

Televised Influence: Examining Opinion Formation Through Live Completion of a Voting Advice Application

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Abstract

The influence of candidate cues on voters' opinion formulation is a subject of ongoing debate in political science. This study examines the 2023 Cyprus presidential elections, when the leading candidates completed the country's most popular voting advice application live on national television. This unprecedented event created a natural experiment to test how televised disclosure of candidate positions affects alignment between voters and their preferred candidates. Drawing on voting advice application responses across a wide set of policy questions and employing regression discontinuity in time models, we estimate changes in voter-candidate congruence before and after the broadcast. The results show no uniform effect. For Andreas Mavroyiannis, supporters converged toward his progressive and pro-solution profile, particularly on foreign policy, welfare, and Cyprus settlement questions. For Averof Neophytou and Nikos Christodoulides, congruence did not increase consistently; in some cases, divergence emerged, as explicit cues exposed divisions within their heterogeneous or ambivalent coalitions. The findings provide mixed support for the expectation that cues strengthen congruence only on less entrenched issues. Convergence was most evident on novel questions, but divergence also occurred on identity and Cyprus-related issues. The study highlights that candidate cues can foster alignment but can also generate divergence, depending on candidate characteristics, issue polarisation, and coalition heterogeneity.

Keywords

candidate cues; elite influence; public opinion; voting advice applications; voter-candidate congruence

1. Introduction

Candidate cues help voters form opinions under limited information. Rather than reflecting political knowledge, cue-taking shows how citizens rely on trusted elites to navigate complex choices (Lupia, 1994; Popkin, 1991). This behaviour may simplify decision-making but can also weaken independent judgement and accountability (Samuels & Zucco, 2014).

Political cues are signals from elites that help citizens interpret issues, evaluate policies, or position themselves in political debates (Sniderman et al., 1991). Party labels, endorsements, and candidate statements allow voters to align preferences without detailed knowledge. Party cues are considered stable influences because they embody ideological traditions and historical experiences (Campbell et al., 1960). By contrast, candidate cues highlight individuals' roles, especially in systems where personalities dominate competition (Lenz, 2012).

Cues matter most when issues are complex, new, or of low salience, since voters with limited knowledge or weak predispositions rely on trusted elites. Lupia (1994) showed that endorsements in a Californian referendum helped voters make decisions consistent with complete information. Cohen (2003) found that people often follow their party's stance even when it conflicts with ideology. Druckman et al. (2013) demonstrated that partisan polarisation amplifies cue effects by shaping the interpretation of conflicting messages. Yet, cues are weaker when attitudes are crystallised, salience is high, or credibility is lacking (Bullock, 2011; Nicholson, 2012). Cues may also shape preferences, as voters adjust to their candidate's positions rather than select candidates based on prior congruence (Druckman, 2001; Lenz, 2012).

The present study examines these dynamics in the 2023 presidential elections in Cyprus. For the first time, the three leading candidates (Nikos Christodoulides, Andreas Mavroyiannis, and Averof Neophytou) completed the country's most widely used voting advice application (VAA) live on national television. VAAs are now a familiar part of European campaigns and can influence vote choice and participation (Garzia & Marschall, 2012; Garzia et al., 2017; Gemenis, 2013). In Cyprus, VAAs had already gained wide popularity, with many citizens using them to assess alignment with candidates or parties.

The 2023 event was exceptional because the three main candidates became VAA users themselves in real time on live broadcast television. Each answered the same 22 policy questions posed to the public. Their responses were immediately recorded, reported by the media, and circulated on social platforms. This created a moment of high visibility in which voters could observe their preferred candidate's stance. It also provided unusual standardisation: all three answered the same questions under the same conditions, reducing contextual biases that complicate studies of cue effects in natural campaigns.

The Cypriot case is well-suited to investigating cue dynamics. First, the televised format guaranteed salience. Voters could directly witness elite positions or encounter them through extensive reporting. Second, the timing created a natural cut-point for quasi-experimental analysis. By comparing VAA responses before and after the broadcasts, it is possible to test whether voters shifted their answers to align more closely with their candidate. Third, the breadth of the 22 questions, spanning social, economic, foreign, and Cyprus-related issues, enables analysis of whether cue effects vary across domains. This design takes advantage of these features. We collected all VAA responses during the campaign and merged them with precise timestamps. For each candidate, we identified the broadcast moment and analysed supporter

responses within windows before and after the event. This allows for event-study models estimating changes in voter–candidate distance. Exploiting this temporal cut strengthens claims of causality, even if it cannot replicate laboratory control. Comparing otherwise similar voters before and after the cue, while adjusting for confounders, provides leverage for attributing shifts to candidate signals.

The scope of the study is twofold. Empirically, it asks whether voters adjusted their positions after their candidate's televised VAA completion. Theoretically, it tests propositions about when cues influence opinion formation. The findings contribute to debates on elite influence and the role of heuristics in shaping electoral behaviour.

2. Literature Review

Existing research has long established that most citizens rely on shortcuts when forming opinions and making choices. Party labels, elite endorsements, and candidates' stated positions operate as cues that can guide preferences with relatively low cognitive effort. Foundational accounts describe party and leader cues as efficient heuristics that help voters economise on information costs (Campbell et al., 1960; Downs, 1957; Popkin, 1991). Empirical literature subsequently demonstrated that elite cues can alter attitudes, often substantially, when voters are inattentive (Lupia, 1994; Sniderman et al., 1991). Recent evidence shows that this mechanism remains robust in contemporary settings, including multiparty European democracies (Adams et al., 2012; Arceneaux, 2008; Bullock, 2011; Grewenig et al., 2020).

Across many designs, the central finding is consistent: When a trusted party or leader signals a position, co-partisans and supporters tend to move toward that position, whereas signals attributed to disliked out-groups can push voters away, deepening polarisation (Cohen, 2003; Druckman et al., 2013; Nicholson, 2012). Observational and field-based studies similarly find that cues help voters resolve uncertainty at low cost and that the direction of movement generally follows the source's identity (Arceneaux, 2008; Bullock, 2011). Yet, as Samuels and Zucco (2014) demonstrated, such responsiveness often reflects partisan loyalty rather than informational updating: citizens align with their preferred leaders even when doing so contradicts their prior views.

The literature also highlights important contingencies. Cue effects depend on context and on the nature of the issue. When motivation to process information is low, citizens are more likely to rely on peripheral cues such as source labels rather than scrutinising arguments (Druckman, 2001). Conversely, when the issue is deeply salient or tied to core values, individuals are more likely to engage in effortful processing and to discount cues that conflict with prior beliefs (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Sniderman et al., 1991).

As personalisation has intensified, leader images and perceived competence increasingly guide vote choice, with cues serving as shorthand for anticipated policy direction (Balmas et al., 2014; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Garzia, 2014). Recent work has further demonstrated that personalised leader evaluations increasingly structure voter alignments across the continent (Aarts et al., 2013; Costa Lobo & Curtice, 2014).

Issue characteristics also moderate cue effects. Work distinguishing "easy" symbolic issues from "hard" technical ones shows that elites can more readily structure mass opinion on the latter because prior attitudes are weaker and knowledge is thin (Carmines & Stimson, 1980; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). Elite

influence also depends on issue salience: cues matter most early in an issue's life cycle, before attitudes crystallise (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Druckman et al., 2013; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Studies of motivated reasoning reinforce this asymmetry: When issues implicate identity, citizens selectively accept congenial elite messages and discount dissonant ones; when issues are peripheral to identity, credible cues can move opinions more freely (Druckman et al., 2013; Nicholson, 2012).

Against this background, VAAs have become a prominent element of electoral campaigns. VAAs ask users to respond to a battery of policy statements and then compute the closeness between the user and parties or candidates. Experimental and quasi-experimental research provides evidence that VAA exposure can update preferences and choices: undecided users may revise their party evaluations in the direction of the recommended match (Garzia et al., 2017) or even be mobilised to participate in elections (Gemenis & Rosema, 2014; Germann & Gemenis, 2019). In line with the spatial voting model (Enelow & Hinich, 1984; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2008), VAAs provide personalised proximity information that reduces informational costs, enabling voters to align with ideologically proximate parties. Yet effects are conditional. Some studies find null or modest impacts on proximity voting and switching (Enyedi, 2016; Mahéo, 2017; Munzert et al., 2020), while others suggest that congruence information broadens voters' consideration sets without altering final vote choice (Ioannidis, 2025). Additionally, in candidate-centred presidential races, publicly revealing a candidate's answers to a VAA collapses uncertainty about that candidate's positions. That moment can function as a concentrated cue shock, potentially producing a measurable increase in congruence between voters and candidates across the contested issues, particularly in contexts where voters lack stable predispositions or where issues are less entrenched in political competition (Druckman, 2001; Lenz, 2012; Tromborg & Albertsen, 2023).

Bringing this literature together suggests the conditions under which a televised candidate-completed VAA should produce measurable shifts in voter–candidate congruence. The cue is credible and salient because it comes directly from the preferred candidate in a public setting. The broadcast timing creates a clear before-and-after window that concentrates attention and reduces ambiguity about when the cue was delivered. In a multiparty presidential contest, some issues will be weakly structured among a candidate's supporters; on those issues, the candidate's stance can coordinate the group and compress dispersion (Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010; Sniderman et al., 1991).

This body of evidence provides the theoretical foundation for two hypotheses: that overall congruence among a candidate's voters increased after the televised VAA completion and that congruence increased most strongly on issues where those voters previously held heterogeneous positions.

The first expectation is straightforward; overall voter–candidate congruence will rise after the televised VAA completion. When candidates publicly reveal their positions across the VAA's policy set, supporters learn where the leader stands. Given the general tendency for voters to align with in-group elite signals, many supporters should adjust their responses toward their preferred candidate, shrinking the distance between their answers and the candidate's answers. In a presidential race with intense candidate visibility, a live, widely covered VAA completion is a straightforward vehicle for such cue-driven updating.

The second expectation concerns where, within the issue set, the movement should be largest. The literature indicates that cue elasticity is greatest where prior attitudes are weak, heterogeneous, or not identity-defining

(Druckman, 2001; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Within a candidate's supporter base, some questions will display high dispersion, signalling uncertainty. For those issues, the candidate's public stance provides a focal point that should concentrate opinions and reduce within-group variance. In other words, congruence should increase most on the issues where supporters were initially most divided.

Finally, unlike typical survey experiments that test hypothetical cues, this study uses a quasi-experimental design embedded in a real campaign, where candidates revealed their positions live on air. Thus, this setting offers higher external validity.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Choose4Cyprus 2023

The 2023 presidential elections in Cyprus provided a unique political context for studying how voters respond to cues from candidates. These elections were highly competitive and took place in an environment of political fragmentation and disillusionment with traditional politics (Ellinas & Katsourides, 2021; Triga et al., 2024). With incumbent President Nicos Anastasiades' term-limited after two five-year terms, the contest to replace him quickly became a three-way race among the leading candidates: Nikos Christodoulides, Andreas Mavroyiannis, and Averof Neophytou ("Former foreign minister," 2023). Christodoulides, a former foreign minister in the Anastasiades government and long-time member of the Democratic Rally (DISY), ran as an independent but was supported by several centrist parties. Mavroyiannis, a career diplomat endorsed by the Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL), presented himself as a progressive alternative. Neophytou, the leader of the governing DISY party, campaigned on continuity and experience. The election was eventually decided in a runoff on 12 February 2023, when Christodoulides narrowly defeated Mavroyiannis by 51.9% to 48.1%, a margin of under 4%, making it one of the closest contests in recent Cypriot history ("Cyprus politician Christodoulides," 2023; Triga et al., 2024).

Amid this tense campaign, an unusual event took place that shaped public debate and provided a near-experimental setting to study political cue-taking. The digital platform Choose4Cyprus, a VAA developed by academics, was introduced just nine days before the first round of the election. It comprised 22 questions covering issues across the economy, society, governance, the Cyprus problem, and foreign policy. Users would indicate their positions, and the system would calculate which candidate's policy stances aligned most closely with their responses. Before seeing their individual congruence results, users were asked to indicate which candidate they intended to vote for. This self-reported voting intention preceded any exposure to their calculated alignment scores.

Despite its late launch, Choose4Cyprus quickly achieved a wide reach. By election day, 10% of the entire electorate had used the application. This was partly driven by the extraordinary media exposure it received on national television. In an unprecedented move, the three leading candidates completed the Choose4Cyprus VAA live on Cyprus's most popular noon information programme, *Alpha Ενημέρωση*, which has a large audience and shapes midday political discourse.

The televised appearances occurred on consecutive days, the week before the election. On 30 January 2023, Andreas Mavroyiannis participated in the live broadcast. Averof Neophytou followed on 1 February 2023, and

Nikos Christodoulides appeared on 2 February 2023 (all participated around 12:40 pm), just three days before the first round of voting. Each session was organised in collaboration with a member of the Choose4Cyprus research team, who joined the show's host to guide the candidates through the process. The format was simple but impactful: candidates responded to each of the 22 policy statements, live on air, explaining their choices to the audience. Once completed, the system produced the candidate's personal VAA result, revealing which political figure most closely matched their expressed positions. For the analysis, each broadcast's exact date and time were used as candidate-specific cut points when defining the *after* variable.

These events provided a setting where candidates with often strategically ambiguous platforms were forced to state their positions on specific policy issues. Presidential contests in Cyprus often revolve around broad appeals, candidate images, and references to the Cyprus problem rather than precise policy commitments (Triga et al., 2018, 2024). Given that the Cypriot presidency combines the roles of head of state and government, candidates' positions carry significant executive and policymaking implications. For this reason, the televised VAA exercises were framed by commentators as an "ideal scenario" to push candidates to clarify their views and allow voters to see them pinned down on concrete choices.

The outcomes of the televised sessions were widely reported and generated public debate. When Andreas Mavroyiannis completed the VAA, the application returned him as the candidate most closely aligned with his own positions, with a very high level of congruence. This unsurprising result allowed him to present himself as coherent and consistent. Mavroyiannis made light of the outcome, remarking that "for good luck," it was best that the tool advised him to vote for himself. Averof Neophytou experienced a similar outcome when he took the quiz two days later. The VAA recommended him as his own best match, which he embraced, using the opportunity to highlight his commitment to digital innovation ("Choose4Cyprus," 2023; "Poio upopsifio edeikse," 2023).

The most notable and controversial moment came during Nikos Christodoulides' appearance on 2 February 2023. When he completed the VAA, the system did not return him as his own closest match. Instead, the application indicated that Christodoulides' answers aligned more closely with those of Andreas Mavroyiannis than with his own declared platform. This surprising outcome was displayed live on television, just days before the election. Christodoulides appeared somewhat taken aback but responded with humour, noting that the result showed he was close to all three major candidates and that this might be interpreted as evidence of his broad appeal. Nonetheless, the symbolism was striking: the frontrunner in the election was told by an ostensibly neutral tool that he should vote for his main rival ("Christodoulidis: "Eimai aisiokos," 2023; "O Christodoulidis dokimase," 2023).

This incident quickly became headline news across the media and social platforms. Newspapers and news sites reported that Christodoulides "matched more with Mavroyiannis than with...himself" ("O Christodoulidis dokimase," 2023), emphasising the moment's irony and raising questions about the clarity of his policy positions. The videos of the televised VAA completions circulated widely on social media, gaining thousands of views on YouTube and Facebook within days. The episode fed into ongoing debates about whether Christodoulides' campaign was too vague, with some commentators arguing that his strategy of remaining ideologically ambiguous allowed many voters to project their preferences onto him. The VAA results seemed to illustrate this ambiguity in a concrete and memorable way (Constantas, 2023; "O Christodoulidis dokimase," 2023).

The televised VAA episodes thus became one of the most discussed features of the final campaign week. This case provides a good opportunity to study voter behaviour in response to elite cues. The unique combination of a widely used VAA, real-time candidate participation on national television, and large-scale subsequent citizen engagement creates conditions resembling a natural experiment. The exact timing of the televised completions is precisely known, which allows for before-and-after comparisons of user responses. The VAA dataset contains thousands of individual-level observations, with timestamps indicating when each user completed the questionnaire. This enabled us to examine whether voters who participated after their preferred candidate appeared on television showed greater alignment with that candidate's positions than those who took it earlier. Moreover, the data allows for disaggregation by issue, making it possible to explore whether alignment increased more on specific questions.

3.2. Methodological Framework

The empirical design of this study exploits the unique timing of the VAA completions, which serve as discrete interventions in the information environment. These moments are treated as discrete interventions in the information environment, creating natural experiments for studying how candidate cues affect voter-candidate congruence. To identify these effects, the study adopts a design conceptually similar to a regression discontinuity in time (RDiT) framework, operationalised as a binned event-study. In RDiT, time itself functions as the running variable, with the cut point being the broadcast moment, and the assumption is that all other factors evolve smoothly across that threshold. Any discontinuous change in outcomes at the cutoff can therefore be attributed to the intervention (Hausman & Rapson, 2018). This design is particularly appropriate in this case because the treatment is time-bound and applies, at least potentially, to the entire electorate simultaneously.

Unlike a sharp discontinuity, however, not all voters are exposed to the treatment simultaneously. Some may have been watching the broadcast, while others only encountered the information later through news coverage or social media. This corresponds more closely to a fuzzy discontinuity, in which crossing the temporal threshold sharply increases the probability of treatment without perfectly determining it (Imbens & Lemieux, 2008). Despite this imperfection, the broadcast marks a moment when the information environment changed for all voters, raising the likelihood of exposure in the hours and days immediately after.

In this study, the event-study specification is used to visualise short-term dynamics before and after each broadcast, showing whether voter-candidate congruence trends remain stable prior to treatment. The RDiT framework, by contrast, provides the formal identification strategy by estimating the discontinuous change in congruence at the precise broadcast cut-off using local regressions on either side. The two approaches are thus complementary: the event study offers a descriptive diagnosis of temporal adjustment, while the RDiT isolates the instantaneous effect at the threshold. This combined design is preferable to a sharp regression discontinuity design because exposure to televised cues is inherently probabilistic rather than deterministic: voters differ in when and how they receive the information. Treating the broadcast as a fuzzy, time-based discontinuity, therefore, better captures the real diffusion of candidate cues through media and public discussion, while still preserving the quasi-experimental logic of a discontinuous change in the informational environment. Nevertheless, we also estimated sharp regression discontinuity models using local polynomial regressions for each candidate. These models employed a triangular kernel, a mserd bandwidth selector,

and a first-order local linear specification. The corresponding results, presented in the Supplementary File Table A4, are statistically insignificant (as expected) since most voters did not receive the televised information exactly at the temporal threshold but rather in the following hours and days through indirect exposure.

The analysis employs a binned event-study specification centred on the broadcast cut points. Time was divided into six-hour bins covering the 48 hours before and 48 hours after each event. Each bin is represented by a dummy variable, with the final pre-event bin omitted as the reference category. The coefficients, therefore, capture deviations in voter responses in each time window relative to the immediate pre-treatment period. This specification has two advantages. First, it provides a flexible way to trace the temporal dynamics of cue-taking, rather than imposing a single break. Second, it offers an internal placebo test: coefficients in the pre-event bins should be statistically indistinguishable from zero if the identifying assumptions hold, since no treatment should occur before the broadcast. This makes it possible to detect both anticipatory effects and post-event adjustments, while preserving a transparent baseline for interpretation (Schmidheiny & Siegloch, 2023).

The outcome of interest is voter-candidate congruence, operationalised as an affinity score. For each respondent, the absolute difference between their answer and their chosen candidate's position was calculated for each of the 22 policy questions in the VAA. These item-level distances are then averaged to produce an overall affinity score, where lower values indicate closer alignment and higher values denote greater divergence. Candidate positions are taken from their televised VAA completions, ensuring that the congruence measure reflects the cues that were disclosed to the electorate during the broadcast. This is crucial to the logic of the design, as the televised responses constitute the informational treatment under examination.

The regressions also include covariates for demographics and political interest to improve precision and guard against compositional changes in the sample. These control variables include age, gender, education, and self-reported political interest. Including them in the analysis helps ensure that the estimated discontinuities truly reflect cue-taking effects, rather than shifts in the composition of respondents (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001).

The regression model can be expressed as the outcome (affinity score) regressed on the set of bin indicators and the covariates. This is equivalent to a saturated interrupted time-series design, where each coefficient represents the deviation of congruence in that bin relative to the baseline period just before treatment. When plotted, these coefficients produce the familiar event-study graph. If cue-taking occurs, one would expect to see a stable pre-event pattern, followed by a sharp downward shift in affinity scores (i.e., improved congruence) beginning in the bin immediately after the broadcast and persisting for subsequent bins. The six-hour resolution is chosen deliberately, allowing the analysis to capture immediate and delayed adjustments. Since most voters would only have been exposed to the cues after work, via news articles or online clips, it is plausible that the most substantial changes appear 6–12 hours or even a day later, rather than instantly. The binning framework allows this lagged effect to be visualised and tested directly.

In addition to the main event-study design, the study undertakes supplementary analyses to better understand the structure of voter–candidate congruence and to identify which issues are most susceptible to cue-taking.

This part of the analysis focuses on the issue level, examining how the degree of polarisation within each policy item shapes the scope for change. A weighted bimodality coefficient is calculated for all 22 items prior to any televised broadcasts, capturing the extent to which responses form two opposing camps while correcting for one-sided skew. Issues with higher polarisation scores correspond to sharper divisions within the electorate, while lower scores denote broad consensus. The expectation is that cue-taking effects are strongest on highly polarising issues, where uncertainty and disagreement create greater scope for televised exposure to influence perceptions of candidate-voter alignment.

4. Results

We begin the presentation of the results with a descriptive exploration of the data to establish a baseline understanding of how voter-candidate congruence varies before and after each of the three presidential candidates publicly completed the VAA. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics. For each of the three candidates, the table reports the mean and variance of affinity scores before and after their respective cut points and the mean categorical age, gender composition, mean education, mean political interest, and number of observations.

Table 1. Summary of affinity scores and demographics by candidate and period.

Candidate	Period	Mean affinity	Variance affinity	Mean age (1–7)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Mean education	Mean political interest	N
Christodoulides	Before	1.41	0.08	3.03	44.09	55.91	5.09	2.94	2,251
Christodoulides	After	1.43	0.08	3.00	50.49	49.51	5.03	2.78	2,384
Mavroyiannis	Before	0.94	0.12	2.81	33.43	66.57	5.20	3.32	1,221
Mavroyiannis	After	1.08	0.14	2.87	45.71	54.29	4.98	3.04	4,322
Neophytou	Before	1.31	0.10	2.87	32.53	67.47	5.15	3.16	1,896
Neophytou	After	1.37	0.10	2.86	38.87	61.13	5.07	3.02	3,692

The results show a consistent pattern across the three candidates: mean affinity scores are slightly higher after the cut point than before. For Christodoulides, the mean affinity increases from 1.41 to 1.43, while for Mavroyiannis it rises more substantially from 0.94 to 1.08. Neophytou's supporters also display an increase from 1.31 to 1.37 after the cut point. The variances remain relatively stable, with no sharp changes in dispersion. These descriptive results may suggest that, on average, voters appeared slightly further from their preferred candidate after the VAA was completed on live television.

However, caution is needed when interpreting these preliminary figures. One plausible explanation for the modest post-cut point increase in affinity scores is related to the dynamics of participation. Toward the end of the period, when the VAA remained open and received high public attention, a surge of late participants entered the sample. These users were likely less politically interested or less informed, and consequently, their answers may have been less consistent with their preferred candidate's positions, raising the average affinity score. In this sense, the increases in affinity observed descriptively might not reflect genuine persuasion effects from the televised events but instead changes in the composition of the user base. It is precisely because of this limitation that we move beyond descriptive statistics and employ an RDIT design. The event-study framework

allows us to isolate changes in affinity at the precise cut points of candidate participation, while accounting for temporal dynamics.

It is also notable that the VAA user base differs from the general population in predictable ways. Users were, on average, younger, more educated, and more politically engaged than the Cypriot electorate as a whole. The mean age across all candidate groups falls within the 35–44 category, while the average education level is situated at the higher end of the scale. This pattern is consistent with prior research on VAA users, which has repeatedly shown that VAA users tend to be younger, more politically interested, and better educated than the general electorate (Marschall & Schmidt, 2008). These demographic biases do not invalidate the analysis, but they underline that the results should be interpreted as evidence of cue-taking among a politically attentive and relatively well-educated segment of the public, rather than as a direct reflection of the broader Cypriot electorate. Of the 15,771 users who selected one of the three main candidates, 14,078 (89.3%) provided complete socio-demographic information. Prior to analysis, the dataset was cleaned to remove duplicate entries (multiple completions from the same IP address), speeders, and abnormal response patterns (giving more than 7 consecutive times the same response). These exclusions were applied before arriving at the final sample of 15,771 users who selected one of the three main candidates.

We now turn to the main empirical results. The analysis focuses on changes in the affinity score between voters and their preferred candidate in the period surrounding the televised completion of the VAA. Affinity is measured as the average absolute distance between a user's policy responses and those of their chosen candidate, such that higher values indicate greater incongruence. The design exploits six-hour bins around each broadcast, with the [−6,0] interval as the reference category. All models include controls for age, sex, education, political interest, and hour-of-day and day-of-week fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered by day to account for temporal autocorrelation in survey activity.

Figure 1 plots the estimated coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from the binned models. Each panel corresponds to one of the three leading candidates. The coefficients represent the change in mean affinity relative to the pre-broadcast bin. For space reasons, the full model estimates are reported in Table A1 in the Supplementary File. The results indicate heterogeneity across candidates. As a robustness check, we also replicate the analysis using a 24-hour window with four four-hour bins; results are reported in Table A2 in the Supplementary File. The results with the alternative specifications are similar.

For Mavroyiannis, coefficients prior to the broadcast are strongly positive, suggesting that his supporters were on average further away from his stated positions in the days leading up to the broadcast. Immediately after the broadcast, however, the coefficients turn sharply negative, with significant drops between 12 and 36 hours after the event. This pattern suggests that exposure to his positions helped to reduce the distance between him and his supporters, producing a short-term convergence effect. One possible explanation is that Mavroyiannis was less well-known outside diplomatic circles. The broadcast gave him a rare high-visibility opportunity to state clear positions on salient issues, which may have reassured and aligned his centre-left support base, especially voters on the right of AKEL who were still consolidating behind him. Additionally, the pre-event upward trend for Mavroyiannis appears to reflect composition-related variation in early user activity. When the same event-study specification is replicated under a strict nearest-neighbour matching procedure (see Figure A1 in the Supplementary File), this pre-event pattern is substantially diminished, confirming that compositional differences have no meaningful impact on the estimated effects.

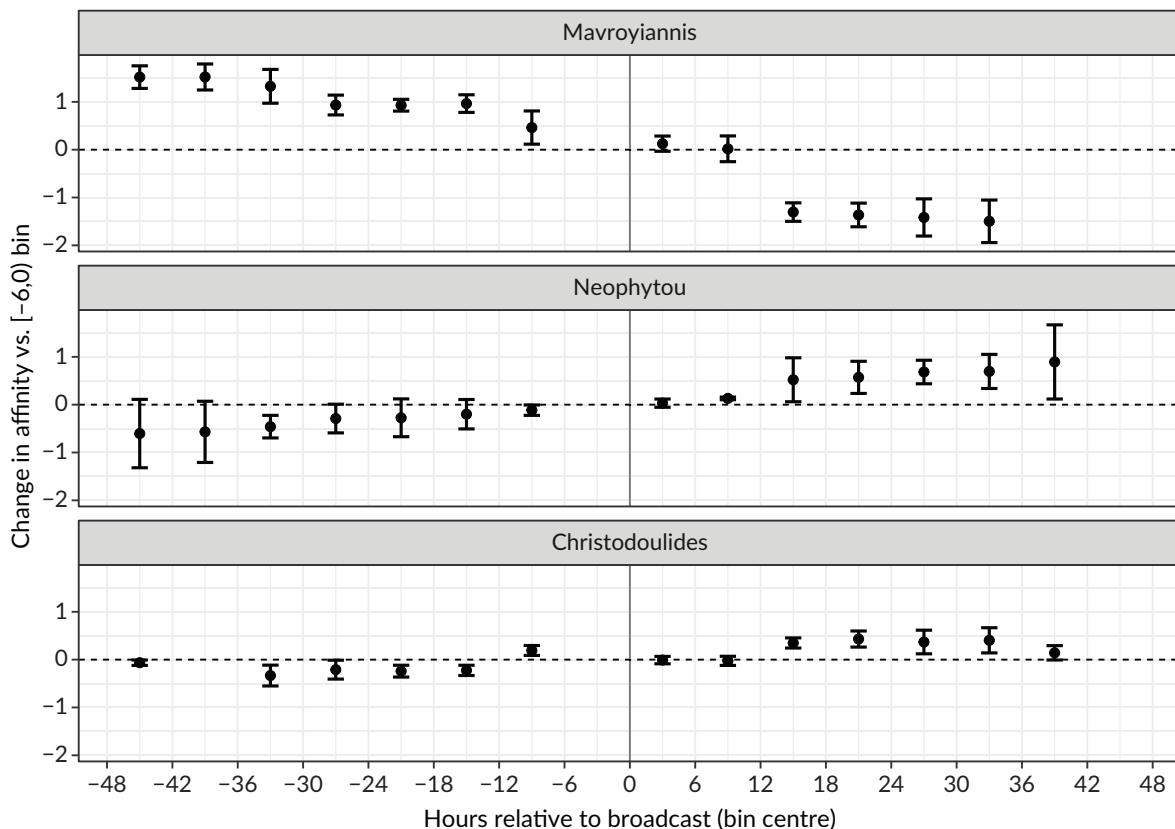


Figure 1. Event-study estimates of change in affinity scores by candidate (bin size: six hours, reference = [-6,0) bin). Notes: Models include controls for age, sex, education, and political interest, plus time dummies; standard errors clustered by day.

Moreover, the matched model reinforces the presence of a clear downward shift beginning in the evening of the broadcast day and continuing into the following day, consistent with genuine post-event convergence rather than artefactual pre-trend noise.

In contrast, Neophytou's results reveal an opposite dynamic. His coefficients are mostly negative prior to the broadcast. After the broadcast, the coefficients turn positive and significant, especially 12 to 36 hours after, indicating that his voters' answers moved further away from his stated positions. Clarifying his positions increased perceived distance on specific issues, eroding rather than strengthening congruence. A possible reason is that during the broadcast, he adopted more centrist positions on welfare and the economy and expressed more liberal views on rights, which may have alienated parts of his traditionally conservative base. In contextual terms, Neophytou faced an uphill battle, as his campaign was overshadowed by intra-party divisions. Many traditional DISY voters were ambivalent, with some leaning towards Christodoulides, who had previously served in DISY governments. The broadcast may have highlighted these internal tensions by making Neophytou's stances appear less representative of the broader DISY electorate, thus widening the gap between him and his declared supporters.

The pattern for Christodoulides is more muted. His coefficients hover close to zero before and immediately after the broadcast, suggesting stability. Yet starting around 12 hours post-broadcast, the coefficients rise significantly, implying that his supporters also drifted somewhat further away from his declared answers.

A plausible explanation is the well-publicised VAA recommendation that matched him with Mavroyiannis rather than himself, which may have prompted some reassessment among his base. Another factor was Christodoulides' strategy of choosing the non-directional answer "neither agree nor disagree" on four key valence issues—environmental protection, same-sex adoption, refugee benefits, and wealth redistribution. Neither Mavroyiannis nor Neophytou resorted to this option in any of the 22 items, regarding it as a signal of dishonesty, but Christodoulides' use of it reinforced perceptions that he was obscuring his positions. More broadly, he adopted a mainstream and pragmatic tone that allowed him to attract support ranging from the centre-left to the right. This catch-all coalition of voters meant that he was already the least congruent candidate with his electorate (Triga et al., 2024), as also seen in Table 1, and therefore, there was little scope for the televised VAA completion to have an effect.

To address potential compositional differences between users who completed the VAA before and after the televised broadcast, we conducted two additional robustness checks replicating the main event-study specification under alternative weighting schemes. First, we implemented a nearest-neighbour matching procedure (3:1 ratio with replacement) on age, sex, education, and political interest. The same event-study model was then re-estimated on the matched data using the matching weights. Second, we performed a raked event-study, in which observations from the reference (pre-broadcast) period were iteratively weighted so that the marginal distributions of key demographics aligned with those of the treated (post-broadcast) group. When raking was infeasible, a stabilised inverse-probability-weighted specification served as a fallback. Both checks are conceptually equivalent to the baseline specification but explicitly adjust for observed differences in user composition. The resulting estimates, shown in Figure A1 (matched) and Figure A2 (raked/inverse probability weighting) in the Supplementary File, closely replicate the main event-study results. The matched specification reduces the mild pre-event trend observed for Mavroyiannis in Figure 1 and strengthens the evidence of a clear downward shift beginning on the evening of his televised completion and continuing into the following day, confirming that compositional imbalance does not account for the observed convergence pattern. These results show that televised completion of the VAA produced asymmetric effects across candidates. For Mavroyiannis, the event appears to have aligned his supporters more closely with him, while for Neophytou and Christodoulides, it seems to have revealed incongruences. These dynamics underscore the centrality of context and candidate profiles in shaping the direction of cue effects. Importantly, they also highlight that elite signals do not always consolidate support but can, in some cases, expose underlying divergences.

We now turn to a more granular analysis of voter-candidate congruence, moving beyond the aggregate affinity score. Instead of treating congruence as a single summary measure across all policy items, we assess how it varies across individual issues and how this variation is conditioned by issue polarisation. The central expectation is that televised exposure should be most consequential on divisive issues. When an issue is already consensual, voters require little additional information to locate themselves relative to a candidate; when it is polarising, televised debates may clarify where candidates stand and help voters reconcile their own views with those positions.

To measure issue polarisation, we computed for each of the 22 VAA policy items a weighted bimodality coefficient using all responses recorded before the first televised broadcast. The coefficient combines skewness and kurtosis to capture the extent to which responses form two opposing camps rather than a single mode. The weighting corrects for one-sided skew, giving higher scores only when both poles of

disagreement are clearly represented. Low bimodality coefficient values, therefore, mark issues of broad agreement, while high values identify genuinely polarised topics that divide the electorate.

Using this issue-level measure, we examined whether voter–candidate distance shifts before and after a candidate’s televised appearance depend on issue polarisation. The models include hour-of-day and weekday fixed effects, with standard errors clustered by day. The unit of analysis is the voter–candidate distance on a single issue.

Figure A4 in the Supplementary File plots the predicted voter–candidate distance before and after each broadcast across levels of issue polarisation. Distance increases with polarisation, that is, voters are generally further from their preferred candidate on divisive issues. For Mavroyiannis, as shown in Figure 2, the broadcast is associated with a reduction in distance on the least polarising issues, with little change on highly polarised ones. For Neophytou and Christodoulides, pre- and post-broadcast lines are parallel and overlapping, indicating no effect. These patterns may reflect the candidates’ strategic choice to maintain moderate positions on polarising issues to avoid alienating segments of their coalitions. However, the observed reduction in Mavroyiannis’ voter–candidate distance runs contrary to our initial expectation, as the overall decline in distance documented in the earlier event-study results appears to stem primarily from improved alignment on the least polarising issues rather than clarification on divisive ones.

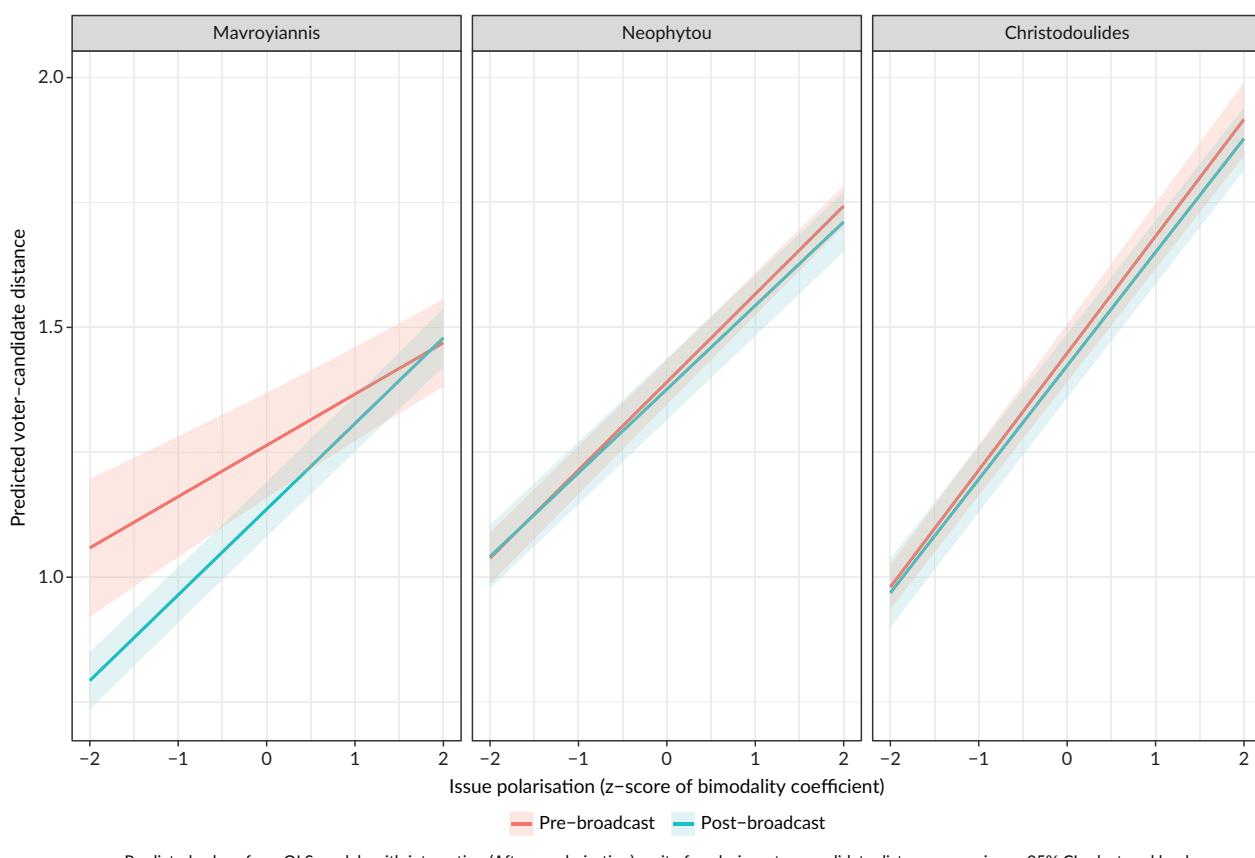


Figure 2. Predicted voter–candidate distance before and after each televised broadcast across levels of issue polarisation.

Finally, the average marginal effects (AMEs) in Table 2 quantify how, after the televised completion, the average distance between a candidate's supporters and that candidate's stance on each item changed relative to the pre-event baseline. Negative values signal convergence, while positive values indicate divergence.

Table 2. Average marginal effects (post-event).

Question	Christodoulides	Mavroyiannis	Neophytou
Environmental protection is more important than economic growth	−0.588***	−0.147	1.194***
The church should have a say in the Minister of Education	0.774***	−0.559	−0.326
Immigrants contribute positively to Cyprus culture	0.482	−1.121***	1.162*
Fence along the Green Line solves immigration	1.724***	−0.307	−2.189**
Same-sex couples equal rights, including adoption	−0.339	−0.946	2.199**
Legalise recreational cannabis	−0.726	0.764	0.410
Abolish refugee benefits if not working	0.287	−1.620***	−0.835*
Accelerate European integration	0.627***	−0.417	0.979***
Support EU sanctions against Russia	−0.795*	−0.693	1.293**
Apply for NATO membership	0.150	−4.322***	−0.412
Privatisation improves service efficiency	0.482	−1.859*	−0.383
Minimal state intervention in the economy	0.608*	0.671	0.164
Redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor	0.183	0.119	−0.169
Increase corporate profit taxes	0.403	0.520*	0.472
Rent-to-buy on state land for housing	0.120	1.757**	−0.777*
“Golden passports” were a sound economic policy	−1.084***	−1.739***	0.496
Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots cannot live together again	1.410*	−3.363**	1.557***
Bi-zonal bi-communal federation is viable	−0.936***	−2.557***	2.164*
Resume negotiations after Crans-Montana	0.328	−2.991***	2.289**
More checkpoints harm the Greek Cypriot side	1.319***	−1.929***	−0.133
Gas pipeline via Turkey before a solution	0.079	0.362	0.320
Referendums are proper decision tools	0.399	−0.672	2.876***

Note: Stars denote statistical significance: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

For Mavroyiannis, convergence is evident on the core progressive and pro-solution items that defined his campaign. He placed himself firmly at the liberal end on cultural issues (fully supporting same-sex adoption, opposing church influence, fences, and welfare retrenchment). Supporters moved toward him after the broadcast, reflected in negative AMEs such as −1.121 on immigrants' contribution, −1.620 on refugee benefits, and −1.859 on privatisation. On the Cyprus problem, where he unequivocally backed a bizonal federation, resumption of talks, and coexistence, large negative AMEs (−2.557, −2.991, and −1.929) show his base realigning to his pro-federal stance. NATO membership is especially striking: he rejected it outright, and the −4.322 AME indicates that many ambivalent supporters converged strongly toward his opposition. These results fit the expectation that cues matter most where voters are less entrenched and where candidates provide clarity.

For Christodoulides, who adopted centrist positions, the AMEs show selective convergence and divergence. He often placed himself at intermediate points (e.g., “neither agree, nor disagree” on environment vs. growth, “disagree” on church influence, “neither agree, nor disagree” on adoption rights, “disagree” on NATO). This ambiguity broadened his appeal but made him a weak anchor. His supporters converged on some issues associated with the Anastasiades-DISY government, such as the “golden passports” scheme (−1.084) and the bizonal federation (−0.936). Yet divergence appears where his centrism clashed with stronger leanings in his coalition. He opposed the Green Line fence, yet his nationalist supporters held to their harder stance (+1.724). On coexistence with Turkish Cypriots, he expressed support, but rejectionist elements within his base produced divergence (+1.410). In short, Christodoulides’s ambiguity attracted diverse supporters, but the cue exposed their differences: convergence on broadly consensual themes, divergence where middle-of-the-road cues met entrenched predispositions.

For Neophytou, the pattern is bifurcated. He consistently adopted market-liberal, pro-Western, and moderately conservative positions: favouring fences, welfare conditionality, NATO, sanctions on Russia, minimal state intervention, and privatisation. His supporters converged on some of these, notably the fence (−2.189), refugee benefits (−0.835), and privatisation (−0.383), suggesting the cue clarified his stance. Yet substantial divergence also appears, particularly on Europe, social liberalism, and the Cyprus problem. Although he strongly supported a bizonal federation and resumption of talks, his supporters diverged after the event (+2.164 and +2.289). On cultural issues, divergence was pronounced: despite supporting LGBT adoption rights, his base moved sharply away (+2.199), reflecting the disconnect between his progressive stance and the conservative instincts of Cyprus’s mainstream right. These patterns reveal that the televised cue accentuated fissures in his base: alignment improved on traditional centre-right issues of security and markets, but supporters resisted his more cosmopolitan or pro-solution signals.

To further probe the dynamics of cueing, we plot two RDiT models for NATO membership and same-sex couples’ adoption rights. While the AMEs reveal whether congruence increased or decreased overall, these figures allow us to observe when, in the hours following the televised completion, the candidates’ cues began to exert influence on their supporters.

Figure 3 shows how congruence with each candidate’s stated stance on NATO membership evolved in six-hour bins before and after the televised completion. Mavroyiannis, who firmly opposed NATO entry, experienced rapid convergence as his supporters adjusted toward his position in the hours after the broadcast. This shift became primarily apparent 12 hours after the televised completion. Christodoulides, who also opposed NATO membership, saw no systematic movement, suggesting his cue did not alter his divided base on the issue. Neophytou, who clearly backed NATO, also saw no major shifts, consistent with the idea that his pro-Atlantic supporters were already aligned pre-event.

Figure 4 depicts congruence dynamics on same-sex couples’ adoption rights. Mavroyiannis, who strongly supported equal rights, experienced no substantial post-event shifts, as his base was already aligned with his liberal position. Christodoulides, who expressed a more ambivalent stance, likewise, shows little movement, reflecting a coalition split between liberal and conservative instincts. By contrast, Neophytou, who supported same-sex adoption, saw significant divergence: many of his socially conservative supporters moved further away from his declared position after the broadcast, underscoring the difficulty of reconciling his progressive stance with the preferences of his traditionalist electorate. This divergence is again evident after the plus 12-hour bin.

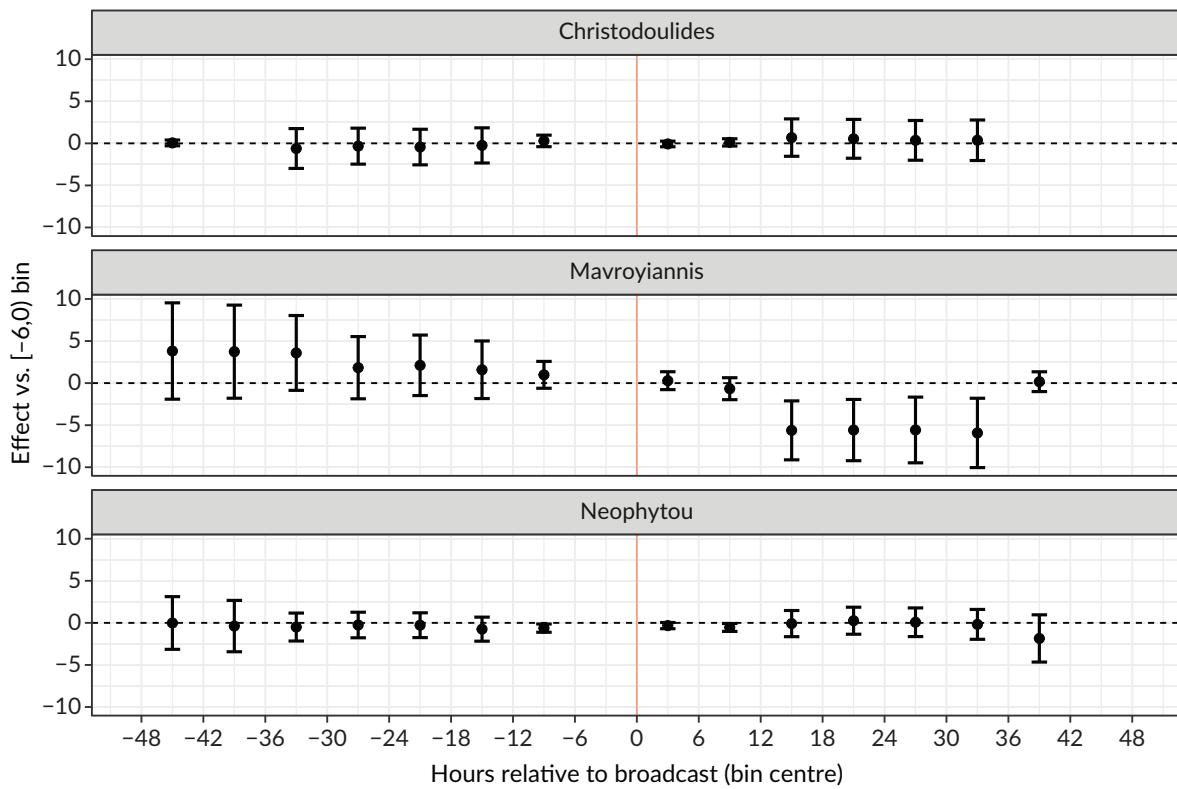


Figure 3. Effect of televised VAA completion on voter–candidate congruence for NATO membership.

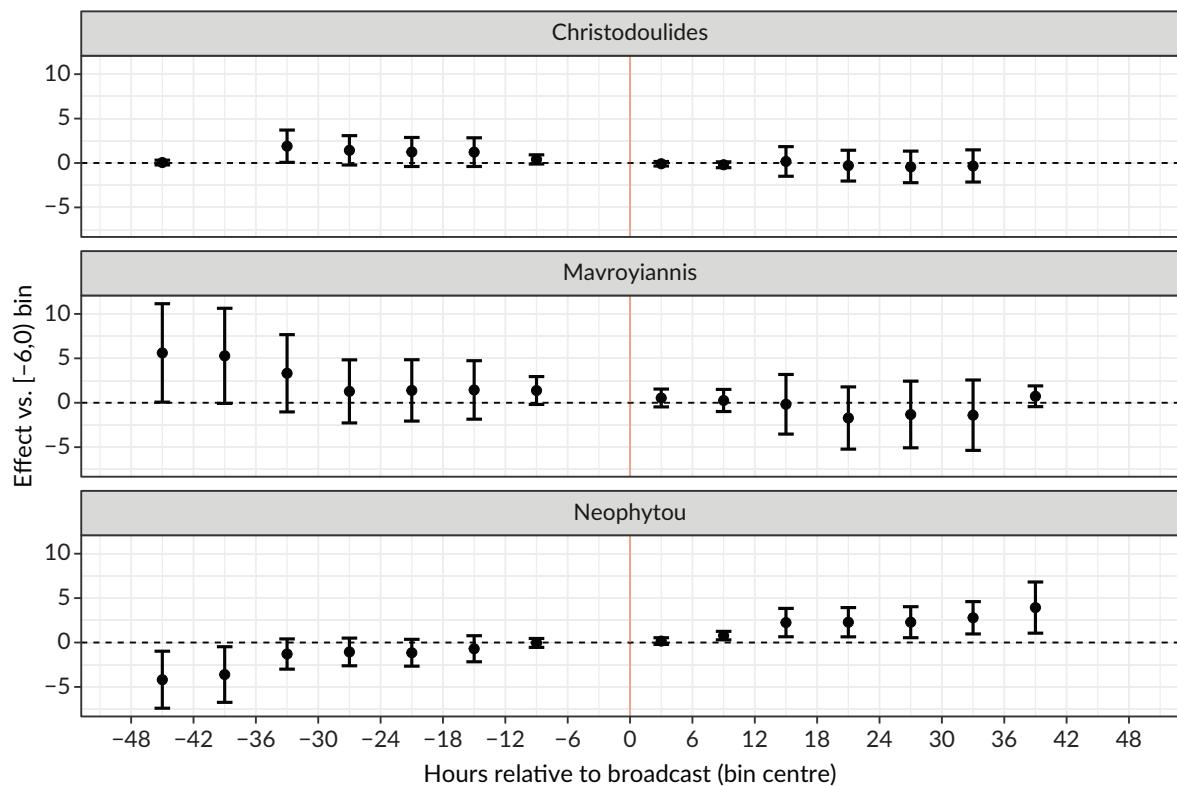


Figure 4. Effect of televised VAA completion on voter–candidate congruence for same-sex couples' adoption.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the televised completion of the VAA by the three leading candidates in the 2023 Cypriot presidential election provides an unusual window into how candidate cues operate in a high-salience campaign. The first expectation was that congruence between voters and their chosen candidate would increase after the televised event, as supporters aligned themselves more closely with the positions their preferred candidate made explicit. The evidence from the regression discontinuity models does not confirm this expectation in any general sense. There was no uniform pattern across candidates, and the effect of the televised cue was contingent on candidate profiles. For Mavroyiannis, who campaigned with a clear progressive and pro-solution profile, the televised disclosure of positions drew his supporters closer to him, though this convergence was mostly concentrated on low-polarisation issues rather than divisive ones. For Neophytou and Christodoulides, the effect was the opposite: rather than reducing the gap between the candidate and the base, the cue revealed and in some cases, widened underlying divergences. The first expectation is therefore only conditionally supported. Cues can strengthen congruence, but they can also trigger divergence when they expose the heterogeneity of electoral coalitions or highlight the ambiguous positioning of candidates (Bullock, 2011).

This outcome speaks directly to the role of candidate characteristics. Mavroyiannis represented a more ideologically coherent base, largely composed of AKEL voters who expected a pro-solution, progressive stance. His VAA completion confirmed these expectations and clarified his positions on issues such as NATO membership. Supporters responded by adjusting their responses, producing observable convergence. Neophytou, by contrast, led a party with an established pro-Western and market-liberal identity, but his electorate included socially conservative voters and members of a party fractured by the candidacy of Christodoulides. His explicit stance favoring socially liberal positions, such as adoption rights, produced divergence among his supporters. Christodoulides relied on ambiguity and attempted to cultivate a broad appeal across the spectrum. The VAA completion forced him to reveal intermediate or non-committal positions, which failed to anchor his coalition. On issues tied to national identity and the Cyprus problem, his cues even generated divergence. Ambiguity may help in attracting broad support, but the disclosure of concrete positions risks alienating segments of such a coalition.

The second expectation was that congruence would increase mainly on issues less embedded in Cypriot political competition and where voters are more heterogeneous. The supplementary issue-level analysis, using the weighted bimodality coefficient to capture issue polarisation, provides a different view. The results show that congruence is generally higher on consensual, low-polarisation issues, while divisive issues tend to produce larger voter-candidate gaps. Crucially, television broadcasts did not reduce these differences on polarizing issues. Instead, the narrowing of the gap between voters and candidates seems to be due to better alignment on less divisive issues, and this only in the case of Mavroyiannis. This suggests that televised cues primarily clarified already cohesive positions rather than bridging divides. One possible explanation is that all three candidates sought to maintain moderate stances on contentious issues, limiting the scope for convergence among opposing camps.

Taken together, these findings highlight that cue-taking is not a mechanical process of alignment but a conditional one. Candidate characteristics, the internal cohesion of their support bases, and the polarisation of issues all interact to shape outcomes. Rather than a universal effect of televised cues on congruence, the

evidence points to asymmetric dynamics. Candidates with coherent and less established images may use such events to strengthen congruence, while candidates with heterogeneous coalitions or those relying on ambiguity may find that the same events reveal divisions.

The study, therefore, contributes to the literature on VAAs and political heuristics by showing that VAAs do not simply provide information to voters but, when candidates themselves participate, they create highly visible cueing moments with varied consequences. Our findings suggest that when candidates reveal their positions publicly, the effect is mediated by the nature of their coalition and the issues at stake.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study emphasises that cues act as heuristics that help voters resolve uncertainty, but their effectiveness is conditioned by issue polarisation and predispositions. The results are consistent with this framework: cues were effective for Mavroyiannis because his base was predisposed to accept his progressive positions; cues failed for Neophytou and Christodoulides because predispositions diverged from their stances, or the candidates lacked credibility as anchors due to ambiguity. Notably, the study shows that divergence is also a possible outcome of cueing. This challenges the assumption in much of the literature that elite cues primarily increase alignment. When candidates cannot sustain ambiguity, cues can expose and deepen divisions within their coalitions.

The implications extend beyond Cyprus. In multiparty systems with fluid alignments, elite signals may produce asymmetric or contradictory effects. VAAs and similar tools that publicise elite positions can clarify competition but may destabilise coalitions built on ambiguity. For scholars of opinion formation, the lesson is that cues should be studied not as uniform mechanisms but as contingent interventions whose effects depend on both candidates and voters.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data underlying this article are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

Large Language Models were used solely for proofreading and minor editorial improvements to the final manuscript. Specifically, ChatGPT 5.0 was employed for this purpose.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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