






ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The rhyme and reason of rebel support: exploring European voters' attitudes toward dissident MPs

Dominik Duell<sup>1</sup> , Lea Kaftan<sup>2</sup> , Sven-Oliver Proksch<sup>3</sup> , Jonathan Slapin<sup>4</sup>   
and Christopher Wratil<sup>5</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria, <sup>2</sup>Department of Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, Witten/Herdecke University, Witten, Germany, <sup>3</sup>Cologne Center for Comparative Politics, University of Cologne, Cologne, Germany, <sup>4</sup>University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland and <sup>5</sup>University of Vienna, Department of Government, Vienna, Austria

**Corresponding author:** Christopher Wratil; Email: [christopher.wratil@univie.ac.at](mailto:christopher.wratil@univie.ac.at)

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## Abstract

Citizens often support politicians who vote against their parties in parliament. They view rebels as offering better representation, appreciate expressive acts, take rebellion as a signal of standing up for constituents, or see rebels as defending their moral convictions. Each explanation has different implications for representation, but they have not yet been tested systematically against one another. We implement survey experiments on nationally representative samples in the UK, Germany, France, and Italy to assess whether voters treat rebellion as a cue for better representation or infer positive character traits implying a valence advantage. Policy congruence does not drive voters' preference for rebels. However, voters do associate positive traits with rebel MPs, even if they do not feel better represented by them.

**Keywords:** Experimental research; political parties and interest groups; representation and electoral systems; voting behavior

## 1. Introduction

It seems a well-established fact that voters across different countries and political systems express more support for, and greater trust in, legislators who are willing to dissent from their party, both on votes and in parliamentary debate (Kam, 2009; Carson *et al.*, 2010; Vivyan and Wagner, 2012; Proksch and Slapin, 2015; Campbell *et al.*, 2016; Wagner *et al.*, 2019; Bøggild, 2020; Bøggild and Pedersen, 2020; Besch and López-Ortega, 2021). Support for these rebels exists despite the fact that voters value party unity and punish divided parties (Greene and Haber., 2015; Lehrer *et al.*, 2022). The existing research offers various reasons for voter support, linking dissent to different conceptualizations of political representation. For instance, voters may appreciate MPs more when they explain their parliamentary behavior in terms of their own personal convictions (e.g., trustee representation), in terms of the preferences of a particular constituency (e.g., delegate representation), or with partisan explanations. Research has generally found that while voters do not distinguish between trustee and delegate explanations for rebellion (see Campbell *et al.*, 2016), they prefer both types of explanation over loyalty to party (Bøggild, 2020). Moreover, research suggests that voters value rebellion as an expressive act, one that signals that an MP likely possesses desirable character traits, including the willingness to represent voters (Vivyan and Wagner, 2012; Campbell *et al.*, 2016; Wagner *et al.*, 2019).

In this study, we present the results of a main survey experiment and a follow-up study aimed at understanding the impact of parliamentary dissent on voters' perceptions of representation. The parliamentary setting of rebellion is chosen deliberately. While intra-party dissent may

occur at any stage in the political process, it is arguably most costly for parties during the policy-making stage, as deviations from party unity can result in failed or delayed legislation. In both surveys, we use a new factorial vignette design in which we present each respondent with several descriptions of a parliamentary voting situation. Our study makes three contributions. First, because much of the literature focuses on rebellion as a cue for better representation, we ask respondents to rate MPs on outcome measures that focus specifically on representation, while showing that our results also hold for other more commonly used outcome measures. Second, whereas previous studies have only examined congruence between MPs and voters in an abstract sense, we focus on specific issues and uncover the role of substantive policy congruence on voters' views of representation by rebels and non-rebels. Thus, we focus on support for individual acts of rebellion linked to decision making, rather than support for MPs who tend to be more rebellious. And third, we examine how voters view rebels with respect to valence characteristics, such as honesty and independence, using an experimental as opposed to observational design.

The main experiment was conducted in nationally representative samples across four countries—France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom—on a total of  $N = 14,000$  respondents in early 2020. A follow-up experiment was designed to uncover the mechanisms underpinning some of the findings from the first experiment. It was run in 2021 with respondents from the United Kingdom only (2,307 respondents).<sup>1</sup> With its focus on rebellion on specific policy issues, our design is more contextually rich than previous survey experiments. We first elicit respondents' positions on different politically salient topics, and then provide respondents with multiple vignettes describing single MPs. The vignettes vary the positions that hypothetical politicians take on our policies and whether or not they dissent from their party on a related vote, along with other characteristics such as whether their party is in government, whether their vote was decisive for the vote outcome, and how long they have served in parliament. Thus, we can examine the extent to which rebellion is prized even when it goes against a respondent's personal policy position, or the positions of voters more generally. Finally, our outcome measures capture whether the respondent views the MP that they have just encountered to represent the ideal of what an MP should be and whether they feel represented by the MP.

We find that respondents support rebels—namely, they report that they would like other MPs to be like the rebel MP—corroborating existing research. Support for rebels appears to be unrelated to policy congruence, and rebellion does not lead respondents to feel more represented. Respondents, however, tend to associate positive character traits, such as independence, honesty, and having strong personal convictions, with rebel MPs. Interestingly, support for rebels over non-rebels is most pronounced in the first vignette that respondents see and it tapers off in subsequent vignettes. The second, follow-up experiment shows that these diminishing rebel effects persist even when we alter our survey design to more closely reflect the designs used by other researchers. However, respondents are likely to associate positive adjectives with rebels regardless of when they are asked to make these associations within our design. Thus, respondents react to our treatments even after rating multiple vignettes—they simply respond differently.

These findings imply that voters' stated support for rebellious behavior might reflect an initial cognitive response to a description of a political situation. But after deeper reflection of similar situations, the allure of rebels dissipates. It remains unclear which response—that following an initial interaction or that following deeper reflection—better captures voters' real-world interaction with rebels. Citizens who fleetingly hear accounts of a parliamentary rebellion may greet it enthusiastically, while those who repeatedly encounter reports or have more opportunity

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<sup>1</sup>The main experiment was conducted with YouGov and the follow-up experiment with Dynata. Registrations associated with the experiments are hosted on OSF: [Link to main experiment](#), [Link to follow-up experiment](#). The experiments received ethical approval from the Ethics Committees of the University of Cologne and the University of Essex. We pre-registered the follow-up experiment and received ethical approval after conducting the main experiment, but before going into the field with the follow-up experiment.

for deeper engagement may come to view rebellion less positively. Nevertheless, voters are still willing to attribute positive characteristics to rebels even after feelings of increased representation fade, suggesting that any support for rebellion is likely related to a valence dimension; albeit one that does not translate into feelings of representation. Thus, the observational benefits that MPs seem to derive from dissent may come through greater media attention and name recognition rather than through direct voter support for the act of rebellion itself (Kam, 2009).

## 2. The link between rebellion, ideology, policy congruence and valence

Experimental studies that seek to uncover how voters view MPs' partisan dissent vary significantly in their research designs, the contextual information provided to respondents, and the countries in which they are conducted. But they are remarkably consistent in their findings that voters express support for rebels. Some studies present survey respondents with vignettes that describe dissent devoid of the policy context in which it occurs, focusing instead on MPs who are more rebellious over the long term, regardless of policy content (e.g., Campbell *et al.*, 2016), others with respect to a policy lacking ideological content or without specifying the direction of policy change (Bøggild and Pedersen, 2020; Besch and López-Ortega, 2021; Bøggild, 2020), and still others by categorizing a hypothetical MP's ideology on the basis of multiple policy positions without directly linking them to the policy position of the respondent (Carson *et al.*, 2010). Studies also vary in the nature of comparisons they ask respondents to make. Some show respondents a number of comparisons between two hypothetical MPs and ask them to choose one MP over the other (or to rate both) in the context of a paired conjoint experiment (e.g., Campbell *et al.*, 2016; Wagner *et al.*, 2019). Other studies use a factorial vignette design, presenting each respondent with only one single vignette about a single MP (e.g., Carson *et al.*, 2010; Bøggild and Pedersen, 2020; Besch and López-Ortega, 2021). The variation in design choices makes it difficult to disentangle the effects of the design from the effects of particular explanations about why voters support rebels. Moreover, none of the existing designs test the impact of substantive policy congruence between voters and the MPs on support for rebellion. Additionally, studies present evidence that voters value independence as a trait in an MP (e.g., Campbell *et al.*, 2016). However, they have not shown experimentally that respondents associate independence and other valence characteristics with rebellion.<sup>2</sup> Despite this variation in designs, the studies consistently find that rebellion is an asset when seeking voter support with few exceptions. For example, in the US Congress, Harbridge and Malhotra (2011) find support for crossing the aisle in general, but also find that strong partisans punish members of Congress who engage in too much bipartisanship.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Campbell *et al.* (2016) find that strong party identifiers are less likely to reward rebellion in the context of British politics. Nevertheless, the findings across these various settings are remarkably consistent in demonstrating that voters express comparatively strong support for MPs engaging in party dissent.

The design of our study differs from the existing studies in important ways. We specifically design our study to examine whether the rebel effect runs through policy and ideological congruence. Of the previous studies only Carson *et al.* (2010) consider ideological congruence, but they do not explicitly consider congruence on specific, salient policy issues. Instead, they construct a measure of latent ideological distance between the respondent and the member of Congress. In contrast, we chose a series of salient policy proposals that relate to relevant ideological conflicts across countries.

We also provide the respondents with a richer information environment than most previous studies. Respondents are given additional information on whether the public supports the bill,

<sup>2</sup>Table A.1 in the appendix presents every survey-experimental study of which we are aware that examines whether voters support MPs who vote against their party. It summarizes these studies on key dimensions of their research designs.

<sup>3</sup>The studies conducted in the USA (e.g., Carson *et al.*, 2010; Harbridge and Malhotra, 2011) frame voting against the party as an act of bipartisanship, which in the US context is often the case, but not always (see, e.g., Kirkland and Slapin, 2018; Duck-Mayr and Montgomery, 2022).

whether the MP's party is in government, whether the MP's vote is pivotal for the outcome of the parliamentary process, or whether the bill is adopted or rejected, among other attributes. The amount of contextual information may make it more difficult to find an effect for being a rebel as respondents may gloss over information about dissent—manipulation checks, however, reveal that they do not—but it also creates a more realistic environment and allows us to potentially rule out alternative explanations. It also prevents respondents from inferring left-out information and perhaps attributing that left-out information to an act of rebellion. To compare our findings with those from existing studies and so that we are not simply adding to the number of designs used, we also incorporate treatments that mirror the conditions in these previous studies.

Before theorizing and testing the reasons behind voter support for rebellion, we would like to be confident that an effect of rebellion exists. Ideally, we would replicate the results from previous experiments that find voter support for rebel MPs. In the context of our experiment, we would hope to find that voters do, indeed, want MPs to be like the rebellious MPs portrayed in our vignettes and also that voters feel represented by these rebels. This leads us to our first hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1:** Respondents express more support and they feel better represented by MPs who are willing to vote contrary to their party leadership on bills.

Assuming that we find support for hypothesis 1, we then move on to test reasons for voter support for rebels. The existing literature has suggested that voter support for rebellion can be primarily attributed to voters associating rebellion with valence characteristics (e.g., Campbell *et al.*, 2016; Wagner *et al.*, 2019). These characteristics include an MP's perceived independence, strong personal convictions, honesty, and other positive attributes. But because existing designs do not specifically look at the ideological congruence between rebel MPs and respondents with respect to particular policies, we cannot rule out that rebellion, instead, serves as a signal that the MP stands up for the policy wishes of the voter. If a respondent, who has no information about policy congruence, sees an MP engaging in an act of rebellion, they may (possibly subconsciously) assume that the MP is rebelling to support a position that they would favor. Moreover, the literature to date has demonstrated that voters prefer MPs that they perceive to be independent thinkers, a trait one is likely to associate with MPs willing to buck their party's wishes, but it has not been shown experimentally that voters are more likely to view rebels as independent compared to MPs who remain loyal to their party.

We suggest that voters might support rebellion, not because they value the act of rebellion, *per se*, but rather because it serves as a signal that the MP stands up for the policy wishes of the voter. By examining support for rebels conditional on substantive policy congruence, we are able to tease out the direct effect of rebellion from the effect of rebelling possibly signalling policy congruence. If we find that voters value rebellion, but that the value of rebellion disappears once controlling for policy congruence, we can conclude that voters' support for rebellion runs through policy congruence. In other words, voters support rebels because they think that those rebels likely represent them better on policy concerns.

**Hypothesis 2:** The effect of rebellion is driven by voters taking dissent as a cue for having their own preferences represented better.

If the rebel effect remains after controlling for policy congruence with the respondent, it suggests that other factors may be behind support for rebels. Support for rebellion might arise, not because rebellion is indicative of individual-level congruence, but rather because it signals to voters that MPs are better at representing a larger group of voters. Voters may believe that rebels are better at representing society, even if they do not represent their own policy views on a specific issue. Our third hypothesis moves beyond individual congruence to ask whether rebellion might signal an MP's concern to represent the electorate at large.

Hypothesis 3: The effect of rebellion is driven by voters taking dissent as a cue for having the electorate's preferences represented better.

Of course, we also wish to test experimentally whether respondents attribute valence characteristics with rebellion as the previous literature has suggested that they do. Thus, we test our fourth and final hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4: Respondents are more likely to attribute positive characteristics to rebels than to non-rebels.

If we fail to find support for hypotheses 2 and 3, but we find support for hypothesis 4, it would suggest support for rebels does, indeed, run primarily through rebellion signaling valence characteristics.<sup>4</sup>

The main objective of the experiment is to explore whether and why voters appreciate rebellious activity. Nevertheless, we expect that the government participation of the MP's party, the sex of the MP, and the number of terms an MP has served in parliament affect whether voters like rebellious MPs without stating theoretically grounded predictions of the direction of these effects. Such contextual features will enter the decision situation we create in the experiment.

### 3. Experimental design

In our main survey, we present respondents with a series of hypothetical vignettes as part of a larger survey on political attitudes.<sup>5</sup> The experiment was conducted on nationally representative samples in France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom ( $N = 14,000$ ). In particular, these four European democracies vary with respect to (1) the level of importance that MPs place on supporting their party (van Vonno *et al.*, 2014), (2) how much party unity MPs believe there should be (Willumsen, 2017), and (3) the degree of unity that MPs actually display (Sieberer, 2006; Depauw and Martin, 2008). France and the United Kingdom have tended to have quite high levels of party unity while Germany and Italy have experienced somewhat lower levels (see Depauw and Martin, 2008), and German and British MPs are more likely to say that MPs should vote with their party than MPs in France and Italy (van Vonno *et al.*, 2014). Further, these countries vary institutionally with respect to their electoral systems, which may also impact how voters view rebellion (Wagner *et al.*, 2019). Given that we implement the same vignette design and definitions of issues across these four countries, we are able to ascertain the robustness of our experimental results on rebel MP behavior across the different national contexts and issues described.

After a series of questions about their socio-demographics, political attitudes, and positions on various policy issues, respondents were asked to assess five experimental vignettes. Each vignette describes the action of a particular MP on a parliamentary vote and corresponds to a bill in a different policy area. We asked respondents for their preferred option for each policy issue before the experiment. Respondents always saw the bills in random order. The five bills are about either (1) removing or establishing environmental regulations for businesses; (2) strengthening or weakening ties with the EU; (3) making it easier or harder for foreigners to immigrate; (4) increasing or decreasing the level of social spending financed by taxation; and (5) increasing or decreasing

<sup>4</sup>Our pre-registered hypotheses explicitly formalize the analytical comparisons we make in the analysis section of the article. However, hypotheses 2 and 3 here present these relationships as substantive claims; the details of the tests are laid out in the "Identification and estimation" section below. Note that pre-registered hypothesis 2 corresponds to hypothesis 3 here and vice versa.

<sup>5</sup>The follow-up survey that tests explanations for the findings from this first survey alters the survey design slightly. We describe these design alterations when discussing the follow-up survey in section 5.

**Table 1.** Wording of the presented bills

Policy area	Policy preferences
Social spending and taxes	1: Increase social spending by increasing taxes. 2: Decrease social spending in order to cut taxes.
Competences of the EU	1: Increase the number of areas in which the EU can make policy. 2: Decrease the number of areas in which the EU can make policy.
EU integration	1: Strengthen [country]'s ties to the EU. 2: Weaken [country]'s ties to the EU.
Climate change	1: Establish new environmental regulations, imposing costs on businesses, but helping the fight against climate change. 2: Remove existing environmental regulations, helping businesses generate economic growth, but hindering the fight against climate change.
Immigration	1: Make it easier for foreigners to immigrate to [country]. 2: Make it harder for foreigners to immigrate to [country].

the range of areas in which the EU can make policy. The wording for each bill and its corresponding policy area are shown in [Table 1](#). After reading about the MP, respondents were asked how they felt about the MP on two outcome measures.

The first vignette was introduced with the following frame: “Voting on bills is a key task of Members of Parliament (MPs). You will now see five hypothetical situations. In each of them, MPs vote on a different bill. We would like you to think about each situation separately when responding to the questions.”

### *Factorial vignette design*

On the next screen, all respondents read a short paragraph describing the topic of the bill, the attributes of the MP (gender and tenure), the MP party's government status, and the voting outcome on the bill in parliament (vote and pivotality). These attributes are uniformly randomized at the vignette level. Most importantly, some MPs rebel against their party by voting differently than their party leadership, other MPs vote in the same way as their party leadership. We also randomize the provision of information about the bill's direction and public opinion on the bill at the respondent level. This provides some respondents with a cue about policy congruence between their preferences, the public's preferences, and the MP's behavior, allowing us to test our hypotheses 2 and 3. In both cases, we either provide no information about the bill's direction or its public support, or we tell respondents the direction of the bill and/or whether the public was for or against the bill.

[Table 2](#) shows the full set of randomly assigned attribute levels. Note that the precise wording of the direction of the bill varies by policy issue (i.e., see [Table 1](#)) and that we simplify the presentation of the design here by just focusing on whether the respondent's preference on the issue and the action of the MP in the vignette align or not.<sup>6</sup>

[Table 3](#) shows the nine possible versions of the vignettes that result from the randomization of the bill's direction and public opinion at the respondent level.<sup>7</sup> In the *Baseline* version, we only provide information on the bill type, but not on bill direction or public opinion, which leaves respondents ignorant about both the MP's position on the bill and the public's view. We also implement six other versions. Four of them only show information on one of the two respondent-level attributes: we tell respondents that the public was against (*Against public*) or for the bill (*With public*); or reveal that the MP's behavior aligned (*With voter*) or did not align (*Against voter*) with their preferences. These versions are needed to test our hypotheses 2 and 3 to observe how the rebel effect changes if we provide information on the hypothesized

<sup>6</sup>The full presentation can be found in section B.3.3 of the appendix.

<sup>7</sup>The full wording of vignettes is shown in section B.3.3 of the appendix.

**Table 2.** Attributes and attribute levels

#	Attribute	Values	# of values	Level of randomization
1	Vote	Members of Parliament (MPs) [adopted / rejected] ...	2	Vignette
2	Policy issue of bill	... a bill on [policy issue] ...	5	–
3	Bill direction	... [empty / bill aligned with respondents' preferences - wording varies by issue / bill opposed to respondents' preferences - wording varies by issue].	2	Respondent
4	Pivotality	The bill was [adopted / rejected] by [one vote / a vast majority].	2	Vignette
5	Public support	[empty / The majority of the public was for the bill / The majority of the public was against the bill].	3	Respondent
6	Gender	Think about the following Member of Parliament. [He / she] ...	2	Vignette
7	Government	... belongs to a party that is currently in [government / opposition].	2	Vignette
6	Rebellion	[[He / she] voted for the bill whereas [her / his] party leadership voted against this bill / [He / she] voted for the bill and [her / his] party leadership voted for the bill / [He / she] voted against the bill whereas [her / his] party leadership voted for this bill/[He / she] voted against the bill and [her / his] party leadership voted against the bill]].	4	Vignette
7	MP tenure	This is [his / her] [first / third] term in Parliament.		

**Table 3.** Summary of vignette versions implemented at the respondent level

MP behavior against voter	MP behavior against public opinion		
	Empty	Yes	No
Empty	Baseline	Against public	With public
Yes	Against voter	–	Against voter–With public
No	With voter	With voter–Against public	–

mechanisms. We further implement two of the four remaining possible versions, in which information on both factors is provided (*With voter–Against public* and *Against voter–With public*), as this allows us to address some concerns about people drawing inferences from information on one factor about the other. We do not implement all nine but only seven versions due to resource constraints.<sup>8</sup>

**Outcome measures**

If, as many have argued (e.g., Campbell *et al.*, 2016; Wolkenstein and Wratil, 2021), rebellion is primarily a cue to voters about the type and quality of representation that they receive, our outcome measures should focus on whether respondents feel represented. To capture voter perceptions of representation by MPs, we use two measures that tap into personal feelings about representation and whether an MP represents an ideal MP in society. First, we consider whether respondents would like to be personally represented using the following question: “How well do you feel represented by this MP?” (“1—Not at all” to “7—Very well,” *feel represented*). Second, we ask respondents to reflect upon whether the displayed MP should serve as an ideal type for other politicians using the following question: “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Every [nationality] MP should be like this MP.” (“1—Strongly disagree” to “7—Strongly agree”; *every MP like this MP*). Thus, we specifically prompt respondents to think about representation when considering the MPs’ actions, as well as the extent to which they would like other MPs to

<sup>8</sup>The choice of the versions we implement is explained in detail in section B.3.1 of the appendix. Treatment balance statistics are given in Table B.2 in the appendix.

engage in the same behavior as the MP they observe. This allows us to capture the depth of support for such behavior.<sup>9</sup>

We furthermore elicit respondents' associations of being a rebel with particular character traits of the MP after the last of our five vignettes by asking: "Which of the following character traits would you say describes the MP best? Please choose up to 3 of them," with the list of possible answers including "independent," "loyal to the party," "honest," "strong personal convictions," "defends interest of his/her voters," "willing to compromise," "untrustworthy," "selfish," "disrespectful," "decisive," "irresponsible," "cowardly," "unreliable," and "stupid" (*MP traits*).<sup>10</sup>

### Identification and estimation

To test *hypothesis 1*, we compute the difference in marginal means of the outcome measures *feeling represented* and *every MP like this MP* for profiles that contain a rebel and those that do not. In other words, the effect of rebellion on an outcome measure is estimated by computing  $\tau(\text{Rebel}) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_i^N \text{Outcome}_i(\text{Rebel}) - \frac{1}{M} \sum_i^M \text{Outcome}_i(\text{No rebel})$ , where  $\text{Outcome}_i(\text{Rebel})$  is the answer of respondent  $i$  on the outcome measure when being shown a vignette that features a rebelling MP,  $\text{Outcome}_i(\text{No rebel})$  when a vignette with a non-rebelling MP is displayed, and  $N + M = 70,000$  is the number of respondent-vignette observations in the study. In a fully factorized vignette experiment such as the one presented here, this difference between marginal means is known as Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE; Hainmueller and others (2014)).<sup>11</sup> We find evidence in support of *hypothesis 1* if  $\tau(\text{Rebel}) > 0$ .

To determine whether voters take rebellion as a cue for policy congruence with themselves (*hypothesis 2*) or with public opinion (*hypothesis 3*), we compute the share of the total effect of rebellion that is driven by policy congruence. This quantity measures the extent to which policy congruence mediates the effect of rebellion—that is, how much of the effect of rebellion is explained by the mediator policy congruence. In line with much literature, we conceive of this mediation effect as a causal mechanism, the process through which the treatment affects the outcome of interest (Imai *et al.*, 2013).

Following Acharya *et al.* (2018) we compute the total effect of rebellion, the effect of rebellion when no information about policy congruence is provided as in the *Baseline* version of our design (see Table 3),  $\tau(\text{Rebel}|\text{Baseline})$ , and subtract from it the component of the rebel effect that we know is not driven by policy congruence, the controlled direct effect. More precisely, the controlled direct effect is given by  $\tau(\text{Rebel}|\text{With voter})$  or  $\tau(\text{Rebel}|\text{With public})$ . This leaves us with the rebel effect that runs through policy congruence, a quantity called the "eliminated effect" (Acharya *et al.*, 2018, p. 357). Whenever  $\tau(\text{Rebel}|\text{Baseline}) - \tau(\text{Rebel}|\text{With voter}) > 0$  we would say that we have found evidence that perceptions of representation are due to rebellion's link with policy congruence between the MP and the respondent (*hypothesis 2*). Equivalently, whenever  $\tau(\text{Rebel}|\text{Baseline}) - \tau(\text{Rebel}|\text{With public}) > 0$  we find evidence that perceptions of representation are due to rebellion because of congruence between the MP and public opinion (*hypothesis 3*). The first term is the total effect of rebellion, which we operationalize as the effect of rebellion when information about policy congruence is absent (i.e., in our *Baseline* version). We subtract from this term the rebel effect that cannot be due to congruence because we hold congruence constant. We are left with the rebel effect on the outcome measures that must emerge from congruence.

<sup>9</sup>Figure C.5 in the appendix shows the distribution of the two outcome measures in the first experiment. Evidence for respondents taking the treatment is illustrated by higher values on the outcome measures (*feeling represented* and *every MP like this MP*) in the *With voter* than the *Against voter* treatment (see Figure B.2 in the appendix).

<sup>10</sup>We chose the character traits based on the character traits most often mentioned in open-ended responses in a pre-test. The pre-test was run on an online sample with  $N=1,000$  approximately representative of the UK national electorate through Prolific.

<sup>11</sup>We discuss the underlying identification assumptions in section B.2.



**Table 4.** Summary of empirical tests of the hypotheses

Hypothesis	Empirical support for hypothesis when ...
1	$\tau(\text{Rebel}) > 0$
2	$\tau(\text{Rebel} \text{Baseline}) - \tau(\text{Rebel} \text{With voter}) > 0$
3	$\tau(\text{Rebel} \text{Baseline}) - \tau(\text{Rebel} \text{With public}) > 0$
4	$Prob(\text{Positive attribute} \text{Rebel}) > Prob(\text{Positive attribute} \text{No rebel})$

Finally, we test *hypothesis 4* by comparing the probability that a respondent attributes positive characteristics to rebels and non-rebels using the question following the final vignette in which we ask respondents to report attributes they associate with the MP they just saw. We find evidence for *hypothesis 4* if respondents are more likely to select the attributes “independent,” “honest,” “willing to compromise,” and “defends interest of their voters” when they are shown the profile of a rebel MP than when shown a loyal MP. We also expect respondents who saw a rebel MP in their final vignette to be less likely to select “loyal to the party” compared with respondents who saw a non-rebellious MP.

Table 4 summarizes the empirical tests for all hypotheses. Note that some of the hypotheses can also be tested in further, alternative ways (e.g., as we have various additional vignette versions or expect some heterogeneity in treatment effects).<sup>12</sup>

We estimate all quantities of interest in a linear regression framework with the main coefficient of interest being the one on the treatment indicator. Because respondents make several choices, unless otherwise indicated, we report standard errors clustered at the respondent level.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Rebel effect

We first establish whether there is an overall rebel effect,  $\tau(\text{Rebel})$ . Pooling countries, the AMCE of rebel status on the outcome measure *every MP like this MP* is positive and significantly different from zero at 0.06 (0.04, 0.09), on a 1–7 scale, 95 percent confidence bounds in parentheses with  $p < 0.01$ . In contrast, the AMCE on *feeling represented* by rebels is negative at  $-0.02$  ( $-0.05$ , 0.00) with  $p = 0.07$ . Figure 1 shows the AMCE for all attributes varied at the vignette level, demonstrating the relative extent of the rebel effect on *every MP like this MP* compared to the effect of other attributes.<sup>13</sup>

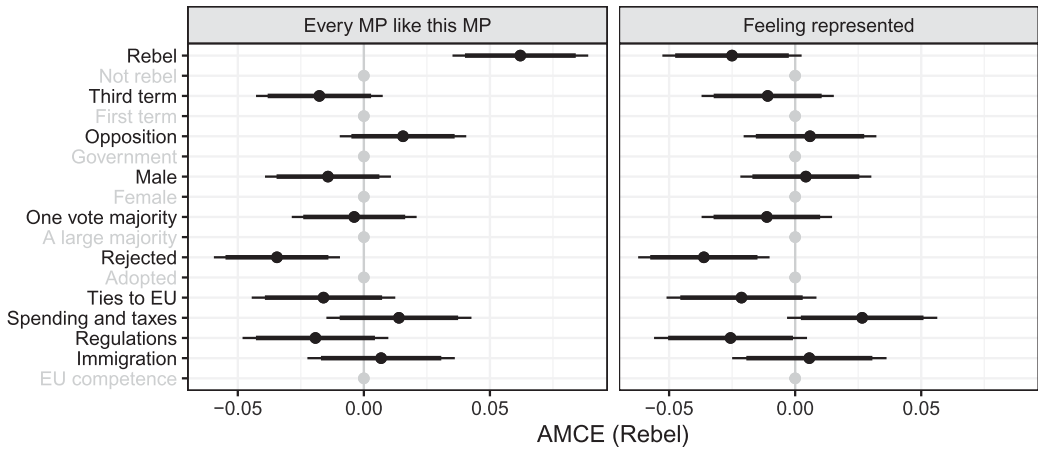
Result 1: Voters do not feel more represented by rebels than party loyalists, but they do report that they wish every MP would be a rebel rather than loyal to the party.

Overall, rebellion is seen as a behavior that would be the preferred behavior for all MPs but rebelling MPs are not seen as better representatives.<sup>14</sup> Both types of observed attitudes may be generated by voters’ true opinion toward rebellious activity or by what a rebel may stand for. Do voters see rebels as ideal type for a good MP because they connect a rebellious act with the MP acting in line with voters’ preferences or the preferences of the broader public? Are voters taking rebellion as cue for policy congruence? Is the rebel effect mediated by policy congruence?

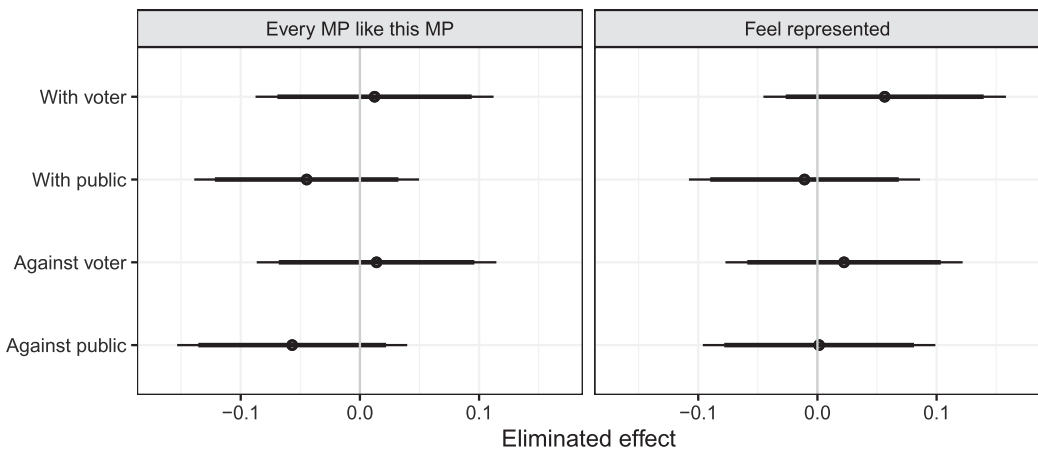
<sup>12</sup>We provide such tests in section C.4 in the appendix. We reference heterogeneous treatment effects throughout the presentation of results below and consider the effect of country or policy issue on the treatment effects in the appendix (see Figures C.8 and C.9).

<sup>13</sup>Whenever we report a test to return a significant result regarding the estimates shown in a figure, we run regressions of the outcome measure on indicators of the attributes shown in the figure (the gray dots indicate the reference category). We report these regressions in Tables C.5–C.11 in the appendix.

<sup>14</sup>We provide further robustness tests in section C.4 in the appendix.



**Figure 1.** AMCE on outcome measures *feeling represented* and *every MP like this MP* for all attributes. *Note:* We report 95 percent (thin line) and 90 percent confidence bounds (thick line) based on clustering standard errors at the respondent level.

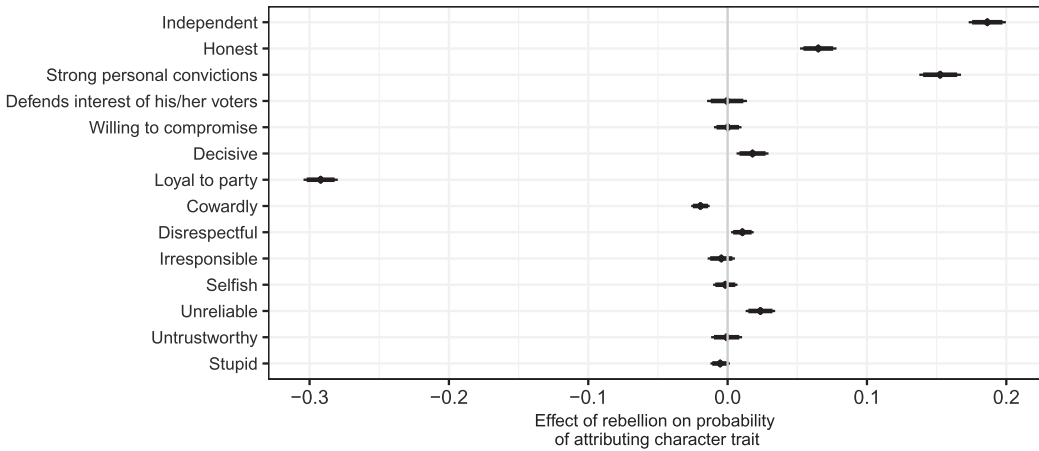


**Figure 2.** Difference between total rebel effect  $\tau(\text{Rebel})$  and rebel effect when respondents learn that the MP shares their policy positions,  $\tau(\text{Rebel}|\text{Congruence})$ , does not share their policy positions  $\tau(\text{Rebel}|\text{No congruence})$ , shares the public’s policy positions,  $\tau(\text{Rebel}|\text{Congruence})$ , or does not share the public’s policy position  $\tau(\text{Rebel}|\text{No congruence})$ . *Note:* We report 95 percent (thin line) and 90 percent confidence bounds (thick line) based on clustering standard errors at the respondent level.

#### 4.2 Rebellion as cue for policy congruence

Our between-respondent experimental design varies information provided to respondents about the alignment of the actions of the MP with the respondent’s own preferences and about alignment with the preferences of the public in general (i.e., our policy congruence treatments). Our test described in the previous section would deliver support for hypotheses 2 and 3 if it reveals a significant and positive difference between the total effect of rebellion and the part of that total effect *not* explained by policy congruence. [Figure 2](#), however, shows no such difference.

Estimates in [Figure 2](#) are taken from a regression of outcome measures on rebel status interacted with an indicator of the preference congruence treatment condition (versus *Baseline*) for the treatment conditions *With voter*, *Against voter*, *With public*, and *Against public*, separately. We



**Figure 3.** Effect of rebellion on whether respondents attribute a character trait to the MP (*MP traits*). *Note:* We report 95 percent (thin line) and 90 percent confidence bounds (thick line) based on clustering standard errors at the respondent level.

plot the coefficients on the interactions. With our design, we find no evidence that respondents use rebellion as a cue for policy congruence. Using a broader definition of policy congruence, we also find no significant eliminated effect.<sup>15</sup>

Result 2: We find no evidence that a voter’s perception of representation due to rebels runs through policy congruence.

### 4.3 Rebels and valence

While we only recover rebel bias for some outcome measures, Figure 3 reveals that voters perceive rebel MPs as clearly different from loyal MPs in terms of the characteristics they attribute to them. The probability that respondents describe MPs as “more independent” is by 0.18 higher for rebels than the probability for loyal MPs. Similarly, this treatment effect of rebellion for “honest” is a 0.07 and 0.15 difference on the probability scale for “strong personal convictions.” Respondents also see rebellious MPs as less loyal to their party; when they are shown a rebel MP, the probability that they associate such an MP with being loyal to the party is lower than the probability associated with a non-rebellious MP. The treatment effect is  $-0.29$ . This last finding, in particular, serves as evidence for respondents recognizing the rebel attribute in the MP profiles shown to them ( $p < 0.01$  for each of the three treatment effects, see Figure 3).<sup>16</sup>

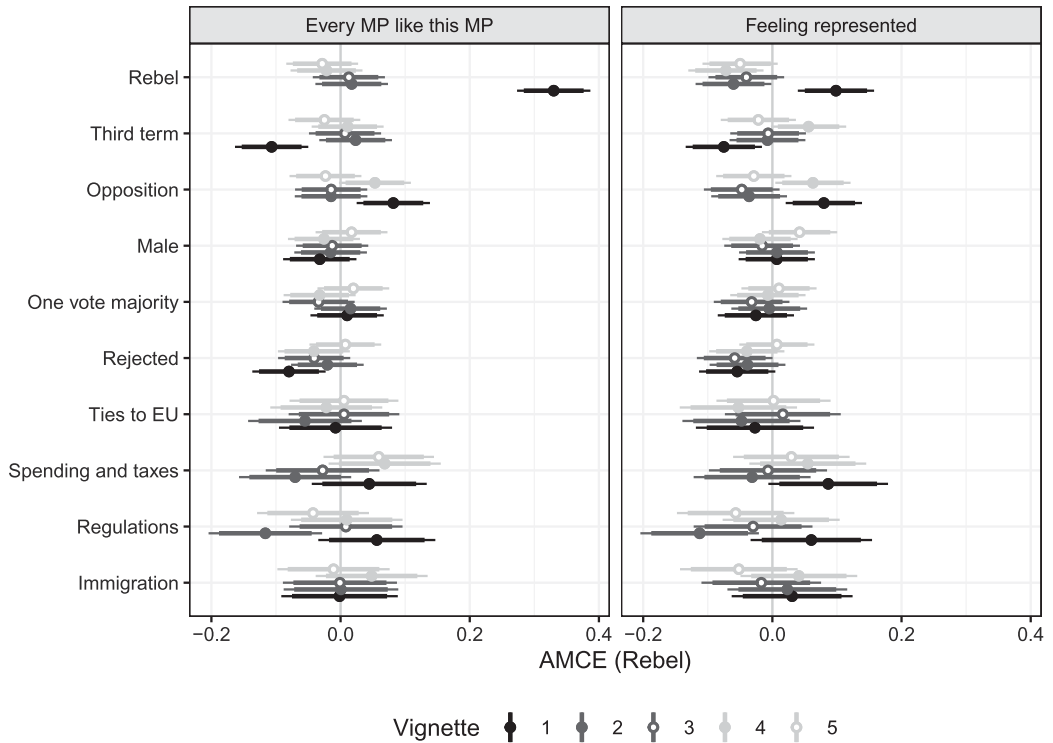
Result 3: Rebel MPs are more often described as “independent,” “honest,” and holding “strong personal convictions” but also as less “loyal to the party” than loyal MPs.

### 4.4 Diminishing rebel bias and valence effects

When we further investigate the effects of rebellion, we discover an interesting pattern. It is the first vignette of five that generates a significant rebel effect in both outcome measures while that effect disappears, and even reverses for the outcome measure *feeling represented*, in the following

<sup>15</sup>In Figure C.6 in the appendix, we show the eliminated effect for a broader definition of the congruence and non-congruence treatments: pooling the treatments *With voter* and *With voter-against public*, *With public* and *Against voter-with public*, *Against voter* and *Against voter-with public*, and *Against public* and *With voter-against public*.

<sup>16</sup>Estimates are taken from a linear probability model with robust standard errors regressing whether a characteristic is mentioned on MP attributes and the issue of the bill voted upon. This effect is particularly strong for respondents whose voices are more positive toward rebels (see Figure C.14 in the appendix).



**Figure 4.** AMCE on outcome measures feeling represented and every MP like this MP for all attributes by vignette number. *Note:* We report 95 percent (thin line) and 90 percent confidence bounds (thick line) based on clustering standard errors at the respondent level.

vignettes. [Figure 4](#) shows the AMCE estimated from observations on the first vignette with a significant and positive rebel effect in both outcome measures (black marker) but none for vignettes 2–5. While there is also some instability in the AMCEs of other attributes, the change in the AMCE of rebellion from the first to the subsequent vignettes is a magnitude larger. The rebel effect also weakens with the number of rebels respondents have encountered in past vignettes.<sup>17</sup>

## 5. Follow-up experiment

As the diminishing rebel effect has not been found by previous studies (e.g., [Campbell \*et al.\*, 2016](#)), we designed a supplementary, follow-up experiment to explore potential design effects and substantive mechanisms that could explain why support for rebels becomes less liked over the course of the vignette tasks.

We hypothesize that the diminishing rebel effect may either be due to design effects or substantive cognitive mechanisms in respondents' minds. With regard to *design effects*, we are particularly concerned that we use different outcome questions in our experiment than [Campbell \*et al.\* \(2016\)](#) and only present a single vignette instead of pairs, as these authors do. With regard to substantive cognitive mechanisms, we hypothesize two possible explanations for the diminishing rebel effect. (1) *Surprise*: rebellion in politics is a rare phenomenon—respondents may be surprised by it at first, and that surprise may generate an effect that wears off starting with the second vignette; (2) *Reflection*: on initial encounter, respondents may view rebellion positively, but

<sup>17</sup>See [Figure C.12](#) in the appendix.

repeated exposure to the possibility of rebellion may cause them to rethink and re-evaluate, retrieving more negative considerations about rebellion.

Our implementation of the follow-up experiment slightly deviates from the main experiment. First, it uses a UK-only sample of 2,307 respondents and was conducted after Brexit. We, therefore, do not ask respondents about competences of the EU and focus on the remaining four issues, only (see Table 1). Second, we only use the *Baseline* version of the vignette, meaning that respondents do not receive information about whether the rebellion goes in a direction that they or the public prefer.<sup>18</sup>

The core of the follow-up experiment are five different treatment arms we designed to test each of the hypothesized explanations for the diminishing rebel effect. Beginning with design effects, we use the *paired vignette* treatment, in which respondents are presented with two sets of four choice tasks. One-fifth of respondents assigned to this treatment arm completed four choice tasks with two vignettes first—seeing two situations with MPs side by side—before completing four tasks with a single vignette afterwards. The “untreated” four-fifths of respondents see the single-vignette tasks first before also completing the paired-vignette tasks. In the *alternative outcome* treatment, we ask a random sub-set of respondents who see the single vignette design first “Based on this information, how much would you like to have this MP as your MP in the House of Commons?” instead of our own outcome measures. Both of these design choices combined are implemented in Campbell *et al.* (2016), who find a stable rebel effect. Results show that using a paired vignette design delivers positive rebel effects for *every MP like this MP* but still provides evidence for a wearing off of any rebel effect in later vignettes. We find no rebel effect using the alternative outcome measure.<sup>19</sup> Thus, we can be confident that our findings of diminishing effects are not merely a function of these design choices.

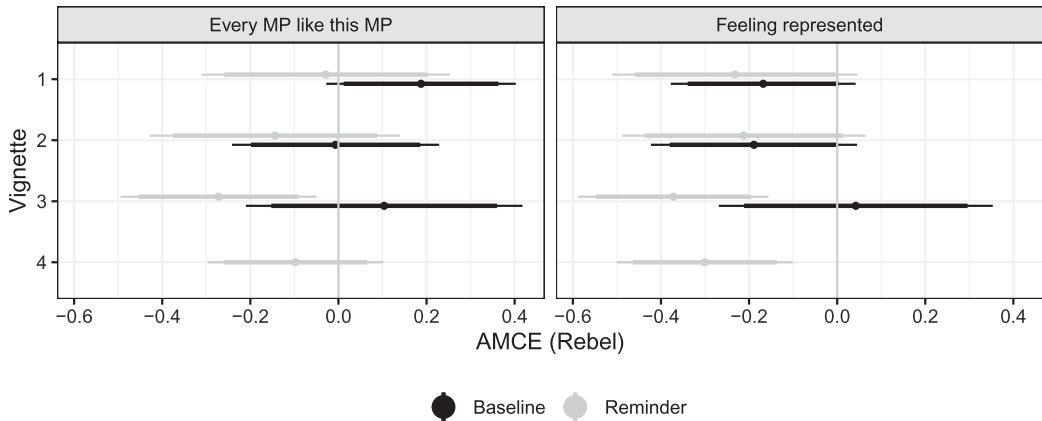
Hence, we test the two substantive cognitive mechanisms that could explain the diminishing rebel effect by randomly assigning those three-fifths of respondents seeing the single vignette design first as well as our outcome questions to three further treatment arms: (1) in the *before reminder* treatment arm, we alert the respondents before they see the first vignette that MPs sometimes vote against their party and ask them to comment on rebels in parliament in an open-ended question; (2) in the *between reminder* treatment, we randomly assign a reminder either before the third or the fourth vignette. Both treatments speak to the first mechanism by making the idea of a rebellious MP available in respondents’ minds when they make a decision, diminishing the surprise of seeing a rebel. (3) In the *MP traits* treatment, we elicit respondents associations of character traits with rebellious MPs not only after the last vignette as in the main experiment, but randomly assigned either after the first, second or third vignette. Here, we wish to measure whether respondents perceptions of rebels turn sour with being exposed to a rebel either repeatedly or in later vignettes, speaking to the reflection mechanism.

In these treatment arms, we use as baseline observations those choice tasks from the *between reminder* treatment where no reminder, and from the *MP traits* treatment where no question on character traits have been shown yet (vignettes 1 and 2 or 1, 2 and 3).<sup>20</sup> For the baseline observations, we replicate the drop in the positive effect of rebellion on the *every MP like this MP* outcome measure between 1st and 2nd vignette out of the four vignettes shown to all respondents. While the AMCE of rebellion is 0.19 (−0.03, 0.40) in the first vignette, it is −0.01 (−0.24, 0.23) in the second vignette as shown at the top of Figure 5 (top two black markers); the difference in

<sup>18</sup>For all details of the follow-up experiment, see section B.4 in the appendix.

<sup>19</sup>See Figure C.15 in the appendix.

<sup>20</sup>In the pre-analysis plan, we specified that we take vignettes 1 and 2 of the *between reminder* treatment as baseline; since more observations in our sample are untreated, we consider all those as well instead. All results reported in this section are robust to the narrower definition of baseline observation.



**Figure 5.** AMCE of rebel attribute on outcome variables *feeling represented* and *every MP like this MP* for baseline observations and observations with reminder. *Note:* We report 95 percent (thin line) and 90 percent confidence bounds (thick line) based on clustering standard errors at the respondent level.

AMCE is not significant.<sup>21</sup> The AMCEs of rebellion on the outcome measure *feeling represented* are negative in both the first and second vignette,  $-0.17$  ( $-0.38, 0.04$ ) and  $-0.19$  ( $-0.42, -0.05$ ), respectively.

We test the surprise mechanism by comparing the AMCE of rebellion for the baseline observations to those treatment observations that received a screen reminding them about the possibility of rebellion either before any or between vignettes (*before reminder* and *between reminder* treatments). We posited that when rebellion does not come as a surprise to respondents, the rebel effect should disappear. Figure 5 demonstrates that when participants are shown a reminder of the possibility of rebellion before one of the four vignettes (depending on treatment assignment, gray markers), the rebel effect is zero or even negative for the *every MP like this MP* outcome measure from the first vignette and drops further negative for the *feeling represented* outcome measure from the first and second to the third vignette. In other words, we find evidence for the mechanism; the positive rebel effect only exists if rebellion is something new. The initial rebel effect is driven by respondents who show a positive sentiment toward rebellion in the open-ended question in the *between reminder* treatment arm.<sup>22</sup>

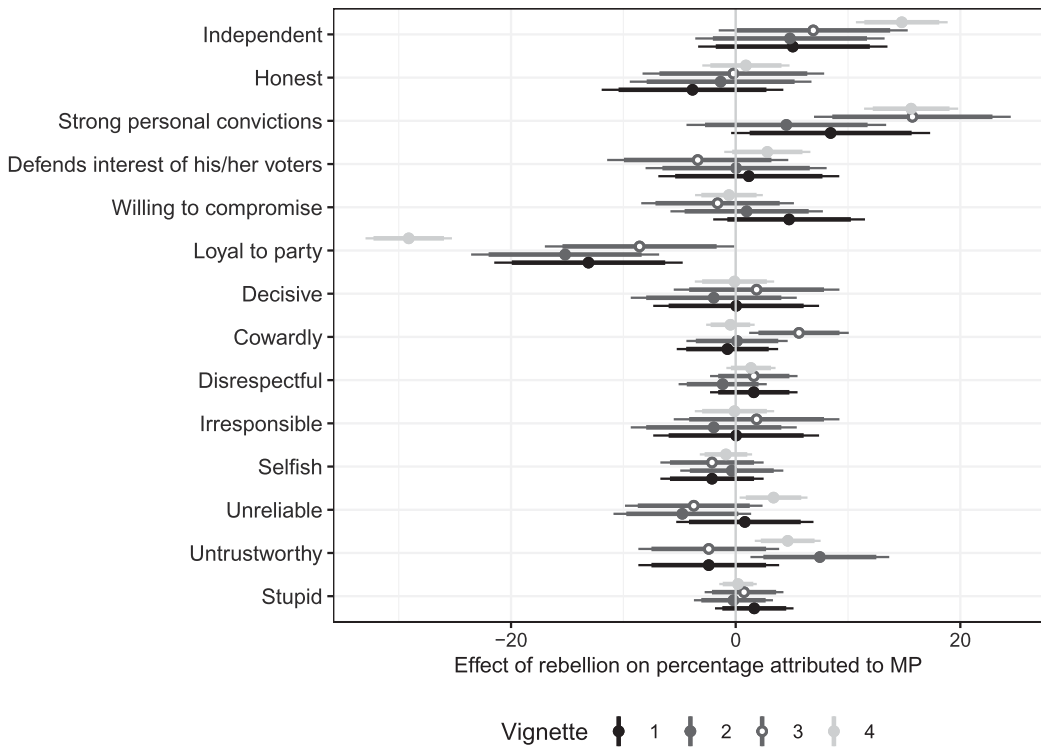
We fail to find evidence for the reflection mechanism that suggests seeing rebels repeatedly or in a later vignette causes more critical perceptions of the rebels. Figure 6 shows, first, that respondents hold similar associations with rebels as they do in the first experiment—they are more likely to see rebels as independent and with strong personal convictions (although not as honest) but less likely to see them as loyal to their party (also see Figure 3). It also illustrates that the positive associations with a rebel MP, being independent and with strong personal convictions, as well as the negative association with a rebel MP, being loyal to the party, if anything, increases in frequency from vignette 1 to 4.<sup>23</sup>

With this follow-up experiment, we have set out to explain the diminishing rebel effect. We find that the wearing off of the rebel effect is not due to us using a single- instead of paired-

<sup>21</sup>Our conclusion about the difference is based on looking at the coefficient on the interaction between rebel status and vignette recovered from a regression of outcome measures on rebel status, an indicator of vignette number (with vignette 1 as reference category), and the interaction of those two variables. The regression is reported in Table C.10 in the appendix.

<sup>22</sup>See Figure C.16 in the appendix.

<sup>23</sup>We obtain the estimate of an increase from a regression of the indicator whether an MP was associated with being independent, has strong personal convictions, or is loyal to the party on rebel status, the number of vignette when the associations are elicited, and the interaction of the two variables as reported in Table C.11 in the appendix.



**Figure 6.** Effect of rebellion on whether respondents attribute a character trait to the MP. Estimates taken from a regression of binary indicator whether a trait is attributed on rebel status interacted with after which vignette those associations were elicited. *Note:* We report 95 percent (thin line) and 90 percent confidence bounds (thick line) based on clustering standard errors at the respondent level.

vignette design, nor is it due to different outcome measures. Instead, the rebel effect completely disappears when respondents are reminded of it before the first effect, while their assignment of character traits to rebels becomes more positive with every vignette they see. We conclude that this diminishing effect is, therefore, most likely due to the surprise mechanism; rebellion is rare, and if it remains rare, voters seem to like it. However, once rebellion becomes more frequent, voters still perceive rebellion as a valence signal for the single MP, but do not seem to like the act of rebellion anymore.

### 6. Discussion and conclusion

The findings presented in the previous section simultaneously confirm and raise questions about previous findings regarding voter support for rebellious MPs. They also provide new insights into how voters view MPs who engage in rebellion and why they support it. Our results confirm previous findings in two regards. First, they show, using yet another experimental design with different outcome measures in a new set of countries, that we can uncover average voter support for rebels over non-rebels. Second, they offer experimental evidence that voters associate rebellion with positive valence characteristics.

In confirming these results, we provide further evidence that voters like individual rebels within parties, even if the literature shows that they dislike divided parties. One resolution to this paradox may lie in careful consideration of when disunity occurs: studies concerned with the overall negative effect of disunity usually focus on the electoral impact, i.e., disunity in the

context of election campaigns. Individual rebellions, however, occur during the policy-making process, when elections are not on voters' minds. Our experiments specifically address individual rebellion during the policy-making stage. Therefore, there may actually be a sweet spot for parties wishing to tolerate some rebellion while maintaining party unity, but it relates less to the frequency of rebellion, and more to when it occurs relative to the next election.

However, our results also show that support for rebellion is more fragile than previously thought, at least when considering voter support for individual instances of rebellion (as opposed to support for MPs who are more rebellious). In a context where we provide information about individual acts of rebellion on specific bills, voter support is strongest when respondents first encounter the notion of rebellion. Once they have thought about and seen scenarios in which MPs could vote against their party, they are less likely to rate rebels more highly than loyal MPs. In fact the rebel bonus disappears. We know that this is not a feature of our design or that respondents become less likely to take our treatment after reading multiple vignettes because they still report that MPs who vote against their party leadership are less loyal to the party. Moreover, they still assign positive characteristics to those disloyal MPs. But those positive characteristics do not seem to translate into greater feelings of representation or more support.

It is difficult to say which results—the stronger findings after the first vignette, or the weaker results after the remaining vignettes—have greater external validity. When voters only periodically encounter rebellion, and then only quickly hear about it in a news report, their reaction to that superficial engagement may most closely resemble the initial cognitive response that they have following the first vignette of our experiment. In instances, though, where people pay more sustained attention, or where there are more instances of rebellion that receive greater coverage, their responses to rebellion may more closely mirror those to our later vignettes.

Finally, our results show that, to the extent that voters do support and feel represented by rebellious MPs, it is not because rebellion on individual votes signals policy congruence to voters or generates feelings of substantive representation in them. Instead, rebellion seems to signal the MP's possession of valence traits such as independence, honesty, and strong personal convictions. These findings are in line with the literature that rebellion may lead to a valence advantage (Campbell *et al.*, 2016).

In sum, our findings suggest that voter support for rebellion may be somewhat fragile, or at least not something that every rebel should count on. How voters react may depend on their level of engagement with the behavior and how often it occurs. But the results also do not mean that there are no advantages to being rebellious. Rebellion still attracts media attention, may help to raise an MP's profile, and may lead to greater name recognition among voters (Kam, 2009). MPs may still, therefore, have an incentive to vote against the party even if voters do not always feel more represented by rebellious MPs.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2023.26>. To obtain replication material for this article, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/MWTZBD>

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**Competing interest.** None.

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