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How Political Parties Shape Public Opinion in the Real World

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Abstract: *How powerful are political parties in shaping citizens' opinions? Despite long-standing interest in the flow of influence between partisan elites and citizens, few studies to date examine how citizens react when their party changes its position on a major issue in the real world. We present a rare quasi-experimental panel study of how citizens responded when their political party suddenly reversed its position on two major and salient welfare issues in Denmark. With a five-wave panel survey collected just around these two events, we show that citizens' policy opinions changed immediately and substantially when their party switched its policy position—even when the new position went against citizens' previously held views. These findings advance the current, largely experimental literature on partisan elite influence.*

Verification Materials: The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/Z5BTCQ.

Political parties play a vital role in democracy by linking citizens to their representatives. But how powerful are partisan elites in shaping public opinion? Do citizens follow their party when it changes its policy position, or do they resist influence and stick to their existing opinions? For over a half century, political scientists have wrestled with these questions, but one obstacle has continued to get in the way: In the real world, parties rarely change their position on major political issues—and when they do, researchers usually arrive too late to identify any effects on opinion.

It is thus with good reason that political scientists have turned to experimental designs to study partisan elite influence (e.g., Barber and Pope 2019; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Bullock 2011; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Broockman and Butler 2017; Kam 2005; Mullinix 2016; Peterson 2019). In experiments, it is possible to randomly expose citizens to different party positions and measure how they respond. This work presents a major step forward in understanding elite influence, but experiments face an inherent limitation: To credibly manipulate the policy position of a candidate or party, researchers are forced to study contexts where citizens do not know the policy position in advance. Consequently, most of what we know about partisan elite influence stems from contexts far from the bustle of real-world politics, where citizens have less crystallized opinions and where competing influences are rare. This presents an important limitation to current literature. Ultimately, we want to know whether partisan elites influence citizens' opinions by taking positions on major issues in the real world. Existing experiments, meanwhile, cannot give us the answer.

In this article, we present some of the most direct evidence to date of how citizens respond when their party changes its position in the real world on issues with

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direct concern to citizens' welfare. We fielded a five-wave panel survey in the aftermath of the Great Recession in Denmark (2010-11), hoping that parties would announce dramatic changes in their position on specific welfare policies. Fortunately for our study, major political parties, including that of the prime minister, announced two wide-reaching policy reforms that came as a surprise to political observers: a 50% reduction in a widely used unemployment insurance program and, later, the abolition of a popular early retirement program. The reduction in the unemployment insurance period (from 4 to 2 years) meant that thousands of people lost their unemployment benefits without having any other source of income. The early retirement program was so widely used that discussions about abolishing it had been "one of the thorniest issues in Danish politics for many years" (Bille 2012, 82). Hence, in both cases, the stakes were salient and real.

We tracked opinions on the exact policies in question, enabling us to gauge what people thought about the cutbacks before and after their party proposed them. Furthermore, our panel survey closely bracketed the two policy changes—in one instance with less than 2 months passing from the pre- to the postwave—limiting the influence of alternative, co-occurring events. On both issues, we find that citizens' policy opinions immediately moved by around 15 percentage points in response to their party's new issue position compared to similar citizens whose party did not change its position. Moreover, the marked opinion change was not just driven by citizens already (partly) supportive of welfare cutbacks. To the contrary, parties were successful in reversing opinions among their supporters, moving them from opposing cutting down welfare to supporting it. The magnitude of opinion change among citizens is remarkable because it is on par with or even larger than many experimental studies, despite such studies being conducted in clean environments with captive audiences and typically on much less salient policy issues (Bullock 2011; Slothuus 2016). In short, our findings suggest that partisan leaders can indeed lead citizens' opinions in the real world, even in situations where the stakes are real and the economic consequences tangible.

Party Influence in Experimental and Real-World Settings

Since the authors of *The American Voter* described the political party as "an opinion-forming agency of great importance" (Campbell et al. 1960, 128), scholars have developed various theoretical approaches to explain why citizens' opinions might be powerfully shaped by the policy positions taken by their party (Leeper and Slothuus 2014). By one account, citizens use cues about the policy position of their preferred party as an informational shortcut to reach an informed opinion. Lacking motivation or ability to learn policy details, citizens turn to their political party for guidance on whether they should support or oppose a policy to advance their interests and values (Carmines and Kuklinski 1990; Lupia 2006; Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012). Another account emphasizes that party identification is a central part of a person's identity, which creates a deep, emotional bond between the citizen and party. To be consistent with their identity and stay loyal to the partisan group, citizens tend to follow the policy position taken by their party (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). In particular, the tendency of citizens to engage in partisan-motivated reasoning where they process policy information selectively to "blindly" defend their party's policies has raised concerns that citizens too readily follow their party (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Mullinix 2016; Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood n.d.; Peterson 2019).

Yet in contrast to the notable theoretical progress, scholars have faced serious difficulty giving empirical answers to the question of *how* powerful political parties are in shaping citizens' opinions. A first generation of empirical research found a robust correlation between citizens' party identification and their policy opinions (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Jacoby 1988; Kriesi 2005; Zaller 1992). However, these studies predominantly relied on cross-sectional data, making it difficult to identify the causal effect of party positions on citizens' policy opinion. Citizens' party affiliation, for example, is correlated with values and ideology that can explain why voters take the same policy position as their party, just as citizens might affiliate with parties in the first place based on their policy opinions (e.g., Goren 2013).[1]

To overcome these limitations, a second generation of scholars turned to experiments to test the causal impact of party position taking on citizens' policy opinion (e.g., Bullock 2011; Kam 2005; Levendusky 2010; Nicholson 2012; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). Experiments randomly vary which party positions participants

[1] Zaller (1992) also uses cross-sectional data to analyze dynamic cases where party positions change, most vividly the Vietnam War during 1964–70. However, his design is based on opinion measured every other year, which makes it difficult to isolate the effect of changing party positions from other events, such as rising casualty levels and social protests.

are exposed to, and the modal finding is that party positions move opinions, leading citizens to become more supportive of their own party's policy position. More recently, experimental studies have explored to what extent partisan elite influence is limited by individual factors (Arceneaux and Vander Wielen 2017; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Mullinix 2016), competing policy information and arguments (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Bullock 2011; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Peterson 2019), as well as issue salience (Ciuk and Yost 2016).

Even though this body of experimental work has vastly improved our understanding of the power of—and limits to—partisan elite influence on opinion, existing literature has, ironically, paid much less attention to what is likely the biggest constraint on partisan influence: that in real-world settings, party leaders have to overcome citizens' general inattention to politics and compete with numerous other information and actors in influencing citizens' opinions. A typical experiment is conducted in a sterile environment free of the noise from competing information common to political debates and where participants are more attentive to stimuli than they would have been in everyday life. Consequently, experiments only illuminate the *potential* of elite influence—a potential that is easily exaggerated (see Barabas and Jerit 2010; Jerit, Barabas, and Clifford 2013).

To get closer to a real-world environment, Broockman and Butler (2017) have pioneered the use of field experiments in the study of elite influence, randomly assigning participants to receive mail about the policy position of a state legislator (see also Minozzi et al. 2015). While innovative, their study is still limited in scope because participants were exposed to policy positions of unknown state legislators, without disclosing any party affiliation and presenting a policy position that the legislator had already taken. Major normative and substantive questions about partisan elite influence hinge on how powerful—or constrained—political parties are in shaping public opinion when they change positions on a major issue in the real world.

Our study advances current literature by studying directly how citizens respond to changing party positions in the real world. We advocate a third generation of research based on obtaining observations from events in real-world settings that allow using sharp variation in party position taking to draw inferences about the effects of changing party positions on policy opinion. Such designs are obviously challenging to implement because it is difficult to, first, predict when political parties will make major shifts in their policy positions and, second, in time ensure good measures of policy opinion before and after the shift (Sniderman and Bullock 2004, 353; Zaller 1996, 19, 58). The former rarely happens, and when it does, implementing the latter is usually too late.[2] Even if one succeeds in collecting such data, there is still the challenge that changes in party positions could be endogenous to real-world factors (e.g., an economic crisis or natural disaster) that might have influenced citizens' opinions as well.

To date, Lenz (2012) has presented one of the most notable attempts to exploit real-world variation in party positions. He compiled a range of panel data mostly collected around elections and creatively exploited that between survey waves, sudden events made some issues salient in the campaign and hence brought otherwise less visible party positions to the attention of voters (for a related design, see Dancey and Goren 2010). By focusing on voters who, during these events, learn the policy position of their party, Lenz (2012) can show that voters tend to adopt the policy position of their party. This work is an important step forward compared to previous studies, yet by design, Lenz (2012) is still forced to study certain individuals (i.e., voters who did not know the position of their party) and issues (i.e., where citizens did not know party positions in advance). Critical to the aim of our study, Lenz (2012) only analyzes two cases where he has panel data spanning a *change* in party positions, the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 and Jimmy Carter's flip-flopping on defense spending in the 1980 U.S. presidential election. In the first case, it is unclear whether the opinion change is due to changing party positions or the nuclear accident itself. In the second case, the fact that Jimmy Carter changed his defense policy not once, but thrice during the campaign may have undermined the persuasiveness of the issue position, making it more a case of flip-flopping than of change in party positions.[3]

In our study, we can directly test how citizens' opinions responded when their party changes its policy position in a real-world setting. Specifically, our design combines situations where parties markedly—and

[2] Zaller (1992, 97) reports an early example of this approach, based on Barton's (1974, 97) study of opinion change among Republican Party activists when President Nixon changed position on wage and price control in 1971. This study suggests that partisan leaders can indeed lead opinion, but the study is limited by a very small sample of elite activists, and it is unclear how comparable the samples were before and after the event.

[3] Another related study is by Slothuus (2010), who took advantage of a shift in policy position during the collection of an opinion survey, but this analysis is limited by not using panel data. Other studies examine the relationship between citizens' knowledge of party positions and policy opinion over longer periods of time (e.g., Carsey and Layman 2006; Highton and Kam 2011; Steenbergen, Edwards, and De Vries 2007), but by design they cannot isolate the effect of any specific change in party position.

unexpectedly—shift their policy position without other obvious events co-occurring (e.g., no economic meltdown or natural disaster) with precise measures of policy opinion among various partisan groups before and after the shift in party positions. This way, we can examine how citizens responded when major political parties in Denmark switched their policy position on two highly visible policies.

Research Design and Data

To study how citizens respond when political parties change their policy positions, we take advantage of two sharp, unexpected shifts in the policy positions of major political parties in Denmark in 2010-11. In both cases, the Liberal Party, then the party of the prime minister, suddenly proposed cuting down the unemployment benefit period and, later, an early retirement program—two major, salient welfare programs. In combination with our five-wave panel survey (described below), these two events offer unique opportunities for examining how changing party positions influence citizens' policy opinions in the real world.

The Treatments: Two Sudden Changes in Party Positions

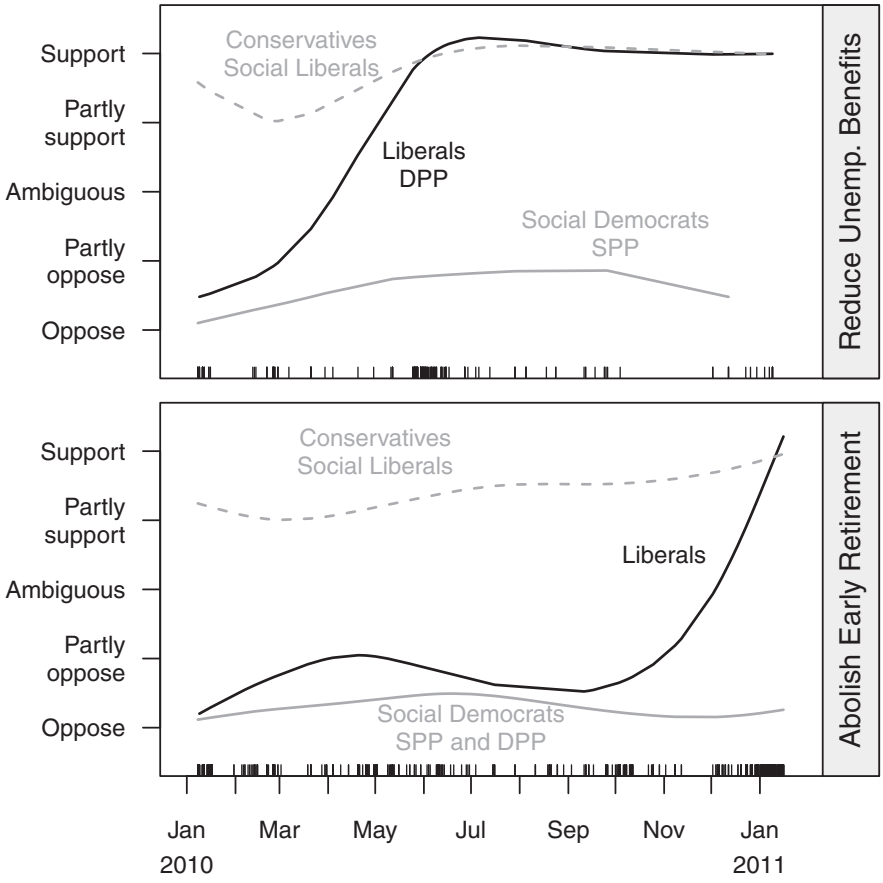
These major changes in policy positions took place in the context of the global economic crisis that hit Denmark, like many other countries, from 2008 onward. In the spring of 2010, political debate in Denmark focused on stimulating economic growth, but the question of how to tame an increasing public budget deficit gained prominence (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018). In early 2010, the governing parties presented their new policy platform, including "76 concrete proposals for how Denmark could escape the financial crisis and become one of the world's ten wealthiest countries in 2020" (Bille 2011, 57). Yet none of these proposals entailed cutting down the unemployment benefit period or the abolition of the early retirement program. Likewise, when the governing parties on May 19, 2010, launched Restoration Act (Danish Government 2010) with a series of initiatives aimed at improving public budgets, none of these initiatives were about unemployment benefits or early retirement, signaling the parties' unchanged policy position on both issues.

It therefore came as a surprise when the Liberals, on May 25, proposed cutting the unemployment benefit period in half, from 4 to 2 years. This dramatic shift in policy was not initiated by the Liberals themselves, but came as a result of negotiations about the Restoration Act with the Danish People's Party (DPP). To avoid other budget cuts, the DPP proposed improving the government budget by cutting down the unemployment benefit period (Bille 2011, 958; Stubager 2012, 862). This policy directly hit the welfare of many unemployed citizens and their families. When the new rules took effect in 2013, 34,000 individuals were falling out of the unemployment insurance system in the first year; two out of three left without any other government income support (AE 2015). This overnight shift in the parties' policy position sparked intense criticism in the news media, and center-left parties—consisting of the major opposition party, the Social Democrats, and the Socialist People's Party (SPP)—strongly opposed it, accusing the Liberals and the DPP of breaking pledges.

To document that this dramatic shift in policy position figured prominently in the news media, we conducted a content analysis of news coverage.[4] Figure 1 (upper panel) shows the results from the content analysis, where parties that show the same trend in policy positions over time have been collapsed (for the position of each individual party, see SI Appendix B). Two findings stand out. First, the content analysis clearly documents the marked change in the policy position of the Liberals and the DPP. In late May, both parties clearly shifted toward supporting cutting down the unemployment benefit period, whereas the position of the center-left and center-right parties remained unchanged. Second, as indicated by the density of the marks in the bottom of the figure, the coded party positions were highly concentrated around the announcement of the policy shift, suggesting that the visibility of policy positions clearly spiked around this period. Attesting to how widely the policy change was diffused to the public, 80% of respondents in the fourth panel wave—that is, half a year after the parties changed positions—correctly recalled that the unemployment period was reduced from 4 to 2 years (see SI Appendix D). While this is not direct evidence on respondents' specific knowledge of the policy position of each individual party, it does suggest that the

[4] As detailed in Supporting Information (SI) Appendix A, the content analysis was carried out on news coverage appearing in two of the most widely circulated national Danish newspapers (*Politiken* and *Jyllands-Posten*), focusing on all full-text articles in which any of the Danish political parties appeared together with a keyword indicating the policy area in question. Using these criteria, we retrieved a total of 646 full-text articles from the Infomedia database. For each article, a trained human coder classified the policy position of each party appearing in the article, yielding a total of 818 coded party positions.

FIGURE 1 Two Dramatic Changes in Party Positions on Two Major Welfare Issues



Note: The figure displays party positions over time on whether the unemployment period should be reduced from 4 to 2 years (top) and whether the early retirement scheme should be abolished (bottom). Party positions were classified by human coders from a sample of 646 newspaper articles. Lines show a cubic smoothing spline. See SI Appendix A for all party-specific trends.

policy change initiated by the Liberals and the DPP was clearly communicated by the mass media and received by citizens.

The other unexpected turn of events was the Liberals' proposal to abolish the early retirement program. The early retirement program allowed citizens to retire 5 years earlier than the standard retirement age of 65. With nearly 50% of eligible citizens aged 64 receiving early retirement pensions (Statistics Denmark 2011, Table 2.1), a large share of the electorate used this opportunity. Due to its popularity, the early retirement program enjoyed a "taboo status in Danish politics," and the "taboo had been kept intact by the Liberal-Conservative governments since 2001" (Stubager 2012, 107). It was thus "a great surprise" (Stubager 2012, 107) when the leader of the Liberals and the prime minister—in front of whirring cameras in his New Year's address on January 1, 2011—made the daring proposal to abolish the early retirement program. The minor party in the center-right coalition, the Conservatives, had tried to push for this policy change from within the government, but the Liberals "had previously flatly rejected doing so," and the Liberal Party "therefore found itself with a considerable problem explaining the party's new position" (Bille 2012, 84). Among the other parties, the DPP would not offhand support the new policy position of the Liberals, and the center-left parties were strongly against it, whereas the Social Liberals had long been making the same proposal.

Again, our content analysis shown in the lower panel of Figure 1 documents the striking reversal in policy position, now only by the Liberals in January 2011, as well as the steadfast policy position of the remaining parties. As in the previous case, the coded party positions are highly concentrated around the shift in policy position, here in

early January, indicating the visibility of policy positions in the news media. SI Appendix D shows that this policy shift too was picked up by most respondents in the panel survey, with 94% of respondents noticing that the Liberals had taken a more strict position toward early retirement and 81% correctly identifying that the party proposed to abolish the welfare program.

In sum, these policy issues offer two instances of sharp, unexpected shifts in party positions; in the first case the Liberals and the DPP and, in the second, the Liberals. Given the wide-reaching consequences of both policy proposals, it was far from obvious that citizens would follow their party on these issues.

Panel Survey Data and Measures

To assess how citizens responded to the changing party positions, we rely on data from a five-wave panel survey conducted in Denmark. Data collection was administered by the private polling company Epinion as an Internet survey. Epinion's pool of respondents was composed of individuals recruited through random sample telephone surveys and various online sources in order to obtain a sample approximately representative of the adult population aged 18-65 years in Denmark, the target population of our study. From this pool of respondents, 2,902 individuals completed the first wave of the survey (55% of invitees), and of these, 81% agreed to be recontacted for further questions. Wave 1 was conducted February 17-26, 2010; Wave 2, March 26-April 12, 2010; Wave 3, June 9-21, 2010; Wave 4, January 5-16, 2011; and Wave 5, June 20-30, 2011. We focus our analysis on the 1,206 respondents who completed all five waves of the survey (42% of all respondents completing Wave 1).

Our key variables are citizens' party affiliation and support for the two policy proposals: cutting down the unemployment benefits period and abolishing early retirement benefits.

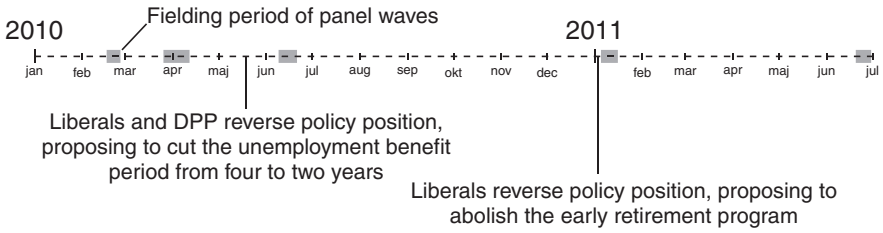
Party Affiliation. We rely on questions, asked in the first panel wave, about a respondent's party affiliation and use it as our indicator of whether a respondent is "treated," that is, whether he or she identifies with a party that will change its policy position in the period being studied. In the case of the unemployment benefit period, respondents who identify with the Liberals and the DPP fit these criteria; and in the case of early retirement, we focus on respondents supporting the Liberals. Specifically, the following question was asked together with a follow-up question for respondents who were unsure about their party affiliation: "Many people see themselves as supporters of a specific party. There are also many people who do not see themselves as supporters of a specific party. Do you see yourself as supporter of a party, for example as social democrat, conservative, social-liberal, liberal, people's socialist or something else, or do you not see yourself as supporter of a specific party?" The follow-up question read: "Upon reconsideration, is there one party you see yourself as closer to than other parties?" We use both questions in constructing our indicator. Out of the 1,206 respondents completing all five waves, 209 (17.3%) identified with the Liberals and 83 (6.9%) with the DPP.

Policy Opinions. For obvious reasons, the changes in party positions were not known in advance, but our survey contained items (measured in all five waves) that covered a wide range of welfare policy opinions. We were lucky to include questions that very precisely measured policy opinions on both issues, allowing us to survey respondents on the two policy proposals *before* their party endorsed them. Policy opinion on the issue of unemployment benefits was gauged by responses to the following statement: "The unemployment benefit period should be cut from 4 to 2.5 years"; answers were measured on a 5 point scale ranging from "agree completely" to "disagree completely" (and including a "don't know" option). Although our question wording technically misses the actual policy change by 6 months, we believe it reasonably captures the degree of support for the proposed policy. Opinion on the early retirement issue was measured by an item that followed the same response format: "In the long term, early retirement benefits will have to be abolished." In the analysis, both measures are rescaled from 0 to 1, where 1 indicates full support, and where "don't know" answers were dropped (unemployment benefit period: $M = 0.42$, $SD = 0.38$, D/K = 2.8%; early retirement: $M = 0.53$, $SD = 0.38$, D/K = 3.5%).

Analytical Strategy

Our aim is to study how changing party positions influence citizens' policy opinions in the real world. We can thus define the causal effect of changing party positions as the difference between the policy opinions of citizens in a situation where their party has changed its position compared to a situation where the party has not. For any individual, we can never observe both outcomes. We are thus forced to make assumptions to answer what citizens' policy opinions would have looked like, had their party not changed its policy position. To that end, our panel survey has several advantages.

FIGURE 2 Timeline of Events and Panel Survey



First, our strategy for answering the counterfactual question above is the well-known difference-in-differences design (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011; Finkel and Smith 2011; Ladd and Lenz 2009). Since we are unsure about how citizens' policy opinions would have changed had their party not changed its policy position, we can use the change among citizens who identify with another party to approximate this unobserved counterfactual. In the analysis below, we thus focus on how "treated" individuals (i.e., respondents identifying with a party that changes its policy position) changed their opinions compared to "nontreated" individuals (i.e., respondents who identify with a party that did not change its position). To the extent that opinion trends among the two groups would have been the same over time had the given party not changed its position—an assumption we further probe with the survey data—the difference-in-differences will get us closer to identifying the causal effect of changing party positions.

A second advantage of our panel design, shown in Figure 2, is that most of the survey waves were collected with only a few months in between. In the first case, where the Liberals and the DPP reversed their position regarding the unemployment benefit period, less than 2 months passed between the two surveys collected before and after the event. This is an important feature of our design because, as Bartels (2006, 135) notes, "the problem of attributing observed changes to *specific* intervening events is often more difficult with panel data, since many different events may intrude in the period between successive panel waves" (italics in original). The larger the period between the panel waves, the bigger the risk that some alternative event could have affected the treated and nontreated groups differently, thus invalidating the difference-in-differences design. With closely spaced panel waves, however, we arguably minimize this risk (also see Gerber and Huber 2010, 157).

Finally, the fact that we have repeated observations of the same citizens—and not a repeated cross-section with different citizens—allows us to study individual-level opinion change. With cross-sectional data, it is impossible to rule out that any apparent change in opinions could simply be due to the fact that different citizens select into the survey or that the composition of party supporters changes over time. When studying a period in where political parties suddenly take dramatically different policy positions, this concern is even more acute since a party—with a new policy position—would likely attract (and turn away) a different set of voters. With repeated observations of the same individuals, we can rule out this alternative explanation.[5]

Still, an unavoidable concern due to panel attrition is whether the remaining panelists might answer the survey differently from what would have been the case had the remaining sample been a representative survey of the target population. To address this concern, we collected a fresh, representative cross-sectional survey parallel with Wave 5 in our panel survey, using the same question wordings but a different mode (phone interviews). Reassuringly, as we detail in SI Appendix E, when we compare the results from Wave 5 in our panel survey to the new, independent survey, we find very similar results. Thus, the nature and magnitude of opinion change we find can likely be generalized to the Danish population.

To estimate the difference-in-differences in how treated and nontreated citizens changed their policy opinions, we relied on a set of ordinary least squares regression models comparing opinion changes in the two survey waves collected just before and after the change in party positions. These models take the following form,

[5]In the analysis, we balance the panel so that a respondent who drops out of the survey or fails to answer one of the key variables is dropped from the analysis. Although this ensures that we compare the exact same individuals over time, some caution is warranted to avoid concerns of posttreatment bias (i.e., that the change in party cues makes certain people drop out of the survey). In SI Appendix E, we analyze attrition and missingness in more detail and show that the change in missingness before and after the change in party positions did not depend on party affiliation and prior policy opinions. Moreover, the results remain the same when using the unbalanced panel (see SI Appendix F).

where i indexes each respondent and t each survey wave:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta Treated_{i\,t=1} + \gamma Post_t + \delta[Treated_{i\,t=1} \times Post_t] + u_{it}. \quad (1)$$

Here, *Post* is a binary indicator that switches on when the respondent is interviewed after the change in party positions, and *Treated* is a binary indicator that takes on the value 1 if an individual identifies with a party that changes its position and 0 otherwise. As indicated by the subscript, this latter variable is time-invariant and measured in the first survey wave. Crucial to testing the central claim in our study, δ yields the difference-in-differences when comparing the over-time shifts between voters whose party changed its position to voters whose party did not (or who did not identify with a party). Finally, we cluster standard errors by individuals in order to account for potential serial correlation and heteroskedasticity. In SI Appendix H, we show that the results are robust to alternative ways of clustering the standard errors.

As noted above, the key identifying assumption in our design is that changes in opinions among treated and nontreated respondents would have been the same, had there not been a dramatic change in party positions—what is often referred to as the common or parallel trends assumption. We probe the plausibility of this assumption in three different ways.

First, since we have multiple survey waves collected before the change in party position, we can estimate placebo difference-in-differences, testing whether treated and nontreated respondents changed opinions differently in the absence of a change in party positions. If the treated and nontreated followed similar trends just before the event, it increases our confidence in using nontreated respondents as a counterfactual. Second, we used a simple matching routine to prune the pool of nontreated respondents to match the treatment group on sociodemographic factors and, importantly, prior policy opinions.[6] Making treated and nontreated respondents more similar *ex-ante*, in particular on prior policy opinions, arguably reduces the risk that the two groups differ on characteristics that lead them to change their opinions differently over time (for discussion, see Abadie 2005). Third, to rule out that treated respondents are changing their opinions because they respond (differently) to an alternative event (e.g., actual changes in the real economy), we augment the specification in Equation (1) with time-varying controls capturing beliefs about the size of the budget deficit, the number of unemployed, and, depending on the outcome variable, citizens' opinions on either early retirement or unemployment benefits. Including these control variables, especially the latter, is restrictive and will arguably pick up whether treated respondents change their opinions, not because they identify with a party that changes its position, but because they are also changing their macroeconomic beliefs or their opinions toward other welfare programs where parties did *not* change their position in the given period.

Results: Cutting the Unemployment Benefit Period in Half

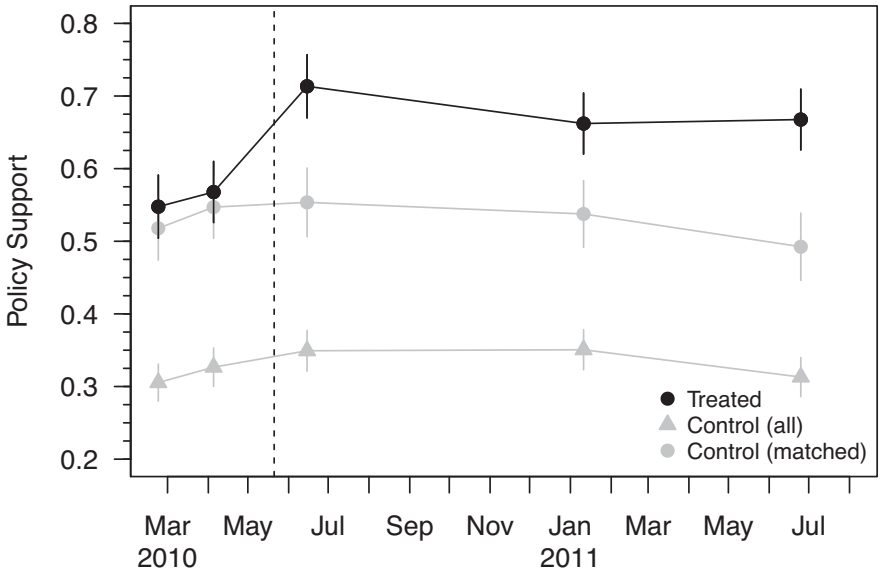
How did citizens supporting the Liberals or the DPP respond when their party suddenly reversed its position and proposed to cut the unemployment benefit period in half? Figure 3 shows the average policy opinion over time among treated respondents (black dots), that is, citizens identifying with the Liberals and the DPP, compared to all other partisans (gray triangles) as well as partisans who match the treatment group on sociodemographic factors and prior policy opinions (gray dots). The figure leads to several important conclusions. Before the change in the policy position of the Liberals and the DPP, the average support among Liberal and DPP identifiers was only just above the midpoint of the scale. Thus, attesting to the low popularity and wide-reaching consequences of the policy proposal, not even Liberals and DPP voters supported the policy in overwhelming numbers.[7] But what happened when the two parties suddenly shifted their position and proposed to cut the unemployment benefit period in half?

In a little over 2 months, Liberal and DPP supporters changed their support for cutting the unemployment benefit period in half from 0.57 to 0.71 on the 0-1 scale, amounting to a change of 0.15 scale points or 15 percentage points—a change that was nearly identical within the

[6]The matched control group was constructed using 1:1 nearest neighbor matching based on propensity scores. The propensity score was calculated based on education level, occupation, sex, age, income, and beliefs about whether the welfare state is under economic pressure—all measured in Wave 1—as well as policy opinions measured prior to the change in party positions (i.e., Wave 1 and 2 in the case of the unemployment benefit period and Waves 1-3 in the case of early retirement).

[7]As clearly shown in Figure 3, the changes in policy opinions prior to the change in party positions were very similar across the treated respondents and all other partisans (for the matched control group the prior trends are parallel by construction). The estimated placebo difference-in-differences was –0.001 ($p = .95$).

FIGURE 3 When the Liberals and the DPP Proposed Cutting Down the Unemployment Benefit Period, Supporters Followed Suit



Note: Over-time changes in answers to "The unemployment benefit period should be cut from 4 to 2.5 years" for citizens who identify with the Liberals or the DPP (black dots, n = 273/N = 1,365), for all other citizens identifying with a party (gray triangles, n = 718/N = 3,590), and a control group that matches Liberal and DPP identifiers on sociodemographics as well as prior opinions (gray dots, n = 266/N = 1,330). Vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. The vertical dotted line indicates timing of change in policy position of the Liberals and DPP.

Liberal and DPP partisan groups. Taking into account the inertia in aggregate opinion (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1992), this change is remarkable in magnitude. In contrast, the policy support among all other partisans was virtually unchanged in the period. Even when considering the matched control group and when including time-varying control variables, we find an identical pattern, further bolstering that Liberal and DPP supporters were in fact responding to changing party positions and not some alternative event. (In SI Appendix G, we further show that factual beliefs about the sizes of the budget deficit and unemployment were virtually unchanged in the period, and that the results are nearly identical if we limit the difference-in-differences to two parties ideologically close on welfare policy, the DPP and the Social Democrats.)

In short, the change in party positions apparently moved citizens' policy opinions, both immediately and substantially—a pattern that persisted over the entire period.

Table 1 yields the more precise estimates of the difference-in-differences in how treated respondents changed their opinions from the second to the third survey wave compared to all other partisans (Models 1 and 2) and the matched control group (Models 3 and 4). The estimates shown in the first and third columns correspond to the observed changes in opinions in Figure 3. The results in Table 1 are clear: The

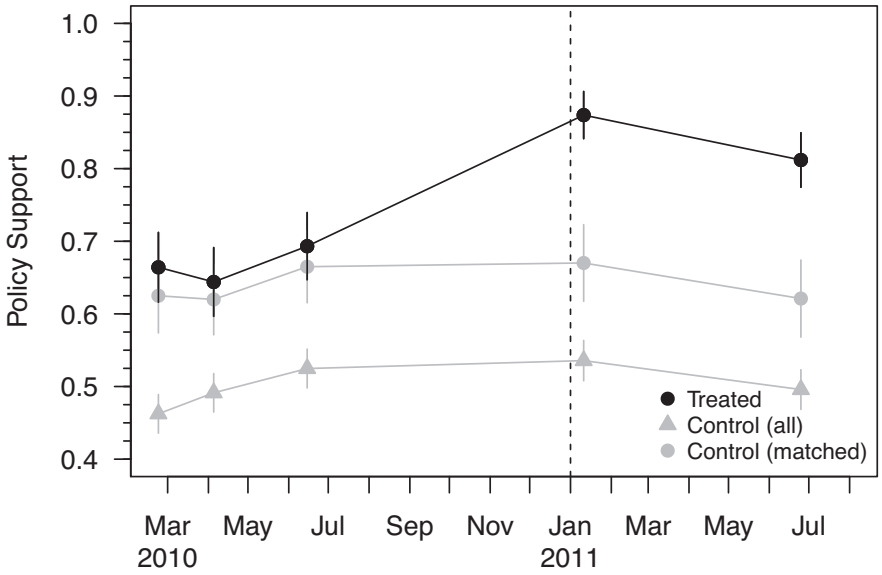
TABLE 1 Effects of Changing Party Positions on Unemployment Benefits Opinion

	All		Matched	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Difference-in-differences	0.12	0.11	0.14	0.12
(Wave 3 – Wave 2)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Units	991	985	539	539
Observations	1,982	1,941	1,078	1,067
Time-varying controls[a]		✓		✓

Note: Difference-in-differences estimates of how Liberal and DPP identifiers changed their support for cutting the unemployment period in half compared to all other voters (models 1 and 2) and a matched control group (models 3 and 4). The difference-in-differences is estimated using only the two waves bracketing the change in party positions (i.e., Waves 2 and 3). Cluster-robust standard errors are in parentheses.

[a] Time-varying controls include factual beliefs about the size of the budget deficit as well as unemployment and opinions toward early retirement (for variable description, see SI Appendix C).

FIGURE 4 When the Liberals Proposed to Abolish Early Retirement, Liberal Supporters Became More Supportive



Note: The figure displays over-time changes, conditional on party affiliation measured in Wave 1, in answers to "In the long run, early retirement benefits will have to be abolished" for citizens who identify with the Liberals (black dots, n = 198/N = 990), for all other citizens (gray triangles, n = 778/N = 3,890), and a control group that matches Liberal identifiers on sociodemographics as well as prior opinions (gray dots, n = 194/N = 970). Vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. The vertical dotted line indicates timing of change in policy position of the Liberals.

difference-in-differences is a precisely estimated 12 percentage points ($p < .001$) when DPP and Liberal supporters are compared to all other partisans, and 14 percentage points ($p < .001$) when compared to the matched control group. Moreover, the results are literally unchanged when controlling for time-varying covariates. When party positions change, in sum, DPP and Liberal supporters become as much as 14 percentage points more supportive of cutting the unemployment benefit period in half *net* of the opinion changes observed among similar citizens in the same period. This is strong evidence that the changing position of the Liberals and the DPP, not some alternative event, caused supporters of these parties to change their policy opinions.

Results: The Abolition of Early Retirement

As we have described, Danish politics happened to develop in a way that would allow us to see whether we could replicate the findings above on a different issue. Thus, the Liberals' proposal to entirely abolish early retirement presents another critical test of citizens' willingness to follow their party on a major, salient issue. How did Liberal supporters respond when their party suddenly switched its policy position, now on a different issue?

Following the same analytical approach as previously, Figure 4 displays support for the abolition of early retirement over-time for Liberals (i.e., "treated" respondents) compared to all other partisans as well as partisans who match Liberals on prior opinions and sociodemographic factors. In what is remarkably consistent with the previous analysis, Liberal supporters clearly became more positive toward abolishing early retirement after their party endorsed this policy position. Although initial policy support was already quite high among Liberal supporters, we still see a marked shift in their opinions after the change in party positions, from 0.69 to 0.87 on the 0-1 scale. Importantly, among both control groups, we see a very different pattern: After the Liberal Party changes its policy position, there is very little movement in opinions. As the Liberal Party proposed to abolishing early

TABLE 2 Effects of Changing Party Position on Early Retirement Opinion

	All		Matched	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Difference-in-differences	0.17	0.19	0.18	0.18
(Wave 4 – Wave 3)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Units	976	975	392	391
Observations	1,952	1,933	784	778
Time-varying controls[a]		✓		✓

Note: Difference-in-differences estimates of how Liberal identifiers changed their support for abolishing early retirement compared to all other voters (models 1 and 2) and a matched control group (models 3 and 4). The difference-in-differences is estimated using only the two waves bracketing the change in party positions (i.e., Waves 3 and 4). Cluster-robust standard errors are in parentheses.
[a]Time-varying controls include factual beliefs about the size of the budget deficit as well as unemployment and opinions toward the unemployment benefit period (for variable description, see SI Appendix C).

retirement, Liberal supporters became more supportive toward the policy proposal than did comparable voters observed in the same period.[8]

Again, Table 2 shows the estimated difference-in-differences when comparing changes in opinions for treated respondents to the two control groups, using only the two survey waves collected before and after the Liberals proposed abolishing early retirement. As shown in the first column in Table 2, Liberal supporters become a staggering 17 percentage points ($p < .001$) more positive toward abolishing early retirement compared to all other partisans in the same period. This change amounts to almost one-fifth of the entire scale on the dependent variable. This result is not only remarkable in magnitude, but it is also robust to using a control group that more tightly matches Liberal supporters as well as including time-varying controls that capture macroeconomic beliefs and attitudes toward the other welfare program (i.e., the unemployment benefit period).

In sum, opinion dynamics on the early retirement issue replicate the key finding from the unemployment issue: Citizens are indeed responsive when their party changes its policy position, even when it comes to major policy issues with direct material consequences for citizens. When the structure of party competition changes—that is, when parties take different policy positions—citizens' policy opinions change accordingly. These results indeed speak to political parties as important opinion leaders.

[8]The estimated placebo difference-in-differences when comparing treated to all other partisans was –0.05 ($p = .01$) between Waves 1 and 2 and 0.02 ($p = .43$) between Waves 2 and 3.

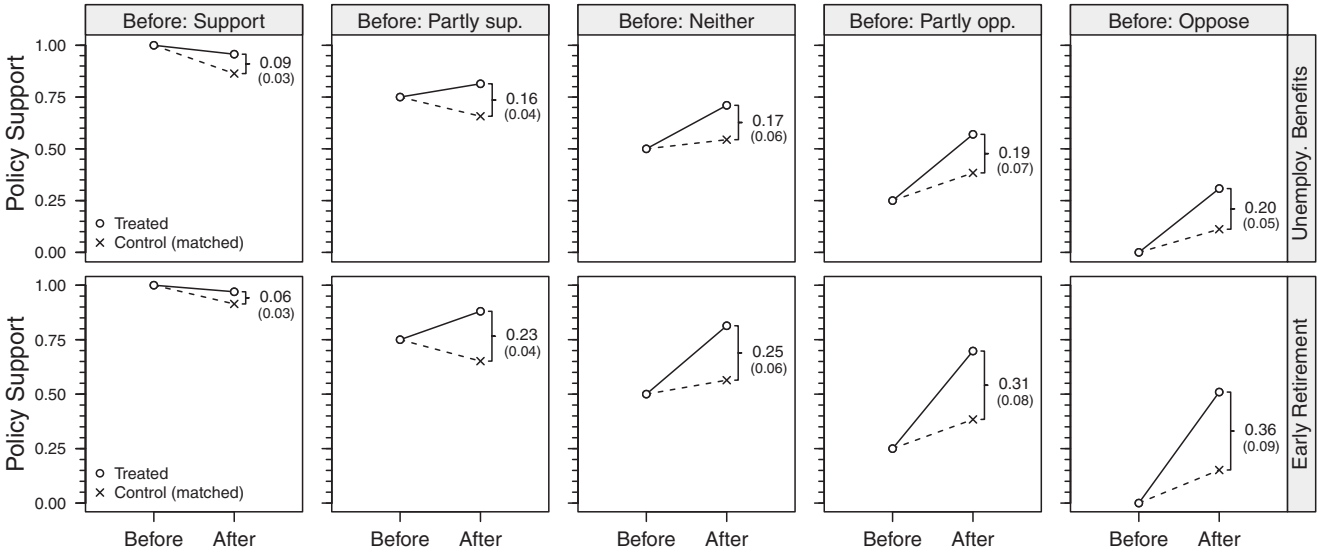
Do Citizens Follow Their Party Regardless of Prior Opinions?

So far, our analysis has shown that when parties reversed their policy positions on two major issues, it substantially moved policy opinions among party supporters. Partisan elites, it appeared, were powerful in leading opinions among their supporters. Yet, the assessment of *how* powerful parties are in shaping public opinion—and how responsive citizens are to their parties—not only depends on parties' capacity to persuade their supporters in general, but also on the homogeneity in the response among supporters. Perhaps the aggregate opinion shifts we observed were driven solely by those Liberal (and DPP) supporters who were already leaning in, toward a conservative policy position of curbing public spending. That is, being able to move citizens further in the direction they are already leaning on an issue hardly qualifies as strong influence—at least not compared to a situation where citizens are flipped from one side of the issue to the other. Thus, an important question for probing the potency of partisan elite influence is whether citizens will follow their party, even when the new party line runs against citizens' previously held views.

With repeated observations of the same individuals, we have a unique opportunity to examine this question. Although Liberal (and DPP) voters on average supported the policy proposals (cf. Figures 3 and 4), there was a considerable number of party supporters who did not initially support cutting down on the two welfare programs. Out of the 489 voters who participated in the second survey wave and supported the Liberals or the DPP, 152 (31.1%) either opposed or partly opposed reducing the unemployment benefit period. Similarly, 65 out of the 332 (19.6%) Liberal supporters who participated in the third survey wave—that is the survey collected just before the Liberal Party leader proposed abolishing early retirement—opposed or partly opposed abolishing early retirement. These partisans held an opinion that would later become at odds with the position of their party, and the question is whether they were affected by the change in party positions.

Figure 5 shows the observed change in opinions before and after the change in party positions among the treated compared to the matched control group, now broken down depending on previous policy opinions as measured in the wave collected just before the change

FIGURE 5 Effects of Changing Party Positions Conditional on Prior Policy Opinion



in party positions.[9] The columns in the figure show if the results change depending on whether citizens supported or opposed the cutbacks just before the change in party positions. The first column in Figure 5 yields the estimated difference-in-differences—among those who already supported cutting back on the two welfare programs—when comparing participants whose party changed its position (treated) to a matched control group. In the case of the unemployment benefit period (upper leftmost panel), we find that when the DPP and the Liberals proposed to cut back the insurance period from 4 to 2 years, supporters of the two parties—who agreed with the position—became 9 percentage points ($p = .006$) more supportive of the cutback compared to similar voters whose party did not change its position. In the case of early retirement (lower leftmost panel), the estimated effect among Liberal supporters who already favored cutting back was a modest 6 percentage points ($p = .027$).[10]

But what happened as citizens' prior policy opinions became inconsistent with the new party position—as we move from left to right in Figure 5? As the figure shows, the estimated effect of the changing party positions appears quite robust and consistent even as citizens' prior policy opinions become more and more at odds with the new position of their party. In the case of the unemployment benefit period (top panels), we estimate that the effect of changing party positions is 20 percentage points ($p < .001$) among Liberal and DPP supporters who initially opposed reducing the unemployment benefit period. This effect is more or less the same for partisans who initially said that they neither supported nor opposed (middle column) and partly opposed (fourth column) the policy before the Liberals and the DPP changed their policy position. Liberal and DPP supporters responded to the changing party position and followed their party even though it went against their previously held views.

Remarkably, this result consistently appears across both issues. Turning to the case of early retirement benefits (bottom panels), the estimated effect of changing party position among Liberals who initially opposed abolishing the early retirement scheme (rightmost column) was as large as 36 percentage points of the policy proposal compared to the matched control group in the same period. Importantly, this effect of changing party positions appears even larger in size than the effects among those partisans who neither supported nor

[9]To retain a sufficient number of observations, the results in Figure 5 are shown for an unbalanced panel, and, to further reduce complexity, results are shown only using the matched control group. In SI Appendix F, we show that the results are similar using the balanced panel and using all other partisans as the counterfactual comparison. If anything, the estimates reported in Figure 5 are the most conservative ones.

[10]While it might seem counterintuitive that voters who already endorsed the cutbacks can be positively affected by the changing party positions, it illustrates an important methodological consideration that is introduced when conditioning on prior values of the dependent variable: Due to regression toward the mean, extreme policy opinions in t will naturally lead to more moderate opinions in $t + 1$, yet the difference-in-differences estimator corrects for this to the extent that the control group is subject to the same mean reversion tendencies.

opposed (middle column) and partly opposed (fourth column) the policy. Indeed, Liberal supporters adopted the changing party position, even when the new party position ran against their previously held views.

Discussion and Further Analyses

We found strong evidence that political parties can powerfully shape citizens' policy opinions outside the sterile experimental setting. Using two rare instances when parties changed their position on major issues with direct concern to citizens' welfare, we found effects that were large in magnitude, strikingly uniform within partisan groups, and durable over several months. We conclude by discussing several important implications of our findings for understanding political party influence on citizens' opinions.

Magnitude and Duration

In light of the common view that treatment effects in controlled experimental settings typically are larger than the effects found in the field (e.g., Barabas and Jerit 2010), the magnitude of party influence on opinions we find is remarkable. On both issues, we found that citizens' policy opinions immediately moved by around 15 percentage points in response to their party's new issue position compared to similar citizens whose party did not change its position. The size of these effects exceeds the party influence found in many experimental studies (Bullock 2011; Clifford, Leeper, and Rainey 2019), even though we studied highly salient issues with clear ideological connotations where experimental studies often find smaller effects (Arceneaux and Vander Wielen 2017; Chong and Mullinix 2019; Clifford, Leeper, and Rainey 2019; Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood n.d.).

Perhaps even more notably, we found that party influence on opinion lasted for several months (on the unemployment issue, more than 1 year). The effects of political messages detected in experiments, even in the field, tend to disappear after a few weeks at the latest (Gerber et al. 2011; Hill et al. 2013). In stark contrast, we find that when political parties change their positions on major and salient issues, their impact on citizens' opinions tend to last. In tandem, the large and durable effects in our study suggest that experimental studies might, in fact, tend to underestimate the influence of political parties on public opinion.

Homogeneity of Effects

That political parties can powerfully influence public opinion is indicated not only by the magnitude and duration of opinion change we found, but also by our finding that citizens within each partisan group responded homogenously to changing party positions. Citizens were willing to follow their party when it changed its position regardless of their prior opinion on the issue, meaning that parties were successful in reversing opinion among their supporters. Moreover, our data allow us to further probe how homogeneous citizens responded to changing party positions across a host of potentially moderating variables—such as strength of party identification, need for cognition, political awareness, issue-specific knowledge, political trust, and issue-specific considerations. Due to space limitations, we report this analysis in SI Appendix I. In contrast to many experimental studies of party cue effects (see Bullock 2020), we observe homogeneous responses among partisans. Thus, we find few and small differences within partisan groups in how citizens responded to parties' changing policy positions. Our findings fit with recent analyses of homogeneous treatment effects in experimental studies (Coppock, Leeper, and Mullinix 2018) and should lead researchers to be more cautious in concluding how heterogenously citizens respond to party signals and, indeed, further highlight our interpretation that partisan elites exert a substantial influence on their supporters.

Mechanisms

Our results also speak to an important, yet unsettled debate about what psychological mechanisms underlie the influence of party positions on citizens' opinions. Although our study was not designed to pinpoint such mechanisms, several of our findings support the view of partisan-motivated reasoning and that many citizens tend to follow their party "rather blindly" (Lenz 2012, 3). Attesting to this view, we found substantial opinion change even among partisans who initially held opinions directly at odds with the new position of their party. Moreover, our analysis of individual-level moderators (SI Appendix I) showed no sign that economic beliefs, issue concerns, or other considerations tempered the willingness of partisans to follow their party. This suggests that citizens follow their party's changing policy position regardless of their policy considerations. We saw this effect even among supporters of the pro-welfare DPP (SI Appendix G.2).

Furthermore, parties could apparently reverse their policy positions—and move citizens' opinions accordingly—with little risk of losing voters. In SI Appendix K, we analyze changes in vote preferences and find little indication that Liberal voters who intitally held pro-welfare policy opinions were any more likely to shift party. Obviously, we cannot tell whether partisans followed their party because they used it to figure out which policy best advanced their values or interests (Leeper and Slothuus 2014, 136) or because of substantive arguments voiced by party leaders, but our results most consistently speak to parties having rather unconstrained power to shape opinions among their supporters.

Generalizability

Our effects likely generalize across different types of citizens, as suggested by noticeable homogeneity in the moderator analysis. Furthermore, the effects generalize across different types of parties and are not just limited to instances when an economically conservative party in government proposes cutbacks on welfare programs: We find near-identical effects when focusing only on the pro-welfare DPP (SI Appendix G.2). This fits with Slothuus (2010), who found comparable effects when the Social Democrats—the traditional defender of the welfare state—proposed significant cutdowns on the early retirement program.

Do our findings generalize to other contexts? We studied a severe economic situation that might have made citizens more receptive to policy proposals from their party. Moreover, Denmark represents a case where parties are relatively coherent and highly trusted by citizens (SI Appendix J), probably making it more likely to observe large, durable effects, even though experimental studies have found that parties influence opinions even in countries with weaker parties (Bullock 2020). Future work should further explore the scope conditions of partisan elite influence on citizens' opinions.

Normative Implications

Finally, our study provides an empirical foundation for normative debates about representative democracy. Some focus on the tasks of politicians, emphasizing that politicians should not only represent public opinion, but also serve "the long-term needs of their people and countries" even if they have not "been articulated as specific demands" from citizens (Bardi, Bartolini, and Trechsel 2014, 237). Others focus on citizens, raising concerns that too strong elite influence could undermine democratic responsiveness because "elected party elites may instill the very opinions to which they respond" (Druckman 2014, 477). And yet, citizens are expected to be able and willing to consider policy arguments and adjust their opinions to a new reality (Druckman 2014). In our study, party leaders responded to an economic downturn by proposing policy reform and were able to *lead* public opinion, but only citizens already committed to these political parties were willing to support the new policies.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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