, we discuss the results and, finally, we conclude our paper with some final remarks and suggestions for further research.

## 2 The Effects of Coalition Signals on Voters' Perceptions and Behavior toward Parties: Expectations

Scholarly interest on the causes and consequences of pre-electoral coalition pacts and rejections has not emerged until recently. The most prominent example of this flourishing literature is perhaps Golder (2005, 2006a,b), who takes them as a dependent variable and provides an account of the conditions under which pre-electoral coalitions are more likely to emerge.

As an independent variable, pre-electoral coalition commitments have been said to exert an influence on government formation processes as they represent a self-imposed constraint to which parties have tied up their hands (e.g. Strøm, Budge and Laver, 1994; Martin and Stevenson, 2001; Geys, Heyndels and Vermeir, 2006). Recent studies show, for instance, that the formation of pre-electoral coalitions independently affect the likelihood of post-electoral coalitions. Some theoretical works have shown that, in equilibrium, reaching a coalition understanding before elections conditions post-electoral

negotiations between parties (e.g. [Bandyopadhyay, Chatterjee and Sjoström, 2009](#)).

This point has been also addressed empirically. [Debus \(2009\)](#) finds that, even after controlling for obvious endogeneity issues that relate to the parties' anticipation of post-electoral bargaining at the pre-electoral stage, pre-electoral pacts and/or rejections significantly impact what agreements are more likely to be reached after elections. Similar conclusions have been reached in experimental settings: Announcing coalition intentions before elections makes the formation of certain coalitions more likely than if these pre-electoral preferences had not been disclosed beforehand ([Goodin, Güth and Sausgruber, 2008](#)).

Other studies have argued that pre-electoral coalition signals shape voters' behavior. Given that the policies that are pursued by a coalition between parties are presumably different than the policies that would be pursued by any of the coalition members separately, voters' calculus about which party is best to vote for will not only depend on their preferences for specific parties but also (or rather) on their preferences and expectations for coalitions ([Linhart, 2009](#)). Evidence in favor of the fact that voters take coalition preferences and expectations into their vote decision function has mounted over recent years, both using observational data (e.g. [Kedar, 2005](#); [Bargsted and Kedar, 2009](#); [Blais et al., 2006](#); [Duch, May and Armstrong, 2010](#); [Meffert and Gschwend, 2010](#); [Meffert et al., 2011](#)) and experimental designs (e.g. [McCuen and Morton, 2010](#)).

But how do voters react when parties actually send coalition signals before elections? These signals are meant to provide information on which coalitions parties prefer and hence which governments are more or less likely to form after elections. Therefore, pre-electoral coalition commitments should influence a voter party choice because they become better informed about what future government they are favoring by voting a particular party.

As convincing as the argument may sound, empirical evidence casts doubt as to whether the effect is present at all. Laboratory experimental results show that only a very limited share of voters use information on parties' coalition intentions to vote strategically or insincerely ([Meffert and Gschwend, 2011](#); [Goodin, Güth and Sausgruber,](#)

2008). Clearer effects are found when coalition intentions are materialized in the form of a pre-electoral coalition where various parties present a joint list in elections. In these cases, but only under certain additional conditions, a voter may abandon his preferred party if it joined a pre-electoral coalition that the voter sufficiently dislikes (Gschwend and Hooghe, 2008).

To sum up, although it has been documented that voters' choices at the polls are shaped by coalition preferences and expectations, it is far less clear that actual coalition signals sent during campaign exert any significant influence. In this paper we further examine this relationship and put forward a series of expectations that are dependent on the position of the voter vis-à-vis the party to which the signal refers. More concretely, we expect coalition signals to exert an effect on the propensity to vote for a given party depending on whether the announced coalition is closer to or farther from the voter's position. Clearly, a voter will more positively evaluate the party if it signals it will strike a deal with a partner to the left (right) if the voter is also to the left (right) of the party. On the other hand, if the party rules out ex ante any potential coalition, we expect no effect, on average, on the propensity to vote for a party (the effect for those that would prefer a right-wing vs. a left-wing coalition will cancel each other out). To summarize, we expect the following:

Expectation 1a A coalition signal indicating that a party rules out participating in any possible coalition with other parties will *not* affect the propensity to vote for the party.

Expectation 1b A coalition signal indicating that a party is going to form a post-electoral coalition with a partner to its right will *increase* the propensity to vote for that party the more the voter is to the right of the party.

Expectation 1c A coalition signal indicating that a party is going to form a post-electoral coalition with a partner to its left will *decrease* the propensity to vote for that party the more the voter is to the right of the party.

Apart from our expectations on voting behavior, one of the main contributions of this paper is to widen the scope of previous analyses and focus on the effect of coalition signals on a number of other perceptions and attitudes toward parties.

We still know fairly little about the process by which voters form and update their perceptions of where parties' stand. The main conclusion of recent empirical research on the issue is that, in general, voters' opinions seem to be more responsive to parties' actions than to rhetorical shifts (Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu, 2011; Adams, 2012; Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014). Voters adjust their perceptions of parties in response to the policies they implement (Lupu, 2014), the roll-call votes they cast (Hetherington, 2001; Grynaviski, 2010), or the leadership changes they make (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2015).

Coalition behavior has recently been found to reshape party images as well. Fortunato and Stevenson (2013), for instance, offer evidence indicating that coalition membership centripetally shifts the perceived positions of government members, although the scope conditions of these adjustments seem to depend on the type of party (Fortunato and Adams, 2015) and the viability of coalition alternatives (Falcó-Gimeno and Fernandez-Vazquez, 2015). From a theoretical point of view, this literature rests on the assumption that the choice of a partner serves voters as an heuristic to adjust their beliefs over the "true" nature of parties (see also Adams, Ezrow and Wleizen, 2015).

In a context with at least some uncertainty about where a party really stands and which are its political commitments, voters trying to figure out the real position of a party may count on coalition signals. Therefore, in line with the findings of previous studies on the effect of coalition membership (not signals), we should expect the following:

Expectation 2a A coalition signal indicating that a party rules out participating in any possible coalition with other parties will *not* move the perceived position of the party toward the left or toward the right.

Expectation 2b A coalition signal indicating that a party is going to form a post-electoral coalition with a party to its right will move the perceived position of the party toward the *right*.

Expectation 2c A coalition signal indicating that a party is going to form a post-electoral coalition with a party to its left will move the perceived position of the party toward the *left*.

So far we know that coalition behavior (i.e. signals or actual membership) shape, to some extent, voters' electoral behavior (i.e. party choice) and voters' perceptions of party positions. However, evidence is sparse, if not absent, as to what extent coalition signals affect other kinds of party images. This is particularly shocking given that there is abundant literature on the conflicting goals of parties when they have to decide between office, policy, or votes (e.g. Müller and Strøm, 1999). In particular, if it is true that a conflict exists between these three objectives, it must be because sometimes seeking office requires the adoption of political strategies that voters may deplore. Among them, the process of choosing coalition partners in order to reach office is likely to be fundamental.

A fairly direct way to test the implications of this argument is to evaluate the effect that coalition signals have on voters' perceptions of parties' office- vs. policy- "seekingness". In principle one should expect that announcing the intention to coalesce with other parties will make voters' more prone to see office as the top priority of the party. By contrast, a signal indicating that the party *ex ante* rules out any possibility to pact with other parties after elections should increase the perception of the ideological "purity" of the party in the sense that office considerations would never come at the expense of policy priorities.<sup>1</sup> Hence, our third group of expectations is the following:

Expectation 3a A coalition signal indicating that a party rules out participating in any possible coalition with other parties will make the party to be perceived as *more* policy-seeking.

Expectation 3b A coalition signal indicating that a party is going to form a post-

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<sup>1</sup>It is true that, from a theoretical point of view, there is nothing in the decision to join a coalition that is intrinsically less policy-seeking than staying in opposition. The latter decision may well entail the formation of a government that implements policies that are farther from the ideal points of the party than they would have been had the party entered a coalition. Nonetheless, in this paper we assume office and policy priorities to present a trade-off for parties (at least in the minds of voters). Hence, there are reasons to believe that a government coalition signal will weigh in the office-seekingness image of the party (and, by extension, downgrade its policy-seeking image).

electoral coalition with a party to its right will make the party to be perceived as *less* policy-seeking.

Expectation 3c A coalition signal indicating that a party is going to form a post-electoral coalition with a party to its left will make the party to be perceived as *less* policy-seeking.

By the same token, coalition signals should also have an effect on how voters assess parties from a moral point of view. If coalition commitments are seen as a way to prioritize the access to office spoils, then voters should adjust their perceptions over the honesty of the party in response to coalition signals. Although it is true that the moral standards by which a party is judged are anything but transparent, it is ultimately an empirical claim whether or not parties' coalition strategies shape the moral image of parties. In any case, consistently with our previous set of expectations, we conjecture the following:

Expectation 4a A coalition signal indicating that a party rules out participating in any possible coalition with other parties will make the party to be perceived as *more* honest.

Expectation 4b A coalition signal indicating that a party is going to form a post-electoral coalition with a party to its right will make the party to be perceived as *less* honest.

Expectation 4c A coalition signal indicating that a party is going to form a post-electoral coalition with a party to its left will make the party to be perceived as *less* honest.

It can be seen that there is nothing in the expectations above that limit their applicability to specific parties. The influence of coalition signals on vote choice, position perception, and other party images rests on general arguments that in principle applies to all political parties. However, the rationale behind these arguments is actually one of heuristics, where coalition signals provide voters with relevant information about parties'



political priorities and hence adjust their perceptions and behavior accordingly. If so, the heuristic significance of such a signal may be conditional on whether voters have more or less prior information about the party. That is, whether voters are judging an “old” party with a heavy load of past history or a “new” party with little or no background.

Research on new parties has almost exclusively concentrated on what determines their emergence and their electoral success (e.g. Harmel, 1985; Harmel and Robertson, 1985; Hug, 2001; Tavits, 2006, 2008; Lago and Martínez, 2011), and the associated methodological problems (e.g. Hug, 2000; Selb and Pituctin, 2009). To our knowledge, though, previous studies have not considered the possibility that the image of these parties is more sensitive to any heuristic information that voters may receive about their commitments and priorities. Old parties, on the contrary, have a history of decisions of all sorts that weigh heavily in their reputation. In fact, the very concept of reputation refers to the common opinion that people have about someone or something based on the actions that precede him, her, or it. It is clearly the case that voters have less information about the decisions that precede a new party and that the marginal value of a coalition signal to build its reputation is larger for new parties than for old parties. Hence, the last set of expectations actually offer meta-conjectures that apply to all previous expectations:

Expectation 5a A coalition signal indicating that a party rules out participating in any possible coalition with other parties will have a *stronger* effect on voters’ behavior and perceptions toward a new party than toward an old party.

Expectation 5b A coalition signal indicating that a party is going to form a post-electoral coalition with a party to its right will have a *stronger* effect on voters’ behavior and perceptions toward a new party than toward an old party.

Expectation 5c A coalition signal indicating that a party is going to form a post-electoral coalition with a party to its left will have a *stronger* effect on voters’ behavior and perceptions toward a new party than toward an old party.

### 3 Identification Strategy: A Survey-Embedded Experiment

Identifying the causal impact of a coalition signal requires comparing what happens under an actual event –a coalition signal, positive or negative, in one direction or another– with what would have occurred under a hypothetical situation –the absence of a coalition– (Decker and Best, 2010). This is why research on coalition signals has resorted to experimental designs where the treatment –a coalition (non-)signal– can be manipulated holding the rest of variables constant. However, that often comes at the expense of generalizability. Convenience samples of students, frequently not embedded in real contextual conditions, are the norm.

In this paper, we pursued a different (also experimental) strategy. We conducted an experiment embedded in a survey, fielded in the context of a real election campaign. This design allows us to preserve our ability to identify the causal effect of the coalition signal while increasing the external validity of laboratory experiments with student samples, both in terms of the sample characteristics and the realism of the setting and stimuli.

#### 3.1 The context

We used the 2015 campaign for the regional government of Valencia as a setting. We chose this case because it allowed us to realistically treat the coalition signals of a new and an established party. After 20 years of government by the right-wing Popular Party, pre-election polls suggested a more fragmented scenario. The Popular Party (PP) was generally expected to lose about half of its votes. Its main rival, the Socialist Party (PSOE), was also expected to suffer considerable losses, whereas the leftist-valencian nationalist *Compromís* was expected to gain significant support. Moreover, all the polls pointed to the emergence of two new political parties (the left-wing *Podemos* and the center/center-right *Ciudadanos*). All in all, the expectations pointed to a fragmented regional parliament, and several post-election coalitions were seen as plausible ex-ante.

Most of the coalition-related discussion revolved around a possible leftist coalition

of the Socialists with *Compromís* and *Podemos*. However, the socialists consciously avoided being too explicit about that. The emerging liberal party *Ciudadanos* (Cs), for whom the media tended to expect an eventual agreement with the PP, also played the ambiguity card during the campaign.

Besides the discussion on the post-election coalitions, the campaign was essentially dominated by a series of corruption scandals affecting the incumbent PP. During the campaign some key PP officials had to face accusations of accepting bribes and, among others, the provincial leader of the party was formally expelled by the regional committee. Apart from corruption, the poor economic situation of the region as well as the sharp public spending cuts implemented by the regional government were the most contested issues. The combination of poor economic performance, harsh austerity, and corruption was generally regarded as driving the expected losses for the governing right-wing party.

After the election, the PP lost its absolute majority, and an agreement with Cs did not reach the absolute majority in the Valencian parliament (something that was thought to be unlikely *ex ante*). There was no minimum winning coalition of two parties, and any agreement had to incorporate at least three actors. Negotiations among the leftist parties started right after the election, although the Socialist Party also made explicit the possibility of making an agreement with Cs with the abstention of the PP to bypass the leftist agreement. In the end, the PSOE and *Compromís* did form a government coalition, and reached a programmatic agreement with *Podemos* that granted parliamentary support for the new government.

## 3.2 Experimental design

Taking advantage of such an uncertainty regarding the coalition choices of the various parties, we designed an experiment in which we manipulated the suggested favorite coalition strategy of two parties: The established PSOE and the new party Cs. We chose these two parties because both offered the possibility of making credible statements about a range of post-election coalition preferences: No coalition, a coalition towards their right, and a coalition towards their left. Other parties had an a priori more limited range of

Table 1: Treatment structure

	Ciudadanos	PSOE
<b>Rule out</b>	$T_1A$	$T_1B$
<b>Right-leaning coalition</b>	$T_2A$	$T_2B$
<b>Left-leaning coalition</b>	$T_3A$	$T_3B$
<b>Control</b>	Placebo	

plausible options and did not have potential partners further to the left or further to the right.

For each party, we presented the respondents with a randomly varying vignette in which political analysts suggested that the party was either not willing to form or join any coalition after the election (*Rule Out* treatment), or that it was intending to join a coalition, both with parties on its right (Cs is the right-leaning partner for the PSOE, and the PP is the rightist partner for Cs) and its left (the PSOE is the leftist partner for Cs, and a combination of left-wing parties for the PSOE).

The experiment also included a control group that received a placebo text stating that there would be a regional election. The purpose of the placebo was to control for the regional election priming effect of the treatments, and be able to identify with precision the effect of the coalition signals, net of the confounding effect of simply priming the specific election and the regional arena.

In Table 1 we present the basic structure of the 4x2 design.

### 3.3 Sample and vignettes

The experiment was fielded during the May 24th regional and local election campaign (from May 12th to May 18th) to an on-line sample of 1,000 respondents from the Valencia region. Given that there were 7 treatment groups, this amounts to an average of 143 respondents per group. The sample was extracted from the on-line commercial panel of the Netquest company. This is an access panel, that does not allow volun-

tary registration. Respondents are invited into the panel by the company, and receive a compensation for their participation.<sup>2</sup> In the sampling process, we introduced age and education quotas to reduce the bias of on-line samples towards the younger and most educated. Despite these quotas, the sample still under-represents older voters, especially the over-65.<sup>3</sup>

The vignettes were conceived to make a credible claim that the party would favor one specific coalition strategy after the election. In order to avoid outright deception, the claim was attributed to undefined political analysts. We therefore avoided to make up fake party statements due to ethical considerations. However, the analysts' judgment was presented as being based on the party representatives' gestures. While this is not, of course, a signal directly sent by the party, the formulation of the treatment vignettes can be considered as a coalition signal under a non-strict definition, since they can provide "reliable clues about which potential coalition partners a party implicitly prefers" (Decker and Best, 2010, 168). The differences observed between  $T_2B$  and  $T_3A$ , that refer to the same coalition (PSOE-Cs) but to signals sent by different parties shows that we are treating not only coalition expectations, but also *signals*.

The text was accompanied by the party logo and, in the case of the coalition treatments, also the logos of the other party mentioned in the text as a potential partner in order to make the treatment more visible. The headlines of every vignette can be found in Table 2, while the original vignettes and complete texts (original and translated) are offered in the appendix.

### 3.4 Outcome variables

According to the expected effects of the coalition signals, we measured left-right placement of parties, declared probability of voting for each party (Propensity To Vote, PTV) and two aspects of party images: The perceived degree of office-seekingness (vis à vis policy-seekingness) and the perceived honesty.

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<sup>2</sup>For detailed information on the sample, see their [Panel Book](#).

<sup>3</sup>Details on the characteristics of the sample can be provided by the authors upon request.

Table 2: Treatment headlines

	<b>Ciudadanos</b>	<b>PSOE</b>
<b>Rule out</b>	Analysts suggest that Ciudadanos will not make any agreement after the election	Analysts suggest that the PSPV-PSOE will not make any agreement after the election
<b>Right-leaning coalition</b>	Analysts suggest a possible agreement of Ciudadanos with the PP	Analysts suggest a possible agreement of the PSPV-PSOE with Ciudadanos
<b>Left-leaning coalition</b>	Analysts suggest a possible agreement of Ciudadanos with the PSPV-PSOE	Analysts suggest a possible agreement of the PSPV-PSOE with Compromís, EUPV and Podemos
<b>Control</b>	The Valencian Parliament, renewed	

NOTE: Body of the treatment articles in the appendix.

Left-right placement was measured through a 0-10 scale, where 0 means extreme left and 10 extreme right. The PTV for each party was also measured through a 0-10 scale, in which the lower bound 0 was labeled as ‘I would never vote for this party’ and the upper bound 10 ‘I am sure I will vote for this party’ in the upcoming regional elections.

In order to measure policy-seekingness, we employed a 5 point scale, in which respondents could choose, for each party, one of the following options:

1. Its top priority is reaching office
2. It is mostly concerned about reaching office, but it also cares about its political platform
3. It is mostly concerned about its political platform, although it also cares about reaching office
4. Its top priority is its political platform

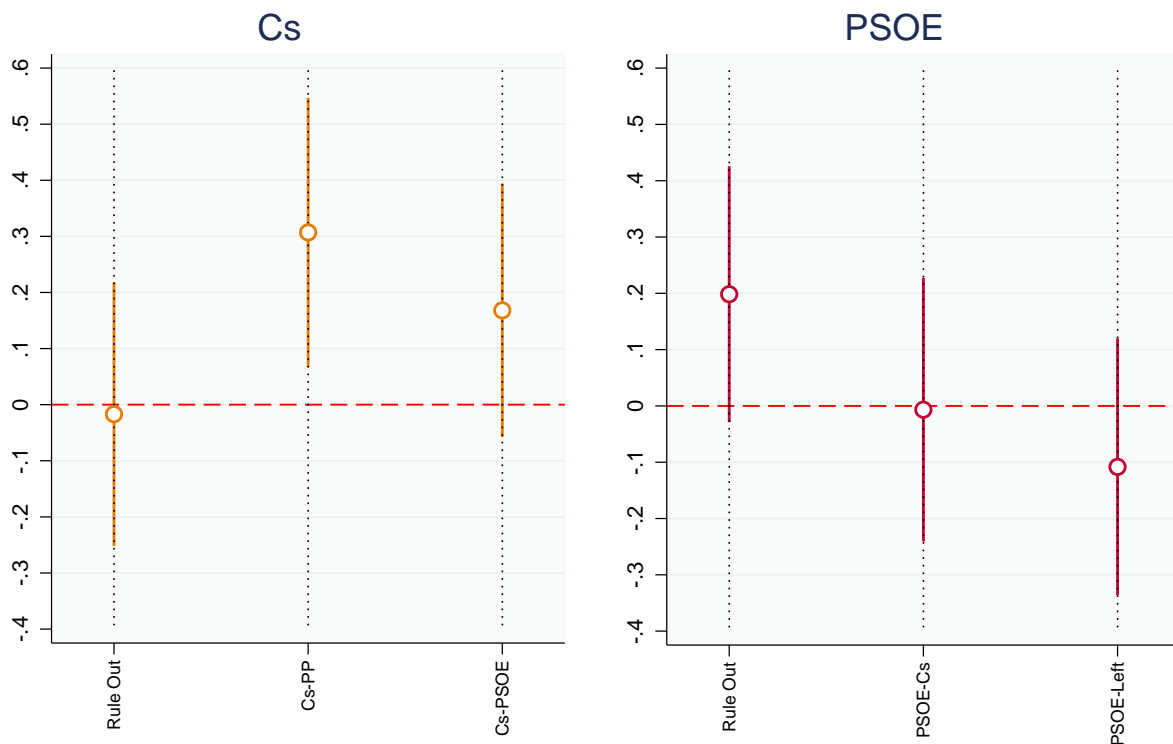
Perceived honesty was measured, for each party, in a 4-point scale ranging from "Very honest" to "Not honest at all".

## 4 Results

In this section we offer the results of our experiment. We present the marginal effect of each treatment relative to the placebo together with its 95% CI in order to show, synthetically, the treatment effect.

Regarding the first set of expectations, we expected that a right-leaning coalition signal would have a positive effect in the probability to vote for the party among those voters placed to the right, and a left-leaning one would attract voters to the left of the party. In figure 1 we present the marginal effect of ideological distance (self-placement – party placement) in the reported probability to vote for each party.

Figure 1: Propensities to Vote (95% CI, marginal effects distance to party by treatment vs placebo)



We can see how when the possibility of a coalition between Cs and the PP is suggested as likely, this has a positive effect on the probability to vote for Cs the more to the right is the voter with respect to the party. Surprisingly, though, a left-leaning coalition signal does not have the opposite effect: We would have expected a negative marginal effect indicating that the more to the right is the voter, the lower the likelihood to vote for the party when the signal is one of a left-of-the-center coalition. Ruling out any coalition, on the other hand, seems to be innocuous in terms of voting intention. Finally, in the case of the PSOE, no treatment reaches statistical significance, although the *rule out* treatment makes distance toward the right to have a slightly more positive effect than in the case of the placebo.

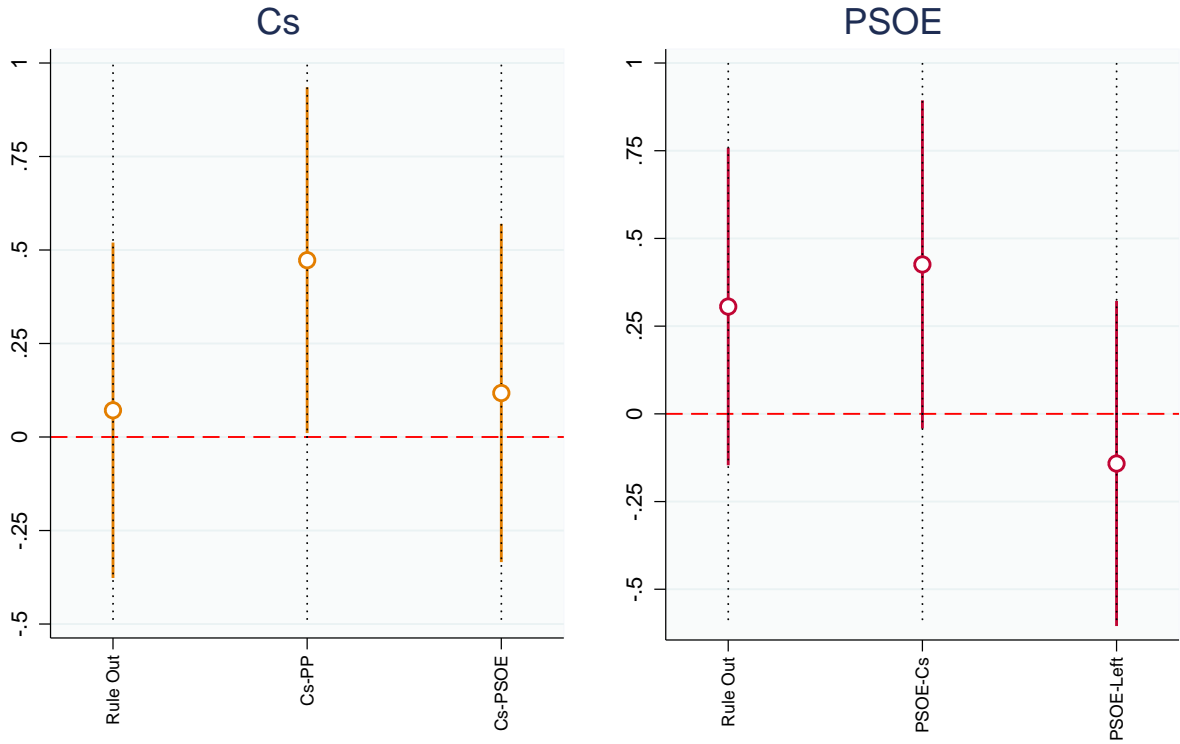
The second set of expectations referred to the ideological placement of parties. We were expecting that a coalition signal sent by a party would move its perceived left-right position closer to the suggested coalition partner. Therefore, we expect that signaling a coalition with a party perceived to be further to the right would move the perceived position of a party to its right, and a left-leaning signal would have the opposite effect. By contrast, ruling out a coalition should not make a difference. In figure 2 we show how, for *Ciudadanos*, the suggestion that it might make an agreement with the right-wing PP has indeed the expected effect. On average, it is placed almost half point further to the right in the 0-10 left-right scale. On the contrary, ruling out any coalition or suggesting an agreement with the Socialist Party does not make any difference with respect to the control group.

For the Socialist Party, we find a rather similar pattern. Signaling an agreement with Cs does move its perceived position to the right, while signaling a left-wing coalition does not seem to produce an update in respondents' priors with respect to the Socialists' ideological stance. In this case, on the other hand, ruling out any coalition whatsoever does have an almost significant effect on the party's perceived position.

It should be noted that, with respect to the left-right position, we did not find remarkable differences between the old and the new party. The magnitude and direction of the effects is rather similar across the two cases, although the effect reaches standard



Figure 2: Ideological Placement (95% CI, marginal effects vs placebo)

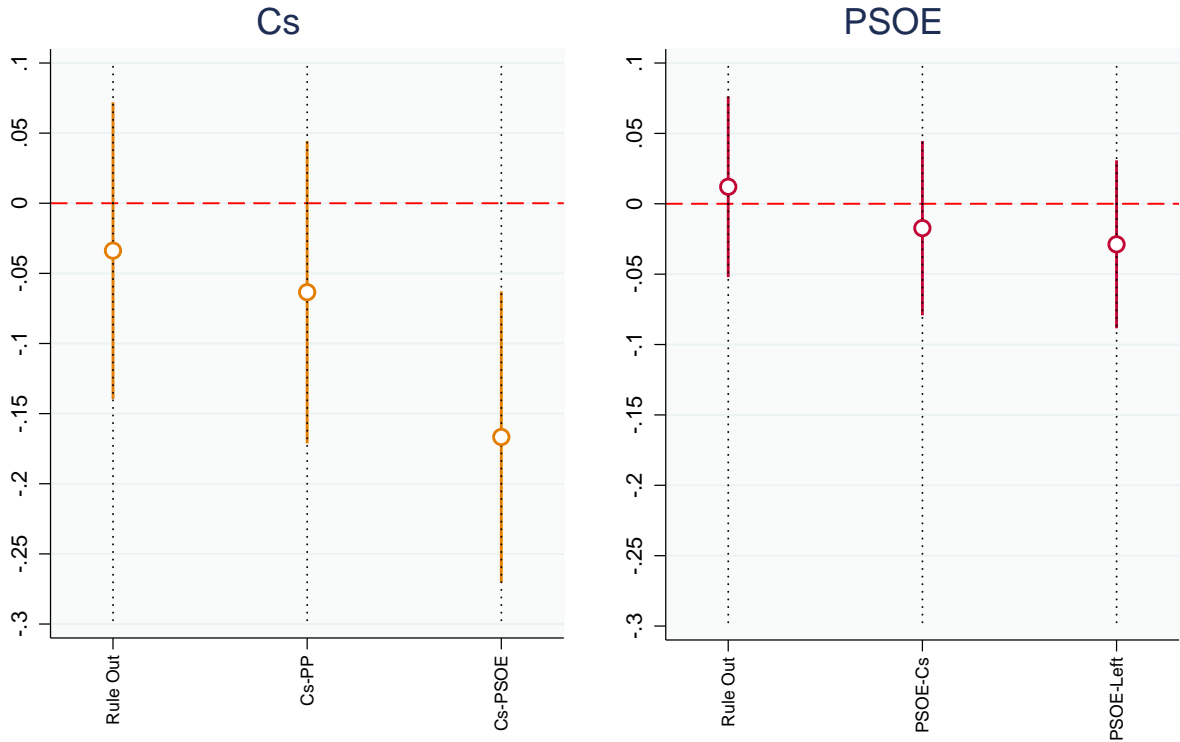


levels of statistical significance for *Ciudadanos* and not for the *PSOE*.

The third and fourth set of expectations had to do with party images. We expect that a signal indicating that a party is willing to form any coalition after the election would make voters perceive it as more office-seeking and less honest. On the contrary, ruling out any coalition should have the opposite effect, and signal the party as more honest and more policy-seeking. We also expected the effect to be stronger for the new party than for the established one. Figure 3 and 4 represent the treatment effects over these two outcomes.

With regards to the perception of honesty, we see in the first place that the treatments do not have any effect on the Socialist Party image. In the case of Cs, on the contrary, there is indeed one clear effect: Suggesting that it would make an agreement with the PSOE makes the new party to be perceived as less honest. Interestingly enough, the signal of a possible coalition with the PP does not affect the party image. This is rather

Figure 3: Honesty (95% CI, marginal effects vs placebo)



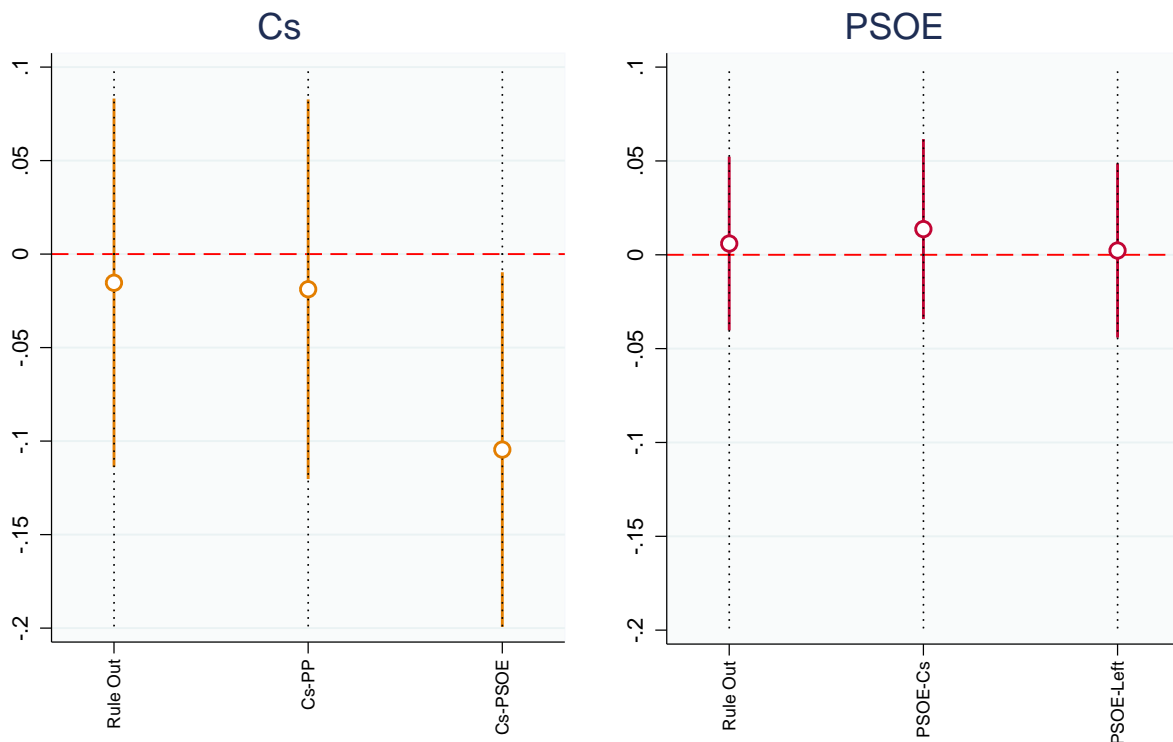
surprising, given that it is the PP in the region that has been the most affected by corruption scandals. However, this finding can be understood in a Bayesian framework: given that the ex-ante expectation for a majority (60%)<sup>4</sup> of the respondents was an agreement between Cs and the PP, the treatment does not update their priors and therefore it does not change their perception of the party.

The same pattern emerges in the policy-seekingness measure. The coalition signals do not change the socialist party image, while only the counter-intuitive treatment *Cs-PSOE* has an effect on respondents' perception of *Ciudadanos*. When exposed to this treatment, respondents tend to see the new party as less policy-seeking (and more office-seeking) than in the other conditions. Again, it seems that coalition signals only affect party images when there is more uncertainty about where the party stands (as in the case of new parties) and when the treatment is counter-intuitive. Note that in these

<sup>4</sup>See manipulation checks in the next section.

two cases, the variance of perceived honesty and policy-seekingness of Cs is much higher than the Socialist Party.

Figure 4: Policy-Seekingness (95% CI, marginal effects vs placebo)



#### 4.1 Manipulation check

In order to grasp whether our manipulations did have an effect on respondents' expectations of post-election coalitions, we included a manipulation check in the experimental questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire, we asked our respondents which coalition behavior they thought would be more likely for each party. In table 3 and figure 5 we can see how the vignettes did affect significantly the expectations of post-election coalition behavior of Cs ( $\chi^2=67.99$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and had a more modest effect, though still significant, for the socialist party ( $\chi^2=28.22$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

In the placebo condition, 60% expected a Cs-PP agreement, 18% a Cs-PSOE coalition and 21% did not expect Cs to join any coalition whatsoever. Under the rule out

Table 3: Manipulation checks. Treatments by post-treatment expectations. Row percentages and adjusted residuals

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		<b>Expect. Cs-PP</b>	<b>Expect. Cs-PSOE</b>	<b>Expect. Alone</b>	
<b>CIUDADANOS</b>	Treatments	Placebo	60.27	18.49	21.23
			[0.048]	[1.155]	[-1.029]
	Alone	45.33	14.00	40.67	
		[-4.299]	[-0.593]	[5.401]	
	Cs-PP	84.96	3.76	11.28	
		[6.679]	[-4.270]	[-4.017]	
	Cs-PSOE	52.41	24.83	22.76	
		[-2.188]	[3.587]	[-0.529]	

*Pearson  $\chi^2=67.99, p<.001$*

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		<b>Expect. PSOE-Cs</b>	<b>Expect. PSOE-Left</b>	<b>Expect. Alone</b>	
<b>PSOE</b>	Treatments	Placebo	26.03	62.33	11.64
			[0.664]	[0.517]	[-1.483]
	Alone	18.18	62.34	19.48	
		[-1.976]	[0.539]	[1.605]	
	PSOE-Cs	37.04	45.19	17.78	
		[4.055]	[-4.167]	[0.844]	
	PSOE-Left	15.71	71.43	12.86	
		[-2.639]	[3.035]	[-0.986]	

*Pearson  $\chi^2=28.22, p<.001$*

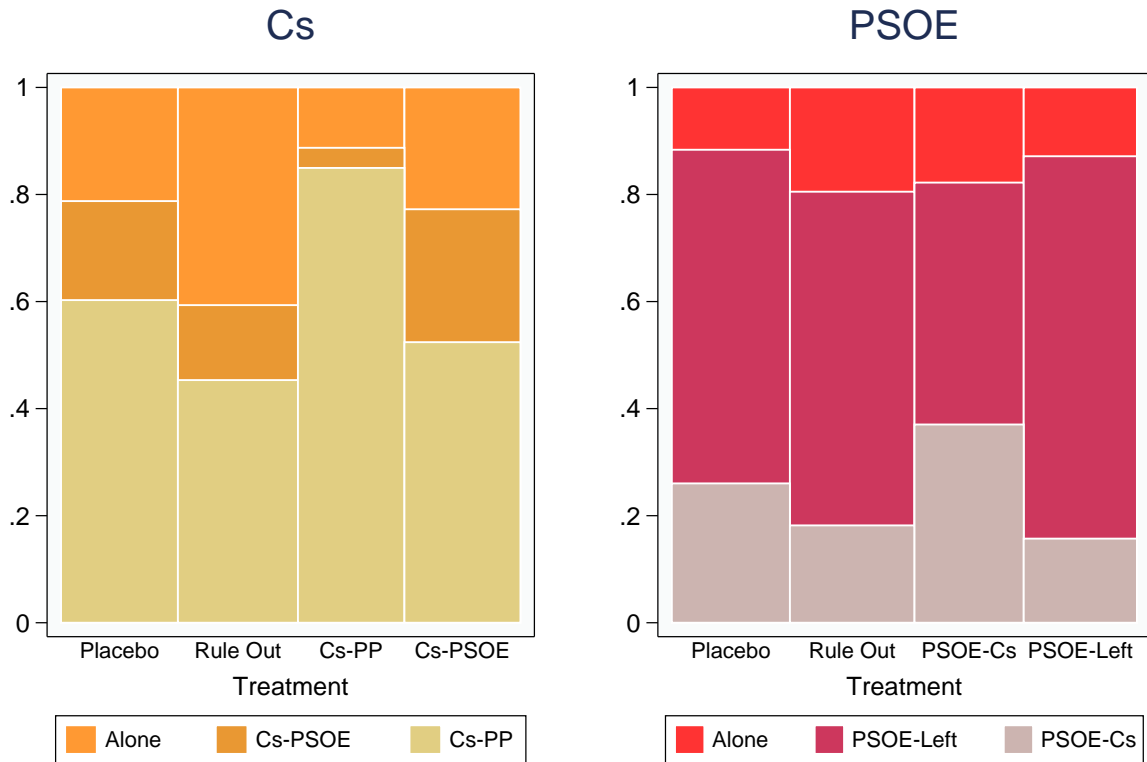
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Adjusted residuals in brackets

Figure 5: Manipulation checks. Spine plots



treatment, the share of respondents that expected Cs to be alone after the election doubled up to 40%, while in the Cs-PP case, those that expected such an agreement add up to 85%. The Cs-PSOE treatment seems to have been perceived as less credible for our respondents, but nonetheless it moved the share of people that expected such a coalition from 18% in the placebo group to almost 25% in the treatment group.

In the case of the socialists, our manipulations had a somewhat weaker effect on their expected post-election coalition behavior. In the control group over 60% expected a coalition with the leftist parties, 26% a coalition with Cs and only about 12% of the sample did not expect the Socialists to join a coalition. The *no coalition* condition doubles this share up to 19.5%, while under the PSOE-Cs treatment those that expect such a coalition go up to 37%. Finally, among those that received the PSOE-Left treatment, over 70% expected such a coalition to occur.

Overall, these results show that the treatments managed to affect the expectations

of the participants about the coalitions they expected to form after elections and, hence, that they can be arguably treated as actual coalition signals. The fact that the effect is clearer for Cs than for the Socialists is congruent with our framework. Voters have stronger priors about established parties and, therefore, their expectations regarding their future behavior are less prone to be manipulated. In any case, all our treatments had the expected effect, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. This variation in the effective strength of the manipulation can account for some of the differences in the results obtained for both parties.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper we have tested a set of expectations on the consequences of pre-election coalition signals on voting intentions and party images. Anticipating the post-election coalition choices of a party can act as an additional piece of information on where the party stands and can influence voters' behavior especially in a situation of limited information and high uncertainty such as it is in the case of a new party.

We used a survey-embedded experiment to randomly expose respondents to different coalition signals by an established and a new party in the context of a real election campaign in the Valencia region in Spain, where several post-election coalition scenarios were credible, given the expected fragmentation of the regional parliament. We presented our respondents with a vignette in which political analysts expressed their predictions with regards to the post-election coalition behavior of two parties, one established (the PSOE) and a new party (Cs). For each party, there was one treatment condition suggesting that it would not join a coalition, another one in which the analysts indicated that the party would form a coalition towards its left and another one in which a right-leaning coalition was expected. Respondents in the control group received a neutral vignette in which they were simply reminded of the upcoming regional elections.

Results have shown that the coalition signals sent via our vignettes did influence respondents' expectations regarding the coalition behavior of the parties, especially in

the case of the new one. Beyond that, our substantive interest was placed in the effects of coalition signals on voting intention, party image and perception of party's ideological stance.

In that respect, and only in the case of Cs, the right-leaning coalition signals had a clear effect on the reported probability to vote among those to the right of Cs. We have also shown how a signal of a right-leaning coalition did move both parties' perceived ideological stance towards the right (around 0.5 points in a 0-10 scale). As expected, ruling out a coalition or suggesting a left leaning coalition did not seem to significantly affect citizens' perception on where the party is placed in the left-right axis. Regarding the perception of honesty and policy-seekingness, only the suggestion of a Cs-PSOE agreement did impact the image of Cs, making it to appear as less honest and more office-seeking. This is, we have argued, because these respondents were faced with a counter-intuitive signal on a new party for which there was a high degree of uncertainty about its positions and priorities.

Overall, our results are rather consistent with the expectations. Pre-election coalition signals seem to provide relevant information to citizens, who use them to update their perceptions on where the party stands and also form their vote intentions. Not all signals have the same effect, however. And this is precisely the avenue for further research that our paper identifies. We have suggested that counter-intuitive signals sent in a context of high uncertainty can be most powerful in affecting the image of the party, provided they are credible. However, while this seems to work for party images, it does not seem to be the case for left-right placements, which seem to be more sensible to a movement toward the right of either party regardless of other considerations. This inconsistency poses an obvious question: Under what circumstances do coalition signals impact more voters' perceptions and behavior toward a party? In this paper we have just presented a first insight into this question, on which further research shall shed light.

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## Appendix

Figure 6: Vignette Ciudadanos - Rule Out

### Los Analistas apuntan que Ciudadanos no pactará con ninguna formación tras las elecciones

Redacción. 10/05/2015

Diversos analistas políticos consultados coinciden que, dadas las declaraciones y señales que ha mandado la formación, existe una probabilidad muy elevada que tras las elecciones autonómicas del próximo 24 de mayo Ciudadanos no pacte la formación de una coalición con ninguna formación política. El partido quiere consolidarse como alternativa de gobierno en la Comunidad Valenciana.



**Translation:** *Analysts suggest that Ciudadanos will not make any agreement after the election. Several political analysts agree that, given the statements and signals sent by the party, there is a high probability that, following the upcoming regional elections of the 24th of May, Ciudadanos will not join a coalition with any other political party. The party wants to confirm itself as a government alternative for the Valencian region.*

Figure 7: Vignette Ciudadanos - Popular Party

## Los Analistas apuntan a un posible pacto de Ciudadanos con el PP

Redacción. 10/05/2015

Diversos analistas políticos consultados coinciden que, dadas las declaraciones y señales que ha mandado la formación, existe una probabilidad muy elevada que tras las elecciones autonómicas del próximo 24 de mayo Ciudadanos pacte la formación de una coalición con el Partido Popular, si los resultados lo permiten. Algunos gestos de la formación indican que probablemente se decantarán por esta opción de gobierno.



**Translation:** *Analysts suggest a possible agreement of Ciudadanos with the PP. Several political analysts agree that, given the statements and signals sent by the party, there is a high probability that, following the upcoming regional elections of the 24th of May, Ciudadanos will join a coalition with the Popular Party, if results allow. Several gestures made by the party point that this will probably be the chosen option.*

Figure 8: Vignette Ciudadanos - Socialist Party

## Los Analistas apuntan a un posible pacto de Ciudadanos con el PSPV-PSOE

Redacción. 10/05/2015

Diversos analistas políticos consultados coinciden que, dadas las declaraciones y señales que ha mandado la formación, existe una probabilidad muy elevada que tras las elecciones autonómicas del próximo 24 de mayo Ciudadanos pacte la formación de una coalición con el PSPV-PSOE, si los resultados lo permiten. Algunos gestos de la formación indican que probablemente se decantarán por esta opción de gobierno.



**Translation:** *Analysts suggest a possible agreement of Ciudadanos with the PSPV-PSOE. Several political analysts agree that, given the statements and signals sent by the party, there is a high probability that, following the upcoming regional elections of the 24th of May, Ciudadanos will join a coalition with the Socialist Party, if results allow. Several gestures made by the party point that this will probably be the chosen option.*

Figure 9: Vignette Socialist Party - Rule Out

## Los Analistas apuntan que el PSPV-PSOE no pactará con ninguna formación tras las elecciones

Redacción. 10/05/2015

Diversos analistas políticos consultados coinciden que, dadas las declaraciones y señales que ha mandado la formación, existe una probabilidad muy elevada que tras las elecciones autonómicas del próximo 24 de mayo el PSPV-PSOE no pacte la formación de una coalición con ninguna formación política. El partido quiere consolidarse como alternativa de gobierno en la Comunidad Valenciana.



**Translation:** *Analysts suggest that the PSPV-PSOE will not make any agreement after the election.* Several political analysts agree that, given the statements and signals sent by the party, there is a high probability that, following the upcoming regional elections of the 24th of May, the PSPV-PSOE will not join a coalition with any other political party. The party wants to confirm itself as a government alternative for the Valencian region.

Figure 10: Vignette Socialist Party - Ciudadanos

## Los Analistas apuntan a un posible pacto del PSPV-PSOE con Ciudadanos

Redacción. 10/05/2015

Diversos analistas políticos consultados coinciden que, dadas las declaraciones y señales que ha mandado la formación, existe una probabilidad muy elevada que tras las elecciones autonómicas del próximo 24 de mayo el PSPV-PSOE pacte la formación de una coalición con el Ciudadanos, si los resultados lo permiten. Algunos gestos de la formación indican que probablemente se decantarán por esta opción de gobierno.



**Translation:** *Analysts suggest a possible agreement of the PSPV-PSOE with Ciudadanos. Several political analysts agree that, given the statements and signals sent by the party, there is a high probability that, following the upcoming regional elections of the 24th of May, the PSPV-PSOE will join a coalition with Ciudadanos, if results allow. Several gestures made by the party point that this will probably be the chosen option.*



Figure 11: Vignette Socialist Party - Left Parties

## Los Analistas apuntan a un posible pacto del PSPV-PSOE con Compromís, EUPV y Podemos

Redacción. 10/05/2015

Diversos analistas políticos consultados coinciden que, dadas las declaraciones y señales que ha mandado la formación, existe una probabilidad muy elevada que tras las elecciones autonómicas del próximo 24 de mayo el PSPV-PSOE pacte la formación de una coalición con formaciones como Compromís, Podemos o Esquerra Unida, si los resultados lo permiten. Algunos gestos de la formación indican que probablemente se decantarán por esta opción de gobierno.



**Translation:** *Analysts suggest a possible agreement of the PSPV-PSOE with Compromís, EUPV and Podemos. Several political analysts agree that, given the statements and signals sent by the party, there is a high probability that, following the upcoming regional elections of the 24th of May, the PSPV-PSOE will join a coalition with Compromís, EUPV and Podemos, if results allow. Several gestures made by the party point that this will probably be the chosen option.*

Figure 12: Vignette Placebo

## Se renuevan las Cortes Valencianas

Redacción. 10/05/2015

El próximo 24 de mayo se celebrarán elecciones autonómicas en la Comunidad Valenciana. El resultado de estos comicios contribuirá a definir el gobierno de la Generalitat para la próxima legislatura. Para esta cita electoral se habilitarán un total de 2.236 colegios electorales repartidos por toda la geografía valenciana.



**Translation:** *The Valencian Parliament, renewed. The upcoming 24th of May, regional elections in the Valencian Country will be held. The result of these elections will contribute to defining the regional government for the next term. In this occasion, 2,236 polling stations will be set up all over the valencian geography*