

The Credibility of Party Policy Rhetoric Survey Experimental Evidence

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This article analyzes how a party's policy statements affect voters' perceptions of where the party stands on a given issue. I argue that voters do not take a party's statements at face value because these messages can be a strategic tool to win elections. Voters discount popular statements because they may respond to vote-seeking incentives rather than reflect the party's sincere views. Espousing unpopular policies has less instrumental value in obtaining more votes and therefore is more credible. I have tested this argument with a survey experiment fielded in the United Kingdom that exposes respondents to Conservative and Labour Party statements on immigration and the National Health Service. I report evidence that popular statements tend to have a weaker effect on voter perceptions than unpopular ones. This finding suggests a paradox: the more a party needs to change its reputation in order to gain votes, the stronger the voters' skepticism.

Politicians spend much of their time making speeches, giving press conferences, and participating in debates. Politicians talk, and some of their messages express views on policy issues. From a normative point of view, this political communication should help citizens make informed voting decisions. Yet, several studies report a weak relationship between changes in the policies that parties propose in their campaigns, as captured in election manifestos, and voter perceptions of party positions (Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2011; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014).

This article helps account for this weak correlation. I argue that voters do not always take a party's rhetoric at face value because they consider the party's motivation for issuing that message. Specifically, voters discount party statements that are popular with the public because these statements may respond to a vote-seeking strategy rather than reflect the party's sincere preferences. An unpopular statement, in contrast, is less likely to be motivated by the pursuit of votes, and thus voters regard it to be a more credible signal of what the party actually stands for. Hence, this ar-

ticle highlights how the effectiveness of party rhetoric hinges on its credibility (see also Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012).

To test this argument, I have fielded two parallel survey experiments in the United Kingdom. Respondents are exposed to actual statements made by the two main political parties, Conservative and Labour. Each respondent places the party on the issue scale before and after observing the statement. The experiments focus on the two most important issues in the United Kingdom: immigration and the National Health Service (NHS). On both issues, a policy option is clearly more popular among voters than the other: a tough immigration policy is more popular than a soft one, and a generous funding of the NHS is more popular than spending controls (April 2016 wave of the British Election Internet Panel Study, <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/>).

I report evidence that a statement espousing the popular position on the issue tends to have a weaker impact on voter perceptions than an unpopular statement. The difference is more pronounced when the party with stronger vote-seeking incentives adopts the popular position. This suggests a par-

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adox: the more a party needs to change its issue reputation, the more skeptical voters are. This finding helps explain why issue ownership tends to be stable (Petrocik 1996).

ARGUMENT

The seminal work of Downs (1957) highlights how a party's policy statements can be a strategic tool to obtain some goal, typically a greater vote share. These policy statements, moreover, are not binding: once in office, the winning party can implement different policies (Stokes 2001). Hence, political parties have incentives to campaign on popular policies in order to obtain more votes, even when these stances do not reflect the party's actual views on the issue. As a result, a party's statement may not be an unbiased signal of what the party actually stands for.

This article argues that, given the strategic nature of party rhetoric, voters do not take a party's statements at face value. Specifically, voters discount popular statements as less credible than unpopular ones. While a popular stance can be part of a vote-seeking strategy, an unpopular statement has less value in obtaining votes and thus becomes a stronger signal of the party's preferences. As a result, popular statements have a weaker effect on voter perceptions of party positions. The argument implies, moreover, that discounting is more pronounced, the stronger the party's vote-seeking incentives to change its image on that issue.

This study focuses on two issues for which UK public opinion has a clear leaning: immigration and the NHS. For these issues voters can easily identify the most popular policy option. On immigration, most voters favor an anti-immigration policy. On a 0–10 scale where 0 means “I prefer many fewer immigrants” and 10 means “I prefer many more,” 0 is the modal voter preference and 3 is the median. With respect to the NHS, the popular option is to increase funding for this service: most voters consider that cuts have gone too far and the service has worsened (2015 British Election Study wave 7).¹ Regarding the two main UK parties, Labour is seen as softer on immigration than the Conservatives and thus faces stronger pressures to change its image. Similarly, the Conservatives are seen as less committed to the NHS than Labour.² Consequently, the argument predicts that voter discounting of popular statements should be deeper for the Labour Party on immigration and for the Conservatives on the NHS.

1. See app. sec. A.1 (available online).

2. The appendix reports the perceived position of Labour and the Conservatives on these issues.

SURVEY EXPERIMENT

Two survey experiments were fielded in August 2015, one focusing on immigration and the other on the NHS. Respondents in both experiments are exposed to a real issue statement made by the Conservative Party and another made by Labour. The statement is either pro- or anti-immigration in the immigration experiment, pro- or anti-NHS in the NHS one. Respondents place the party on the relevant issue scale before and after observing the statement. Placements are measured on a 0–10 scale. For immigration, 0 means “close borders for new immigrants” and 10 means “open borders.” For the NHS, 0 means “decrease NHS funding” and 10 means “increase NHS funding.”

The statement in each treatment condition was selected using crowdsourcing. First, I identified speeches made by prominent politicians from each party and selected excerpts dealing with immigration flows or NHS funding. Second, I followed Benoit et al. (2016) and crowdsourced the coding of these statements to estimate both the position and the clarity of the message.³ The statement selected for each condition has a clear meaning and reflects a distinct position on the issue. Table 1 presents the immigration statements.⁴

To capture how respondents interpret each statement, a posttreatment manipulation check asks the participant to place the meaning of the statement on the same 0–10 scale. In addition, the last survey question prompts respondents to identify the popular position on the issue.⁵ With this information I create an indicator variable, *popular*, which indicates whether, according to the respondent, the party statement reflects the popular position on that issue.

Both survey experiments were administered to a convenience sample of British adults recruited through CrowdFlower, a Mechanical Turk (MTurk) style platform that can enlist survey respondents and compensate them for their participation.⁶ The appendix presents a robustness check ruling out the possibility that the findings of this article are the product of the nonrepresentative nature of the survey sample.

This survey experiment has an advantage over previous observational studies (e.g., Adams et al. 2011). The design disentangles the discounting of popular statements from two factors that can also explain why party rhetoric may fail to change perceptions: lack of exposure and lack of under-

3. Full results for the crowdsourced coding are reported in the appendix.

4. The statements selected for the NHS are reported in app. sec. A.2.

5. The item reads: “Irrespective of your own position, what is the option most British citizens espouse?”

6. Compared to MTurk, CrowdFlower has a superior capacity to recruit participants outside of the United States.

Table 1. Statements in Each Treatment Condition: Immigration

	Anti-immigration	Pro-immigration
Conservative	"The number of migrants we are seeing is far higher than our local authorities, our schools and our hospitals can cope with. So many people, so fast, is placing real burdens on our public services."	"Our openness is part of who we are. We should celebrate it. We should never allow anyone to demonise it. We are Great Britain because of immigration, not in spite of it."
Labour	"People want there to be control of immigration. And I agree. That means strengthening our borders, with proper entry and exit checks. And we will introduce those checks."	"Over many centuries Britain has benefited from the ideas and talents of those who have come here from abroad. We need migration to get the top talent and investment we need, for our world class universities to compete internationally, or to meet skills shortages in the NHS."

standing. Regarding the first factor, respondents are explicitly encouraged to read the party's statement (Mutz 2011).⁷ Regarding the second, the statements selected for the experiment were previously classified as clear by crowd coders. Relative to the experimental work of Tomz and Van Houweling (2012), moreover, this design maximizes the level of external validity by using actual statements and party labels. Finally, the survey design improves on Lupu (2013) in how it makes it possible to gauge the impact of policy statements controlling for voters' prior perceptions.

EVIDENCE

I estimate the effect of the policy statement on respondents' perceptions of where the party stands by regressing the post-treatment perception on the pretreatment perception and the position expressed in the statement.⁸ In order to test the argument that respondents discount popular statements, I interact both the statement position and the pretreatment perception with an indicator that the statement espouses the popular option on that issue:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{posttreatment perception} &= \alpha + \beta_1 \text{statement} \\
 &+ \beta_2 \text{pretreatment perception} \\
 &+ \beta_3 \text{statement} \times \text{popular} \\
 &+ \beta_4 \text{pretreatment perception} \times \text{popular} \\
 &+ \beta_5 \text{popular} + \varepsilon.
 \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

The variable *statement* indicates the issue position expressed in the statement, as interpreted by the respondent. *Pretreatment perception* reflects the respondent's opinion before observing the statement. Logically, the higher the impact of the statement, the lower the coefficient for pretreatment per-

ception because it captures the stability in the respondents' opinion. *Popular* is a dummy variable defined as follows: for a respondent who thinks that most UK voters are anti-immigration, popular equals 1 if the statement expresses an anti-immigration position and 0 otherwise.⁹ For a respondent who believes that most voters are pro-immigration, popular takes the value of 1 if the statement is pro-immigration.¹⁰ The same rule applies to the NHS. The argument predicts that popular statements will have a weaker impact on perceptions. Hence, the interaction coefficient for statement \times popular should be negative and that for pretreatment perception \times popular should be positive.

Table 2 reports the regression results. The estimates show that the content of the statement affects the posttreatment perception of the party, particularly for Labour. This is consistent with previous work that shows that policy rhetoric is more effective for opposition parties than governing ones (Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012). Most importantly, there is evidence that the magnitude of the impact depends on whether the statement espouses a popular or an unpopular position. For both parties and for both issues, the interaction coefficient statement \times popular is negative and pretreatment perception \times popular is positive. This suggests that a popular message decreases the effect of the statement and reinforces the importance of the previous belief. Interaction coefficients are larger in absolute magnitude and statistically significant when the party faces strong electoral incentives to shift positions: the Labour Party on immigration and the Conservatives on the NHS.¹¹ To facilitate the interpretation

9. If the respondent places the statement at 4 or lower on the 0–10 immigration scale.

10. If the respondent places the statement at 6 or higher on the 0–10 immigration scale.

11. The *p*-value for all three interaction coefficients marked with the † symbol is .06. These *p*-values drop below .05 if demographic controls are included in the equation (see app. table A.7).

7. Appendix fig. A7 shows a screenshot of how the treatment is presented.

8. The appendix reports manipulation check and across-subject results.

Table 2. Effect of Popular versus Unpopular Statements: Regression Results

	Immigration		National Health Service	
	Conservative	Labour	Conservative	Labour
Statement	.43*	.62*	.46*	.48*
	(.1)	(.1)	(.1)	(.1)
Statement × popular	−.03	−.15*	−.17†	−.1
	(.07)	(.07)	(.09)	(.1)
Pretreatment perception	.35*	.37*	.50*	.35*
	(.1)	(.04)	(.1)	(.1)
Pretreatment perception × popular	.07	.13†	.13†	.06
	(.08)	(.07)	(.07)	(.08)
Popular	−.16	.4	.4	.4
	(.5)	(.5)	(.7)	(.8)
Intercept	1*	−.1	.1	.9†
	(.4)	(.4)	(.2)	(.5)
R ²	.44	.58	.60	.49
N	452		401	

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

† $p < 10\%$.

* $p < 5\%$.

of regression estimates, figure 1 plots the marginal effect of popular and unpopular statements. Taken together, these results support the argument that voters are less responsive to vote-seeking party statements.

The discounting of popular statements has consequences for party competition. The vast majority of respondents agree that an anti-immigration policy and a pro-NHS one are the popular options on these issues (86% and 94% of respondents, respectively).¹² Hence, the discounting of popular statements should imply that anti-immigration and pro-NHS statements have a weaker effect on perceptions than pro-immigration or anti-NHS stances. The evidence reported in appendix section A.7 confirms this prediction: it shows that anti-immigration and pro-NHS statements (the popular policy options) tend to have a weaker effect on posttreatment perceptions. These differences are statistically significant except for the Conservatives on immigration, a party that is already perceived as tough on immigration and therefore does not face strong vote-seeking pressures to change its reputation.

The appendix presents several robustness checks. I show that the results obtained with this convenience sample can be extrapolated to the UK population as a whole. I also confirm that the findings are robust to specifying several demo-

graphic and attitudinal controls, like party identification. Finally, I rule out the alternative explanation that some statements are discounted not because they espouse popular policies but because they deviate significantly from the party's issue reputation. All these empirical analyses confirm the empirical patterns reported in the main text.

DISCUSSION

This article suggests that voters do not take party statements at face value. Popular messages have a weaker effect on perceptions, particularly if the party has vote-seeking incentives to change its issue position. Hence, voters take into account the party's motivations when reacting to the party's platform. This supports the argument that voters are more responsive to party behavior that is costly (Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012; Fortunato and Stevenson 2013) and helps explain the stability of party reputations (Dalton and McAllister 2015).

The discounting of popular statements reduces the capacity of political parties to change their reputation on an issue: the stronger the party's electoral pressures to shift positions, the stronger the voters' skepticism. This identifies a mechanism that helps account for the stability of issue ownership over time (Petrocik 1996): the disadvantaged party is constrained in its capacity to credibly shift its issue reputation toward the position of the advantaged party.

12. Appendix sec. A.6 provides further details.

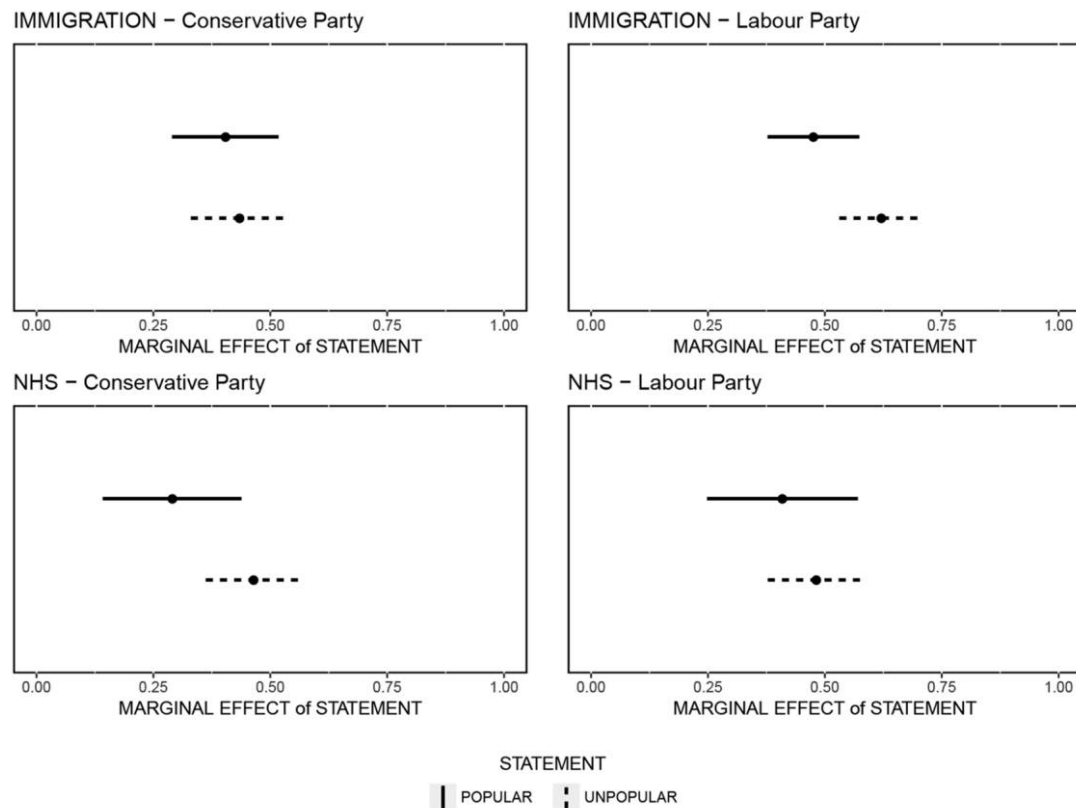


Figure 1. Marginal effect of a policy statement, depending on whether it is popular or unpopular

A natural extension of this article is to analyze whether the choice of issue statements has consequences for voters' opinions about the party's valence characteristics. If voters discount popular statements because they may respond to opportunistic motivations, voters may also conclude that a party that promises popular policies is less principled than one that expresses unpopular positions. Building on Tomz and Van Houweling (2012), who have shown that candidates that shift positions obtain worse valence evaluations than consistent ones, the testable prediction would be that shifting stances toward the popular option on an issue is more costly for a party's valence than moving toward an unpopular position. The logic of this argument implies that supporting popular policies can paradoxically reduce the ability of the party to get elected.

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