

# Voter discounting of party campaign manifestos: An analysis of mainstream and niche parties in Western Europe, 1971–2011

Party Politics

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ppq](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ppq)**Pablo Fernandez-Vazquez**

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**Abstract**

Election campaigns are supposed to inform voters about where parties stand on policy issues. Yet campaign promises are not binding, since parties may advocate some policies in the campaign and implement others in office. This article thus analyzes the conditions in which voters believe party platforms. I argue that voters find platforms that can help the party obtain more votes to be less informative about the party's ideology. This hypothesis is tested with both mainstream and niche parties in Western Europe. The analysis also distinguishes between governing and opposition parties. Empirical evidence for parties in opposition fully supports the argument: For mainstream parties, which have vote-seeking incentives to appear ideologically moderate, voters discount centrist manifestos. With respect to niche parties, which tend to lose support if they moderate, voters discount extreme platforms. Regarding governing parties, this article confirms previous work suggesting that voters disregard the platforms of incumbent parties. These findings have implications for democratic representation, party competition, and electoral volatility.

**Keywords**

mainstream and niche parties, party manifestos, party positions, spatial models of party competition, voter perceptions

**Introduction**

Election campaigns are supposed to help citizens make informed decisions at the polls. Campaigns provide an opportunity for political parties to present their policy proposals to the public. Political parties elaborate campaign manifestos, participate in debates, and give speeches, among others. From a normative point of view, this communication is expected to make it easier for voters to identify their preferred political option. The problem, however, is that campaign platforms are not binding: Political parties may promise one thing in the campaign and implement different policies once they are in office (Alesina, 1988; Stokes, 2001). Hence, the challenge for voters is to identify whether a party's campaign rhetoric reflects the party's actual policy preferences or not.<sup>1</sup>

The central argument in this article is that voters are aware that parties need not be sincere in their campaign platforms. Hence, voters do not take party platforms at face value. More specifically, I claim that voters intuit that, in their choice of campaign proposals, political parties can be

motivated by vote-seeking goals. Hence, a party may campaign on policies that are at odds with its actual ideology but that help the party increase its electoral support. As a result, voters find platforms that can help the party electorally to be less informative about the party's ideology. Whereas such platforms may respond to short-term vote-seeking incentives, campaigning on policies that can damage the party's popularity is a strong signal of what the party stands for. Hence, voters discount electorally beneficial policy promises as less credible.

To test this implication, I analyze the link between the content of campaign platforms and the perceived ideology of Western European parties. I evaluate the theoretical

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argument separately for mainstream and for niche parties. According to previous work, mainstream parties tend to be more electorally successful when voters perceive them to be ideologically moderate (Ezrow, 2005, 2008; Kirchheimer, 1966). Therefore, my argument predicts that, for mainstream parties, voters will find campaigns advocating centrist policies to be less credible than those espousing more extreme policy stances. With respect to niche parties, in contrast, there is empirical evidence that niche parties tend to lose votes when they moderate their policy offerings (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2008). Hence, the argument yields the opposite prediction for niche parties: Since niche parties have vote-seeking incentives to be perceived as extreme, for these parties, voters will find extreme platforms less credible. To evaluate this, I draw on public opinion data on the perceived left–right positions of Western European parties between 1971 and 2011. In order to capture the type of policy positions that parties campaign on, I use party manifesto data (Volkens et al., 2013).

The analysis also distinguishes between governing and opposition parties. The rationale is that platforms play a different role for incumbent parties than for opposition ones. While parties in opposition rely on campaigns to communicate changes in their policy positions, governing parties have other tools to signal an ideological change, like the choice of coalition partners (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013) or the type of policies that they implement in office (Lupu, 2014). Indeed, there is increasing evidence that voters are generally skeptical of governing parties' campaign platforms (Bawn and Somer-Topcu, 2012; Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2017). The findings in this article confirm this by showing that the governing parties' platforms have no discernible effect on voter perceptions.

The evidence for parties in opposition supports the argument in this article. For mainstream parties, while campaigning on extreme policies significantly changes opinions about the party's left–right position, running on a centrist platform has little effect on perceptions about the party's ideology. Indeed, the estimated impact of centrist manifestos on voter perceptions is not statistically distinguishable from zero. The opposite pattern emerges for niche parties: Centrist manifestos have a stronger impact than noncentrist ones. These findings therefore suggest that, when reacting to the campaign manifestos of parties in opposition, voters are skeptical of campaign platforms that could be electorally beneficial.

This empirical evidence contributes to our understanding of whether party campaign proposals help citizens make informed voting decisions. The implications of this article move beyond the two main extant interpretations of the role of election platforms in party competition: the Downsian model and the cheap-talk approach. On the one hand, an unreconstructed Downsian model assuming that campaign stances are credible commitment devices cannot account for voter skepticism toward party rhetoric (e.g.

Adams et al., 2011, 2014). On the other hand, cheap-talk approaches, by considering party statements as completely uninformative about party positions, cannot make sense of those instances in which platforms change voter perceptions (e.g. Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014; Plescia and Staniek, 2015). The view that I propose is more nuanced: Voters do use campaigns to draw inferences about party policy preferences, but only if party proposals are not likely to be part of a short-term electoral strategy.

Finally, by mapping conditions in which campaign platforms influence opinions about parties, this article contributes to the debate in political science about whether election campaigns have an impact on electoral outcomes (Hillygus and Jackman, 2003; Lewis Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Vavreck, 2009). Since voter perceptions of party positions are a key determinant of vote choices (Hinich and Munger, 1997; Jessee, 2009; Merrill and Grofman, 1999), the evidence in this article helps identify the scenarios in which the campaign is more likely to affect a party's electoral fortunes.

## What we know so far

According to spatial models of elections, perceptions of where political parties stand on policy issues are a key determinant of voting choices. Indeed, there is vast empirical evidence showing that electoral outcomes depend on the relationship between voter preferences and the perceived issue position of political parties (Adams et al., 2005; Jessee, 2009; Lacy and Paolino, 2010; Merrill and Grofman, 1999). This framework is also widely used by media pundits to analyze candidates' and parties' electoral strategies.<sup>2</sup>

For that reason, there is a growing scholarly interest in understanding the determinants of voter perceptions of party positions. Regarding parties in government, several articles have shown that voters infer the ideology of incumbent parties from their actions in office. The type of policy decisions that are implemented (Lupu, 2014), the choice of coalition partners (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013), or the type of legislation passed (Grynawski, 2010) seem to change the ideological reputation of incumbent parties. These actions are strong signals of the policy preferences of governing parties because they generate winners and losers and therefore reflect the ideological choices that the party has made. Perhaps, because of this, there is increasing evidence that voters do not pay much attention to the campaign proposals of incumbent parties (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2017).

Parties in opposition, on the other hand, cannot use actions in office to signal their policy position and therefore have to rely on publicly broadcast policy proposals to communicate their ideological preferences. Political communication is in fact the object of increasing attention in political science: Several text analysis techniques have been deployed to identify the type of topics that political

parties choose to emphasize and to scale their stances on policy issues (Benoit et al., 2015; Grimmer and Stewart, 2013; Lucas et al., 2015; Volkens et al., 2013).

It is not obvious, however, whether opposition parties can successfully use campaign platforms to inform voters about what the party stands for ideologically. Indeed, several articles have suggested that voter beliefs about parties' left–right positions do not respond to shifts in the ideological orientation of party manifestos (Adams et al., 2011, 2014). Such scholarship suggests that, while citizen perceptions of party positions help explain voting choices, these perceptions are not shaped by the type of policy offerings that parties publicly promote (Adams, 2012).

## Argument

This article proposes an explanation for why party campaign platforms may fail to shape voter perceptions of where the party stands. I claim that voters are aware that parties need not be sincere in their campaign policy proposals. Since campaign proposals are not binding, political parties may promise certain policies and implement different policies once they are in office (Stokes, 2001). I argue that voters have some understanding that this is possible and therefore do *not* take parties' campaign proposals at face value. Since parties need not be sincere, when voters observe a party take an issue position they need to interpret whether it reflects the party's actual ideology or not.

I claim that voters are aware that political parties' decisions can be motivated by vote-seeking incentives. Specifically, voters intuit that political parties may decide to campaign on policies that help the party obtain more votes even if such stances do not reflect the party's actual ideological views (Alesina, 1988; Banks, 1990; Callander and Wilkie, 2007). As a result, voters understand that campaign stances that can help the party obtain more support may not be very informative about the party's ideology. In contrast, policy proposals that do not make the party more electorally appealing are a strong cue into what the party actually stands for. Hence, the impact of a campaign platform on voter perceptions of the party's ideology depends on whether the platform is likely to respond to vote-seeking incentives or not.

I test the implications of this argument by examining the impact of campaign manifestos on the perceived left–right positions of Western European parties. The argument is tested separately for mainstream and for niche parties because they face different electoral incentives. *Mainstream* political parties, according to Adams et al. (2006) definition, are parties belonging to the social-democratic, liberal, Christian democratic, or conservative party families in each country. These parties face vote-seeking incentives to appear ideologically moderate (Ezrow, 2005; Kirchheimer, 1966; Przeworski and Sprague, 1986).<sup>3</sup> For these parties, my argument predicts that voters will be more

skeptical of party campaigns espousing centrist positions because these are more likely to be driven by vote-seeking goals. The hypothesis that derives from the argument is that, for mainstream parties, centrist policy rhetoric will generate smaller changes in voter perceptions than extreme platforms.

*Niche* parties, on the other hand, tend to campaign around a smaller set of issues than mainstream parties (Wagner, 2012). On these issues, such as immigration or the environment, they tend to defend distinctively strong positions. Characteristically, voters tend to place these parties in noncentrist positions on the left–right scale (Adams et al., 2006). Unlike mainstream parties, niche parties tend to lose when they moderate their ideological offerings (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2008). Hence, regarding niche parties, the theoretical argument yields the opposite prediction: Voters will consider centrist stances to be more credible than noncentrist ones.

Empirical tests also distinguish between governing and opposition parties. The reason for this is twofold: First, opposition parties rely to a larger degree on campaign platforms to communicate their policy preferences than governing parties. Second, it has already been shown that voters tend to disregard the campaign platforms of governing parties (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2017). As shown in the following, the empirical evidence in this article confirms these previous findings.

The argument in this article diverges from previous models of voter discounting. Grofman (1985), Alesina and Rosenthal (1995), or Kedar (2005) have also proposed discounting models. Yet these discounting models are of a different nature. These previous discounting models still consider that parties/candidates are sincere in their campaign proposals. The reason for the discounting is that, despite the fact that parties are sincere in their *intentions*, they cannot fully deliver because the status quo is “sticky” or because of intra-institutional bargaining. In contrast, the discounting model advanced in this article claims that voters discount party platforms because they consider that parties may not be sincere, that is, they understand that a party may campaign on certain policy proposals for vote-seeking reasons even though it actually has no intention of following through on them.

## Empirical strategy

The theoretical argument is tested using data on Western European political parties over the period 1971–2011. These political parties constitute a suitable sample to test the empirical predictions. First, there exists longitudinal data on citizen perceptions of party positions. Indeed, in several European countries since the 1970s, postelection surveys have included questionnaire items asking respondents to place parties on a left–right scale. Second, the Manifesto Project provides time-series estimates of the

left–right tone of party election manifestos, a text-based proxy measure for what parties broadcast to the mass media. Such manifesto data, although nonexclusively European in scope, focus on these countries.<sup>4</sup>

The outcome of interest is the perceived left–right position of a party after the campaign. This is captured by the average left–right placement attributed to the party in a postelection survey.<sup>5</sup> The focus on the left–right dimension responds to two complementary reasons. First, the left–right axis is an “ideological super-issue” that summarizes positions on several issue areas (McDonald and Budge, 2005; Pierce, 1999). As such, research has shown that the left–right dimension is useful to understand party competition in Western European democracies (Brug et al., 2005; Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006). The second reason is more pragmatic: The left–right dimension is the issue area that is most regularly included in European national election studies.

The main explanatory variable is the policy orientation of the party’s campaign, which I proxy for using the estimated left–right tone of the party’s election manifesto. The key variables of interest in the empirical models party are measured around the time of elections: before the campaign in the case of manifestos and after the election for the perceived party position. Hence, the data set includes as many data points for each party as elections have been held during the time frame of the study.<sup>6</sup>

The main data source for how voters perceive the left–right ideology of a political party is the European Voter Database, a collection of national election studies.<sup>7</sup> I have expanded this database to include recent elections that were not part of the original data.<sup>8</sup> I have also incorporated a series of Spanish election surveys between 1986 and 2008. The vast majority of these surveys use a 0–10 left–right scale. In the few cases, where a 1–10 scale is used, I have rescaled the data accordingly.<sup>9</sup> A table listing the countries and periods considered in the analysis is available in Table A6 in the Online Appendix.

I employ the Manifesto Project coding of party election manifestos as an indicator of the content of parties’ campaign platforms.<sup>10</sup> Election manifestos are written policy statements published by political parties in the run up to the election. Even though arguably few voters read these documents, the evidence reported by Somer-Topcu (2009) and Adams et al. (2011) indicates that these documents inform the campaign messages that parties broadcast to the general public. Manifesto estimates rely on the division of the text into “quasi-sentences” and their coding into mutually exclusive issue categories. Each of these categories is then classified as left-leaning, right-leaning, or “neutral.” Given these issue category counts, the scaling of the manifesto left–right tone that I use is the one advanced by Lowe et al. (2011). I do not use the one proposed by the Manifesto Project team—the *Rile* scale (Laver and Budge, 1992)—because it is suspect of being biased to the center (Benoit

and Laver, 2007; McDonald and Mendes, 2001).<sup>11</sup> Lowe et al. (2011) scale avoids this problem because it does not consider “neutral” quasi-sentences. Instead, it computes the log of the ratio of right and left mentions. I have rescaled the logit estimates of manifesto left–right positions so that they also take values on the 0–10 interval.<sup>12</sup> As a robustness check, the Online Appendix presents a replication of the empirical analyses using Kim and Fording’s (1998) scaling of manifesto data, which also addresses the problem of centrist bias in *Rile* estimates. The substantial conclusion of my article is not affected by the use of this alternative scale. The Online Appendix also presents estimates addressing measurement error in left–right manifesto estimates. Following Benoit et al. (2009), I reestimate the empirical models using a simulation–extrapolation approach and show that, once we take measurement error into account, the empirical results offer even stronger support for the theoretical argument.

To classify political parties as niche or mainstream, I adopt the party family-based definition proposed by Adams et al. (2006). For this purpose, I also use data from the Manifesto Project, which includes information on party family affiliations. Finally, the indicator of whether a political party is in government or in opposition draws on information on the partisan composition of cabinets, obtained from the *Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive* (Müller et al., 2012) and the *Parties, Governments, and Legislatures* data set (Cusack et al., 2007). Table A8 in the Online Appendix provides summary statistics of the data.

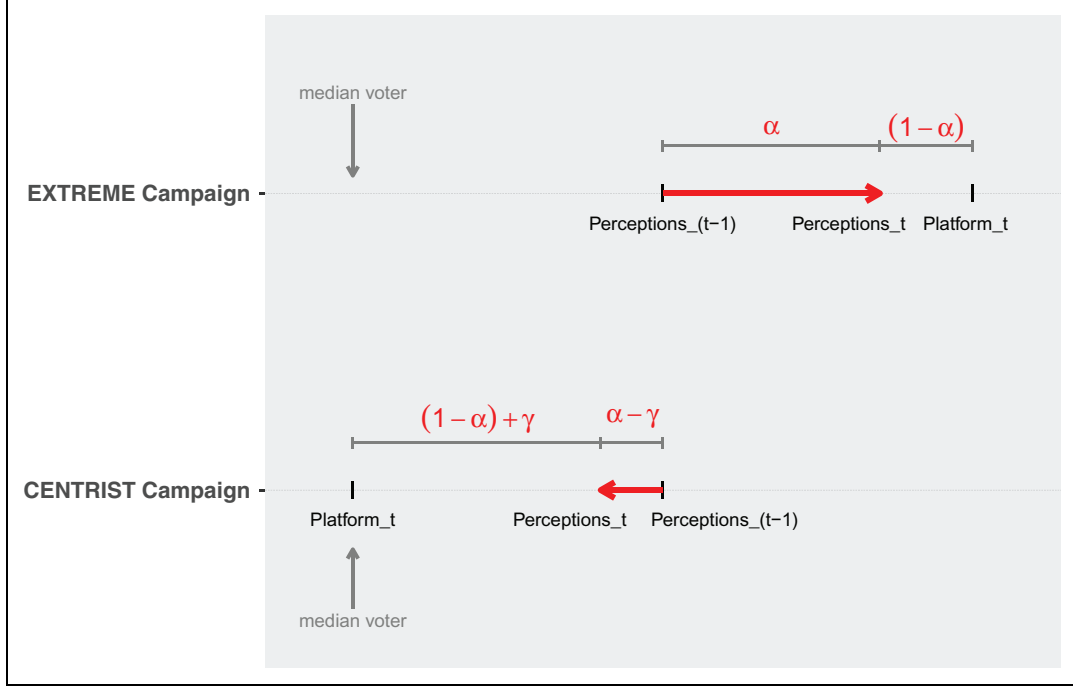
### Empirical model

I model a party’s perceived left–right position after the election as a combination of two factors: the position stated in the election platform and its perceived position *before* the campaign. The baseline model that I estimate is the following

$$\text{Voter perceptions}_t = \alpha \text{Platform}_t + (1 - \alpha) \text{Voter perceptions}_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t \quad (1)$$

A party’s perceived position after an election campaign ( $\text{Voter perceptions}_t$ ) is thus defined as a weighted average of the party image before the campaign ( $\text{Voter perceptions}_{t-1}$ ) and the position stated in the campaign manifesto ( $\text{Platform}_t$ ), where the relative weight of each factor is determined by the  $\alpha$  parameter. The model assumes that  $\alpha$  is bounded between 0 and 1 and that the sum of the two coefficients equals 1. The coefficients for  $\text{Platform}_t$  and  $\text{Voter perceptions}_{t-1}$  will be estimated without imposing any constraint, which makes it possible to test whether the modeling assumption holds.

Substantively, this model implies that, after the campaign, the party is perceived to be somewhere between the initial party image and the campaign stance. The higher the value of  $\alpha$ , the closer the postelection party image to



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized relationship between the type of platform and its influence on a mainstream party's perceived left-right position. In this example, the party is initially placed to the right of the center (median voter). Two scenarios: a centrist and an extreme campaign manifesto. Both platforms are equally distanced from the initial party image.  $\alpha$  and  $(1 - \alpha)$  reflect the impact of campaigns and initial perceptions when the party adopts an extreme platform. If the party chooses a centrist platform, the marginal effects are  $\alpha - \gamma$  and  $(1 - \alpha) + \gamma$ . Therefore, the hypothesis implies that  $\gamma > 0$ .

the position stated in the campaign. In other words, the party image shifts as a result of the election manifesto in a proportion  $\alpha$  of the distance between the initial policy image and the campaign platform.

In order to test whether centrist manifestos are more heavily discounted than extreme platforms, I interact both the party's perceived position before the campaign and the platform with an indicator that the manifesto is centrist (*Centrist*)

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Voter perceptions}_t = & \alpha \text{ Platform}_t + (1 - \alpha) \\ & \text{Voter perceptions}_{t-1} \\ & - \gamma (\text{Platform}_t \times \text{Centrist shift}_t) \\ & + \gamma (\text{Voter perceptions}_{t-1} \\ & \times \text{Centrist}_t) + \varepsilon_t \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

*Centrist shift* takes the value of 1 if the manifesto is more centrist than the party's pre-campaign image. Specifically, taking the position of the median voter as a reference point,<sup>13</sup> the platform is coded as a *centrist shift* if it endorses a position closer to the median voter than the initial placement given to the party (as measured by  $\text{Voter perceptions}_{t-1}$ ). To give an example, imagine a party that is initially placed at position 4.<sup>14</sup> The median voter is located at 4.7. If the party produces a manifesto endorsing position 4.5, calculated using Lowe et al. (2011)'s definition and rescaling it to the 0–10 interval, then centrist shift equals 1. If, on the contrary, the party runs on a manifesto located at 3.5, centrist shift equals 0.

The parameter  $\gamma$  captures how the effect of campaigns on voter perceptions changes depending on whether the party runs a centrist campaign or not. Namely, the effect of the platform equals  $\alpha$  if it is extreme, and  $\alpha - \gamma$  if it is centrist. The weight of the initially perceived position, in turn, amounts to  $1 - \alpha$  and  $(1 - \alpha) + \gamma$  for centrist and noncentrist manifestos, respectively. The theoretical argument predicts that, when mainstream parties adopt centrist platforms, the effect of the campaign is *smaller* and the degree of persistence in voter perceptions is *larger*. Therefore, it implies that  $\gamma_{\text{mainstream}} > 0$ . The graph in Figure 1 illustrates this empirical prediction. For niche parties, in contrast, the argument predicts that noncentrist platforms have a smaller impact and hence the expectation for niche parties is that  $\gamma_{\text{niche}} < 0$ . As abovementioned, no constraint will be imposed in the estimation of these coefficients, which makes it possible to test whether parties' perceived position after the election are indeed a weighted average of campaign messages and initial party image.

In sum, I estimate a standard updating model in which current perceptions are defined as a weighted average of new and past information. This is a common approach in political science. It is present in studies that use Bayesian updating to model the dynamics of political attitudes, such as party identification (Achen, 2002), perceptions of incumbent performance (Bartels, 2002), or candidate evaluations (Bartels, 1993). At the aggregate level, public

**Table 1.** Baseline models.

	All parties	Governing	Opposition
Voter perceptions ( $t - 1$ )	0.90*** (0.02)	0.89*** (0.03)	0.90*** (0.04)
Platform	0.11*** (0.03)	0.07 (0.04)	0.15*** (0.05)
Intercept	−0.03 (0.10)	0.29 (0.18)	−0.31 (0.18)
$R^2$	0.94	0.94	0.94
RMSE	0.4	0.4	0.4
N	185	84	101

Note: RMSE: root mean square error. The impact of campaigns on voter perceptions as a function of whether the platform is centrist or not. Lowe et al. (2011) logit scale.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$  clustered standard errors at the party level.

opinion trends have also been approached as a process that combines memory and current events (Erikson et al., 2002).<sup>15</sup> Within the field of electoral competition, Enelow and Munger (1993) propose a formal model of elections in which voter policy expectations from each candidate are a weighted average of the previous and the current policy stance. Finally, this approach has also been adopted in a previous study of the effect of campaigns on voter perceptions (Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014).

## Evidence for mainstream parties

This section tests the argument for mainstream parties. Table 1 reports the results of estimating the baseline model in equation (1). The first column reports regression results for the full sample of mainstream parties, the second for governing parties, and the third for parties in opposition. These results uphold the modeling assumption that a party's perceived position after the election is a weighted average of the pre-campaign perception and the position advocated in the manifesto. The Platform and Voter perceptions $_{t-1}$  coefficients capture  $\alpha$  and  $(1 - \alpha)$ , respectively, which implies that the sum of both parameters should equal 1. In fact, the sum is very close to one in all three models and  $F$ -test cannot reject the null hypothesis that the sum of both coefficients equals one.

Substantively, results for the full sample suggest that campaigns have a small overall impact on voter perceptions—the coefficient for Platform is positive and statistically significant. The fact that the coefficient for Voter perceptions $_{t-1}$  is 0.9 and that of Platform is 0.11 implies that, on average, the magnitude of the shift in the party's perceived ideology is about 10% of the distance between the initial perception and the campaign platform. To give an example, a party's average perceived left–right placement will move from 6 to 6.1 if the party runs a campaign on policies considered as a 7 on the scale. This is consistent with previous work (Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014).

For governing parties, however, manifestos do not seem to have an impact on voter perceptions. The coefficient for

Platform is smaller than in the full sample and it is not distinguishable from zero. This is consistent with findings in previous work (Bawn and Somer-Topcu, 2012; Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2017) and offers further evidence that voters learn about the ideological position of incumbent parties from their performance and decisions in office (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013; Lupu, 2014) rather than from their campaign rhetoric.

Manifestos do have an impact for opposition parties. The coefficient for Platform is larger than in the full sample (0.15) and it is statistically significant. This finding is reassuring because parties that are out of office cannot signal changes in their ideology through government decisions and therefore have to rely on campaign messages to communicate these changes in left–right positions.

Table 2 tests the argument in this article by estimating the interactive model presented in equation (2). It allows to compare the effect of centrist and extreme manifestos for the left–right images of mainstream parties. The first column reports results for the whole sample, while the second and the third columns reflect estimates for governing and opposition parties, respectively.

Results for the full sample of mainstream parties offer support for the theoretical argument. The effect of running on a noncentrist manifesto on the party's left–right images is substantial: The marginal effect amounts to 0.35 and this effect is statistically distinguishable from zero. In contrast, if the party adopts a manifesto that is more centrist than its reputation, the party's perceived position barely changes: The marginal effect of the centrist manifesto is only 0.06—the sum of the coefficients Platform and Platform  $\times$  Centrist—and this effect is not statistically distinguishable from zero.<sup>16</sup> As the interaction coefficients show, these differences between centrist and extreme platforms are statistically significant. The contrast between the impact of centrist and noncentrist platforms also emerges in the coefficient of the lagged dependent variable. With a centrist manifesto, the marginal effect of the initial party image is high 0.91—the sum of Voter perceptions $_{t-1}$  and Voter perceptions $_{t-1} \times$  Centrist. If a mainstream party adopts a more extreme position in its manifesto, on the other hand, the weight of the initial voter perception is noticeably lower 0.54. Taken together, the estimates for the full sample are consistent with the argument that voters are more skeptical when a mainstream party announces a shift toward more centrist positions.

The pattern for the subsample of governing parties confirms that manifestos are not a relevant factor in how voters perceive the position of parties in office. Whether the manifesto signals a movement to the center or away from it the impact on the party's perceived position is negligible in magnitude and it is not statistically distinguishable from zero. In the first case, the marginal effect is 0.09—with a standard error of 0.07, and in the second case, the effect equals 0.06 with a standard error of 0.07. Hence, the

**Table 2.** Interaction models.

	All parties	Governing	Opposition
Voter perceptions ( $t - 1$ )	0.54** (0.21)	0.80*** (0.19)	0.36 (0.28)
Voter perceptions ( $t - 1$ ) $\times$ Centrist shift	0.37* (0.21)	0.09 (0.19)	0.57** (0.27)
Platform	0.35** (0.14)	0.06 (0.07)	0.54*** (0.17)
Platform $\times$ Centrist shift	-0.29** (0.14)	0.03 (0.10)	-0.49** (0.18)
Centrist shift	-0.28 (0.50)	-0.44 (0.74)	-0.30 (0.64)
Intercept	0.47 (0.48)	0.68 (0.66)	0.41 (0.67)
$R^2$	0.94	0.94	0.95
RMSE	0.4	0.4	0.4
N	185	84	101

Note: RMSE: root mean square error. The impact of campaigns on voter perceptions as a function of whether the platform is centrist or not. Lowe et al. (2011) logit scale.

\*10%, \*\*5%, and \*\*\*1% clustered standard errors at the party level.

left-right images of governing parties are not shaped by the content of their election manifestos. Marginal effects of the platform and the initial perceived position for both governing and opposition parties are plotted in Figure 2.

For parties in opposition, who largely rely on campaign platforms to communicate changes in policy positions, the pattern of results supports the argument advanced in the article. If the party adopts a manifesto that is more centrist than its initial reputation, the party's perceived position barely changes: The marginal effect of the manifesto is only 0.05—the sum of the coefficient for Platform and that for Platform  $\times$  Centrist shift—and we cannot reject the null hypothesis that it equals zero. Consistent with this, the weight of the lagged dependent variable is very high 0.93—adding the coefficients for Voter perceptions $_{t-1}$  and Voter perceptions  $\times$  Centrist shift, which indicates that, with a centrist platform, the party's postelection image is almost the same as the preelection one.

The effect of noncentrist manifestos, in contrast, is substantial. When the party endorses a more extreme manifesto, the effect on the party's perceived position is 0.54 and this estimate is statistically significant. This also implies that the degree of persistence in the party's perceived position is also smaller: With a noncentrist manifesto, the weight of the lagged dependent variable is only 0.36. The following example illustrates the substantive implication of these findings: Take a mainstream party in opposition who is perceived to be located at position 3 on a 0–10 left-right scale. If the party runs on a more centrist platform located at 4, its policy image changes only slightly: Voters locate it at 3.1 after the election. Instead, if the party espouses left-wing policies located at 2, there is a more substantial change in the party's perceived placement: It becomes 2.6, a shift that is four times larger. Following Williams and Whitten (2012), section A.4 in the Online Appendix also presents the predicted long-term effects of centrist versus noncentrist manifestos.

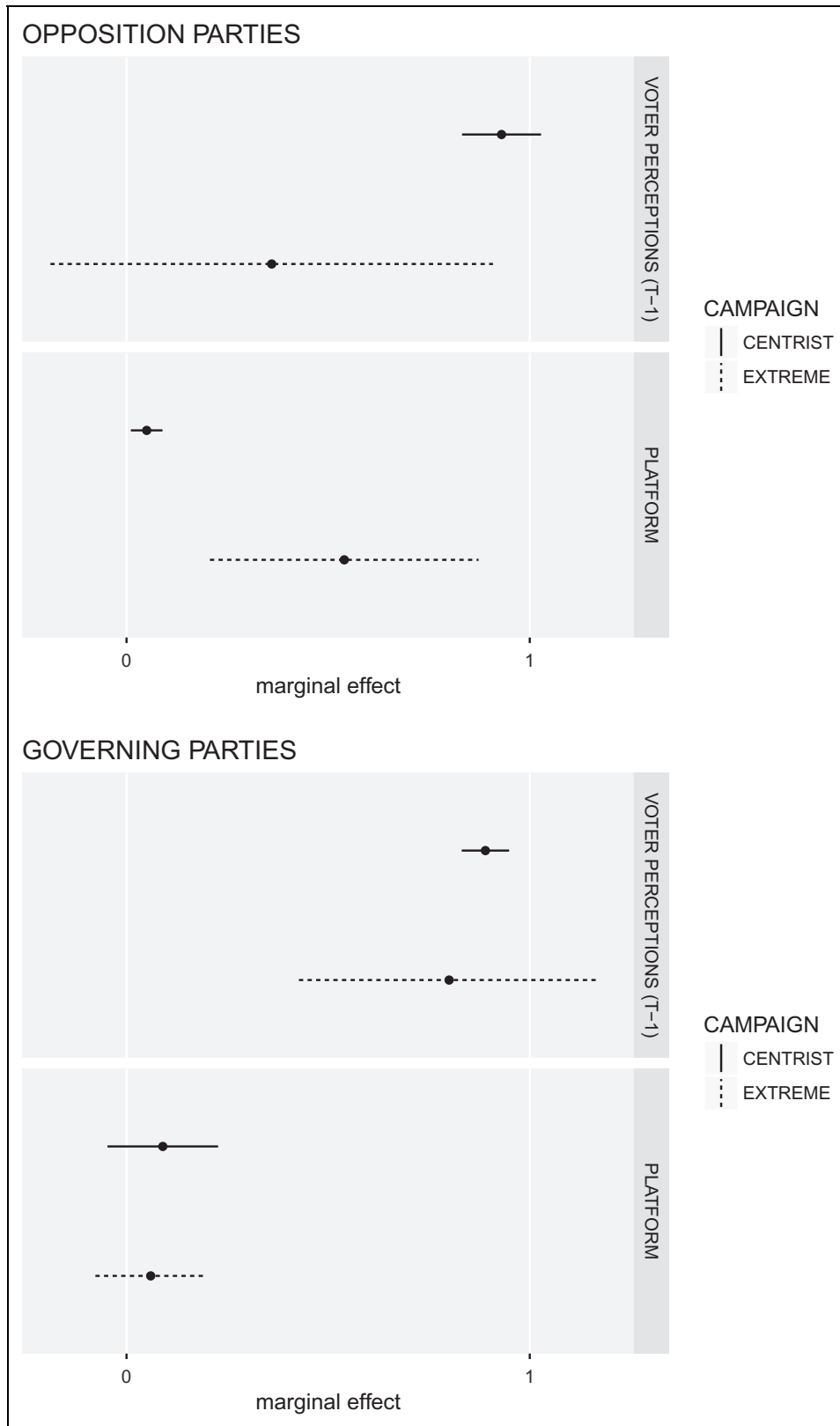
### *Ruling out an alternative explanation*

In this section, I rule out an alternative explanation for the empirical pattern presented earlier. I have shown that when opposition parties adopt centrist platforms, the effect on voter perceptions is much smaller than when the party endorses a more extreme manifesto. The article argues that this pattern stems from voters discounting centrist manifestos of mainstream parties as vote-seeking and therefore less credible. An alternative explanation for this pattern is that centrist platforms generate smaller changes because their *content* is more ambiguous. As such, voters would have a harder time drawing inferences from it and updating their perceptions.

In order to test this alternative explanation, I compare the ambiguity in the content of centrist versus noncentrist manifestos. As a proxy, for the ambiguity in a manifesto, I use data on the how much uncertainty there is in the estimate of the manifesto's left-right position. For that purpose, I rely on data obtained from Benoit et al. (2009) and Lowe et al. (2011). The assumption is that, the more ambiguous the content of the manifesto, the higher the uncertainty in the estimate of the manifesto's position. Consequently, if this alternative account is correct, we should observe that uncertainty associated with centrist manifestos is higher than that for noncentrist ones.

Table 3 compares the standard error in the estimate of the manifesto's left-right position for both centrist and extreme manifestos. This difference in means test shows that the level of uncertainty associated with centrist manifestos is *not* higher than that of noncentrist ones. The difference in uncertainty between centrist and noncentrist platforms is very small and it is not statistically distinguishable from zero. Hence, this analysis suggests that the lower impact of centrist platforms on voter perceptions of mainstream parties is not due to systematic differences in the ambiguity of party manifestos.

The Online Appendix presents several additional robustness checks. It displays the results of estimating the



**Figure 2.** Comparing opposition and governing parties. The marginal effect of campaign platforms on party policy images. Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals. Mainstream parties. Note: The top pane in each plot reflects the estimated marginal effects for voter perceptions ( $t - 1$ ), that is, the average left–right placement attributed to the party before the campaign. The bottom pane in each plot reflects the marginal effect for platform, that is, the left–right tone of the party’s election manifesto.



**Table 3.** Comparing the uncertainty of centrist and extreme manifestos.

	Average uncertainty	Difference
Centrist = 1	0.23 (0.01)	0.01 (0.03)
Centrist = 0	0.22 (0.02)	

Note: Difference in means test. Mainstream political parties. Standard errors in parentheses. Uncertainty is measured as the standard error in estimates of manifesto left–right positions (Benoit et al., 2009; Lowe et al., 2011).

\*10%, \*\*5%, and \*\*\*1% clustered standard errors at the party level.

**Table 4.** The impact of campaigns for niche parties.

	All parties	Opposition
Voter perceptions ( $t - 1$ )	0.91*** (0.03)	0.92*** (0.04)
Platform	0.11** (0.05)	0.10* (0.05)
Intercept	−0.06 (0.09)	−0.04 (0.09)
$R^2$	0.97	0.97
RMSE	0.5	0.5
N	66	61

Note: RMSE: root mean square error. Lowe et al. (2011) logit scale.

\* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$  clustered standard errors at the party level.

empirical models using an alternative scaling method for manifestos' left–right positions (Kim and Fording, 1998). With a simulation–extrapolation procedure, I also address the presence of measurement error in manifesto data (Benoit et al., 2009). In addition, the interaction model is estimated including party and country fixed effects. In all cases, the same empirical pattern emerges: Centrist platforms bear less influence on the perceived ideological position of mainstream political parties than noncentrist ones.

## Evidence for niche parties

I extend the analysis to evaluate the impact of campaign platforms for niche parties. Regarding these parties, Adams et al. (2006) and Ezrow (2008) have shown that they tend to lose electoral support when they adopt more centrist left–right positions. Unlike mainstream parties, therefore, niche parties do *not* face vote-seeking incentives to adopt moderate policy stances. Applied to niche parties, the theoretical argument thus predicts that voters will find the platforms of niche parties that espouse centrist policies to be *more* credible than extreme ones. To test this empirical prediction, I have estimated the baseline and interaction models for niche parties. Table 4 presents the results of estimating the baseline regression model (equation (1)). The left column reports estimates for the full sample of niche parties while the right column reflects results from the subsample of niche parties in opposition. Separate regression results for niche parties in government are not

**Table 5.** The impact of campaigns for niche parties.

	All parties	Opposition
Voter perceptions ( $t - 1$ )	0.91*** (0.03)	0.89*** (0.02)
Voter perceptions ( $t - 1$ ) × Centrist shift	−0.02 (0.05)	0.00 (0.04)
Platform	0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)
Platform × Centrist shift	0.15** (0.07)	0.13* (0.06)
Centrist	−0.40** (0.18)	−0.41** (0.17)
Intercept	0.15*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.03)
$R^2$	0.97	0.97
RMSE	0.5	0.5
N	66	61

Note: RMSE: root mean square error. Lowe et al. (2011) logit scale.

\*10%, \*\*5%, and \*\*\*1% clustered standard errors at the party level.

available because there are only five observations of niche parties in government during the period of study.<sup>17</sup>

Baseline model results suggest that the *overall* effect of platforms is very similar for niche and mainstream parties: It is of moderate size—0.11 for the full sample and 0.10 for opposition—but statistically different from zero. Consistent with this, the persistence of the party's perceived position over time is very high: The effect of the lagged dependent variable is 0.91 in the first case and 0.92 in the second case.

Table 5 tests the article's argument that, for niche parties, voters discount extreme platforms as less credible than centrist ones. Results for both the full sample and the subsample of niche parties in opposition are consistent with the implications of the argument. A noncentrist platform has a null effect on the perceived position of a niche party: 0.02 in the full sample and 0.03 for opposition parties, and neither of these effects is statistically distinguishable from zero. Since the effect of extreme platforms is negligible, the weight of the lagged variable is very high in these contexts—0.91 and 0.89. In contrast, when a niche party adopts a centrist platform, voters do update their perceptions: The effect of the platform is 0.17 and 0.16 for the full sample and for the subsample of opposition parties, respectively. Hence, these results confirm that voters take into account the vote-seeking incentives of political parties when reacting to campaign platforms: For mainstream parties, voters discount centrist platforms because these parties have incentives to be seen as moderate. For niche parties, on the contrary, voters are skeptical vis-à-vis extreme manifestos because niche parties do better electorally when they are seen as more ideologically extreme.

## Discussion

This article has explored the conditions in which a party's campaign platform impacts voters' perceptions of where the party stands ideologically. The approach taken highlights the fact that election promises are not binding and therefore voters may not find party platforms credible.

Specifically, the theoretical argument predicts that voters will discount platforms that are likely to respond to vote-seeking incentives. Empirical tests have been conducted separately for mainstream and niche parties. The rationale is that they face different electoral incentives: Whereas mainstream parties tend to do better when they are perceived to be ideologically moderate, niche parties are penalized at the polls if they do moderate. The data analysis also distinguishes between governing and opposition parties. The reason for this is that campaign platforms play a more relevant role for opposition parties. Indeed, there is growing empirical evidence that voters tend to disregard the campaign platform of governing parties (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2017).

Empirical results for opposition parties offer robust support for this article's theoretical argument. While extreme campaign platforms affect the perceived left-right positions of mainstream parties, endorsing centrist policies in the manifesto is inconsequential for these parties' left-right images. The opposite pattern is observed for niche parties: If the party endorses a centrist platform, voter perceptions change substantially. If, on the other hand, a niche party adopts noncentrist manifestos, voters' perceptions remain unchanged. Finally, the evidence reported for governing parties confirms the findings of previous work: Campaign platforms are not relevant for the perceived position of parties in office.

This article thus helps illuminate why voter opinions about a party may fail to respond to what the party campaigns on (Adams et al., 2011, 2014). It suggests that the disconnect between party manifestos and voter perceptions is not necessarily the result of voters "not listening" (Adams et al., 2011). Voters may still be listening, but they do not update their perceptions because they do not find the party's platform credible. The fact that some platforms have a stronger impact on the party image than others is consistent with this interpretation.

It is true that even in scenarios where platforms have a significant effect on voter perceptions, the size of this effect appears small at first. Yet, when compared against the strong stability of Western European parties' left-right images, the estimated effects are of substantial magnitude. Indeed, Dalton and McAllister (2015) estimate that the median shift in a party's perceived position between one election and the next is 0.3. Using that as benchmark, this manuscript suggests that the marginal effect of a one-unit shift toward the extreme for a mainstream party in opposition is 0.54, which more than doubles the median baseline change in a party's perceived position.

The empirical evidence also makes a contribution to the debate in political science about the influence of campaigns on election outcomes (Hillygus and Jackman, 2003; Lewis Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Vavreck, 2009). Indeed, perceptions of where parties stand on issues affect voting decisions (Hinich and Munger, 1997; Jessee, 2009;

Merrill and Grofman, 1999). Hence, by identifying when platforms have a stronger effect on perceptions, this article helps map scenarios in which campaigns are likely to impact election returns. Specifically, it suggests that, for a mainstream party, running a centrist campaign has a smaller impact on the election outcome than a left-wing or right-wing platform. For niche parties, in contrast, shifting the platform to the center is more consequential than shifting away from it.

While this article has focused on the perceived left-right positions of political parties, the theoretical argument could be tested with other policy dimensions. For each possible policy dimension, the logic of the argument would predict that voters will discount the platforms that are most likely to be part of an electioneering strategy. Take the hypothetical example of a party that has incentives to develop an anti-European Union (EU) reputation in order to increase its voter support. In that case, a pro-EU platform cannot respond to vote-seeking pressures, and therefore, it provides a more credible signal of what the party stands for than adopting a Euro-skeptic campaign. Future work will be able to test the argument advanced in this article on policy issues beyond the left-right dimension.

An additional extension could be to analyze the impact of campaigns for political parties outside of Western Europe. For instance, Ezrow et al. (2014) report results from postcommunist countries in Eastern Europe, suggesting that parties with extreme policy reputations perform better in elections. For these parties, therefore, the argument predicts that voters will be more skeptical of left-wing and right-wing manifestos than of moderate ones.

This article also opens the way for further research that explores individual-level differences in the discounting of party platforms. Indeed, the contribution of this article has been to uncover general patterns in the link between campaign platforms and perceptions of partisan ideologies. What remains to be analyzed is whether the impact of a campaign platform diverges across individuals as a function of their education, their level of political sophistication, or their party identification. A survey-experiment approach, for instance, could address these follow-up questions in future research.

If the electoral incentives that Western European parties face were to change, further research should also reexamine the pattern of voter discounting. Indeed, the predictions of the argument about mainstream and niche parties are specific to the time period analyzed in the article. If the electoral environment changes, then the predictions of the theoretical argument change as well. For instance, if it became electorally profitable for mainstream parties to adopt extreme left-right positions in order to address the threat of more radical parties, the argument implies that left-wing and right-wing platforms would become less credible than centrist ones.

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## Notes

1. In the words of Downs (1957: 39): “[The voter] cannot merely compare platforms; instead he must estimate in his own mind what the parties would do were they in power.”
2. As an illustration, see the New York Times’ recent piece on how the new British labor leader might be too left-wing to succeed in a general election, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/14/world/europe/labour-partys-swerve-left-may-help-tories-in-next-british-elections.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/14/world/europe/labour-partys-swerve-left-may-help-tories-in-next-british-elections.html?hpaction=clickpgtype=Homepage module=first-column-regionregion=top-newsWT.nav=top-news_r=0nytimes.com/2015/09/14/world/europe/labour-partys-swerve-left-may-help-tories-in-next-british-elections.html), and the Washington Post discussing whether Republican primary candidate Ted Cruz is too conservative to win the primaries <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/25/is-ted-cruz-too-conservative-for-republican-primary-voters/washingtonpost.com/is-ted-cruz-too-conservative-for-republican-primary-voters/>.
3. Karreth et al. (2013), however, argue that vote gains associated to ideological moderation may be short-lived.
4. For a reference, see [https://visuals.manifesto-project.wzb.eu/mpdb-shiny/cmp\\_dashboard\\_dataset/](https://visuals.manifesto-project.wzb.eu/mpdb-shiny/cmp_dashboard_dataset/) [https://visuals.manifesto-project.wzb.eu/mpdb-shiny/cmp\\_dashboard\\_dataset/](https://visuals.manifesto-project.wzb.eu/mpdb-shiny/cmp_dashboard_dataset/) (last accessed June 28, 2017).
5. The average placement is used as a summary statistic of the distribution of placements attributed to the party.
6. An alternative approach to test the argument would be to rely on individual-level survey data and estimate a multilevel model. However, survey items capturing essential control variables vary widely across national election studies, and therefore, it is not possible to merge these surveys into a single multilevel data set. A second take would be to use panel surveys.
7. For further information about this database, please refer to the following website: <http://www.gesis.org/en/services/data-analysis/survey-data/international-election-studies/the-european-voter-project/www.gesis.org/en/services/data-analysis/survey-data/international-election-studies/the-european-voter-project/> (last accessed December 31, 2016).
8. These include the election studies of Sweden (2002 and 2006), the Netherlands (2002, 2003, 2006, and 2010), Denmark (2001, 2005, 2007, and 2011), Great Britain (2001, 2005, and 2010), Norway (2001, 2005, and 2009), and Germany (2002, 2005, and 2009).
9. In such cases, I have mapped the extreme values into 0 and 10, and applied the function  $\text{newscale} = (\text{oldscale} - 1) \cdot \frac{10}{9}$  to the intermediate values.
10. The data are maintained and updated by Volkens et al. (2013).
11. Rile captures the difference in the number of right and left mentions over the total number of sentences, and therefore, an increase in neutral text units pushes Rile toward zero, thereby suggesting a shift in party position toward the center even though the number of mentions to the left and right issues has remained constant (Benoit and Laver, 2007; McDonald and Mendes, 2001). This potential centrist bias would be particularly worrisome for my analyses because it would overestimate the number of centrist manifestos.
12. Given that the logit estimates of manifesto positions do not have fixed endpoints (Lowe et al., 2011), I have based the rescaling on the *empirical* distribution of logit estimates (including for this purpose niche parties). Leaving aside a clear outlier—the Swedish left party in 1991—the logit left–right estimates range from  $-3.09$  to  $2.71$ . Accordingly, I have assumed that the logit values  $-3.5$  and  $3$  map onto 0 and 10 in the survey scale. Hence, the original logit values have been transformed by applying the following rescaling function:  $\text{transformed\_logit} = (\text{original\_logit} + 3.5) \times 10/6.5$ .
13. The position of the median voter is captured using the median self-placement on the left–right scale in the previous postelection survey.
14. In other words, voter perceptions  $(t - 1) = 4$ .
15. As Erikson et al. (1998: 910) put it: “macropartisanship incorporates not only the political and economic news of the present but also the accumulation of news from the past.”
16. The standard error of this marginal effect is 0.05.
17. These observations are: The German Green Party in the 2002 and 2005 elections, the Dutch Pim Fortuyn List in 2003, and the Norwegian Socialist Party in 2005 and 2009.

## Supplemental material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

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