Does Public Opinion Respond to Shifts in Party Valence? A Cross-National Analysis of Western Europe, 1976–2002

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Recent empirical research has demonstrated that, in addition to policy positions, parties' electoral support is also affected by their character-based valence attributes such as competence, integrity, and unity. Thus far, however, research into the effects of parties' character-based valence attributes has not examined how such party attributes affect public opinion. The article examines whether changes in parties' character-based valence attributes motivate shifts in public opinion – specifically, whether public opinion shifts leftwards when right-wing parties' character-based valence attributes suffer relative to leftist parties, and vice versa. *It presents the results of pooled time-series analyses of the relationship between parties' valence attributes and shifts in public opinion for nine European polities. The findings suggest that changes in parties' character-based valence attributes do motivate shifts in public opinion as hypothesised, and the effects are substantively large. These findings have implications for party strategies and for our understanding of the factors which shape public opinion.*

The often mundane world of European politics is frequently punctuated by events that reflect poorly on the political elites charged with representing the public interest. A cursory perusal of European news stories over the past year provides some illustrative examples, such as the resignation of the German president following his involvement in a corruption scandal; the (former) Danish tax minister asking for a leave of absence after evidence emerged suggesting that he had interfered in the personal tax audits of top politicians; and the resignation of a Dutch Labour Party MP, after he responded 'knowledgeably' to questions about the fabricated release of a fake terrorist suspect. Such incidents can have serious political consequences. In particular,

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these events raise the question of whether political elites, and by extension the parties with which they are affiliated, suffer more consequential damage to their images as a result of their connection to these events. In the context of Western Europe, I argue that the actions of political elites do affect their respective parties' images with regard to important character-based valence attributes such as competence, integrity, and unity. As a consequence, I examine whether changes in parties' character-based valence attributes can motivate shifts in public opinion, that is, in citizens' left–right orientations. Evidence from the United States, as well as recent cross-national research on Western Europe, suggest that changes to parties'/candidates' valence-related images can have notable electoral consequences (Abney *et al.* 2013; Andersen *et al.* 2002; Clark 2009; Green and Hobolt 2008; Mondak 1995; Stone and Simas 2010).

Normatively, one would expect that when parties' images deteriorate with respect to attributes such as competence and integrity, then this would motivate public opinion to shift away from those parties, and towards parties whose valence-related images have improved. I report empirical tests of whether a causal relationship between changes in parties' character-based valence attributes and shifts in public opinion does indeed exist. This research question is important for several reasons. First, systematic research into the relationship between parties' valence attributes and voters' ideological orientations is lacking, so whether voters reorient their views as a result of changes in parties' valence-related images remains an open question. Evidence of such a relationship would also help shed light on how parties' valence attributes affect parties' electoral fortunes.

Second, my analyses relate to research emphasising the importance of 'cueing effects', or, more specifically, whether and how parties provide policy cues to voters. To date, scholars have found mixed evidence with regard to the question of who is cueing whom. As Edwards *et al.* note, examination of mass–elite linkages has turned up considerable evidence of both 'bottom up' and 'top down' connections (Edwards *et al.* 2007: 14). For example, studies have found that, under certain conditions, political parties can provide voters with important policy-related cues (Gabel 1998; Gabel and Scheve 2007; LeDuc 2002; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Steenbergen and Jones 2002), and particularly when the focus is on the linkage between parties and their partisans (Brader and Tucker 2012; Brader *et al.* 2012). Further, research has also shown that voters are likely to consult the policy positions of their preferred parties, but especially when complex issues are in play (Coan *et al.* 2008; Crum 2005; Hobolt 2009; Kam 2005). Importantly, however, studies of these mass–elite linkages focus exclusively on policy-related cues or signals. As a result, the potential impact of valence-related cues that parties provide voters, and their subsequent impact on public opinion, has been overlooked. I analyse this relationship, and conclude that voters shift their left–right ideological positions away from parties whose valence images deteriorate and towards those whose valence images improve.

In this respect, I contribute to the literature on cueing effects in two ways. First, and to reiterate, I find original empirical evidence that, in the aggregate, valence-related cues regarding parties' images affect voters by causing them to update their left–right ideological preferences. Second, my findings suggest the importance of a previously unspecified condition which could plausibly affect 'when' parties will be more or less successful in providing policy-based cues to voters – namely, that parties' abilities to cue voters about policy is mediated by parties' valence-related attributes. While I do not directly test the 'conditioning effects' proposition regarding valence-related attributes, my arguments are supported by research which shows that factors such as internal party dissent are key determinants of parties' abilities to cue voters on important issues such as European integration (Edwards *et al.* 2007; Gabel and Scheve 2007; Ray 2003). Of particular relevance here is the work of Brader, Tucker, and Duell (2012), who note that scholars have paid scant attention to how the traits of political parties affect policy-related cue-taking by their partisans. However, their cross-national study of Poland, Hungary, and Britain considers the age, incumbency, and ideological clarity of parties rather than the character-related valence attributes that I emphasise here. Related, in a US context, research by Mondak (1993) demonstrates that voters use evaluations of political leaders as cues to help them better understand policies and issues with which those leaders are associated. Importantly, my results diverge from studies finding that party elites do not have the ability to persuade their own voters to update their policy preferences (e.g. Milazzo *et al.* 2012).

Third, my findings offer an interesting extension to research by Dancey and Goren (2010). Focusing on the US, these authors find that parties are more effective at cueing their supporters about policy when the issues in question have received extensive media coverage. By way of extending their media-related arguments, my analyses also suggest that media coverage matters, but in this investigation it is the coverage of parties' valence-related images (as opposed to their issue positions) that matters, as well as the tone of any such media coverage.

Finally, my findings draw attention to the importance of temporal considerations when examining the party–voter relationship. In brief, I find evidence of lagged effects regarding the impact of changes in parties' character-based valence attributes on public opinion. These lagged effects make both normative and theoretical sense since parties whose members are often embroiled in events which affect those parties' valence-related images plausibly 'earn a reputation' that they cannot easily shake, which undermines their credibility. For example, 'Black Wednesday' continued to depress voters' evaluations of the British Conservatives' competence long after this event occurred. This lagged effect is consistent with the empirical findings of Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009), who find evidence that voters exhibit lagged responses to parties' policy shifts.

Considering the Role of Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes

The term 'valence' has been employed in a wide variety of research, and defined in numerous ways, so much so that confusion can arise over its usage. The appearance of the term is typically attributed to Donald Stokes, who, in a seminal critique of spatial modelling as a way to analyse party competition, argued that we should not exclude what he termed 'valence issues' from the discussion (Stokes 1963). In later writings, Stokes argued that valence issues should be understood as those issues upon which 'parties or leaders are differentiated not by what they advocate but by the degree to which they are linked in the public's mind with conditions or goals or symbols of which almost everyone approves or disapproves' (Stokes 1992: 143). Accordingly, valence issues are understood to represent dimensions of party or candidate evaluation along which all voters hold identical positions such as 'reducing crime,' or 'increasing economic growth', but also including desirable *non-policy-related party or candidate characteristics* such as honesty, trustworthiness, unity, and competence. By way of example, Stokes suggested that if office-holders are corrupt, then there will be calls to remove those individuals from office. However, the impact of these calls will stem not from where the parties position themselves on a scale ranging from 'honesty' to 'dishonesty' but on how closely the parties are linked with the universally disapproved symbol of corruption (Stokes 1992: 144). On the other hand, positional, or spatial, issues are those which are classically Downsian, and represent dimensions of evaluation along which voters, as well as parties or candidates, can plausibly hold a range of positions and encompass debates such as those over immigration, the European Union, tax policy, abortion, gun control, and so forth (Adams *et al*. 2005: 254).

   In empirical studies, scholars have typically considered valence in terms of Stokes' notion of parties competing over issues on which everyone holds identical positions. Accordingly, perhaps the most prominent discussions of valence have appeared in research based upon the concept of 'issue ownership' whereby voters evaluate, and parties/candidates compete, on the basis of which party/candidate is considered the 'most capable' at handling a given issue (or set of issues), rather than which has presented the policy position most proximate to voters' preferred policy positions (e.g. Clarke *et al*. 2004, 2009; Green 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008; Pardos-Prado 2011; Petrocik 1996).

   A second collection of writings equates valence with non-policy-related factors that can provide parties/candidates with an electoral advantage (or disadvantage) independent of their policy positions. For example, scholars have highlighted the 'state of the economy' (Anderson 2000; Lewis-Beck 1988; Palmer and Whitten 2000), as well as factors pertaining to the 'incumbent advantage' such as name recognition, fundraising skills, or the ability to win federal pork for one's district (Burden 2004; Fiorina 1977, 1981; Grose 2005). However, of particular interest for my purposes are studies that focus on the

role played by the character-based valence attributes of political parties/elites, factors which also fit comfortably within Stokes' discussions of valence outlined above. For example, research on US Congressional elections has uncovered the importance of desirable candidate attributes in shaping the outcomes of both House and Senate races. Specifically, Mondak (1995) and McCurley and Mondak (1995) examine the extent to which valence-based attributes, such as competence and integrity, influence the electoral success of House incumbents. Similarly, in their investigations of the factors influencing candidate and voter behaviour, recent studies by Stone and Simas (2010), Buttice and Stone (2012), and Adams *et al*. (2011) all highlight the significance of 'character dimensions of candidate valence' such as honesty, diligence, integrity, command of the issues, and so forth (see also Funk 1999; Grose and Globetti 2008; Serra 2010; Sullivan *et al*. 1990). In a West European context, studies have also demonstrated the importance of character-based valence attributes of competence, integrity, and unity to parties' electoral support (Clark 2009; Clark and Leiter 2013).

A Valence–Opinion Hypothesis

In this study, I bring together findings from both the valence-related literature, and the literature regarding cueing effects, to examine what motivates voters to shift their policy viewpoints. I expect that, in the aggregate, public opinion (ideologically speaking) will shift *away* from those parties whose character-based valence attributes decline relative to their competitors, and towards those parties whose valence-related attributes have relatively improved. As I outline above, my intuition is guided both by existing studies demonstrating the effects of character-based valence attributes on political behaviour, and by the literature on cueing effects – the behaviour of party elites will reflect on the parties to which those elites are affiliated, thus providing cues along valence dimensions of evaluation, and resulting in the public reorienting their left–right opinions away from (towards) those parties most affected. In order to test for evidence of these effects, I explore a hypothesis that I label the Valence–Opinion Shift Hypothesis:

> H1: As right-wing parties' character-based valence attributes decline (with respect to competence, integrity, and unity) relative to left-wing parties, public opinion will shift leftward away from right-wing parties (and vice versa).

Data and Measurement

To test the hypothesis outlined above, I require longitudinal measures of both parties' character-based valence attributes and public opinion.

1. Measuring Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes

Measurement of parties' character-based valence attributes is no simple task. Lacking any kind of cross-national, longitudinal measures that would capture parties' character-based valence attributes, I utilise an original, exogenous measure constructed from content analysis of *Keesing's Record of World Events*. The data I use has been employed in several related studies and so similar information regarding the construct and measurement of the key independent variable can be found elsewhere (Clark 2009; Clark and Leiter 2013), but for the purposes of this paper I clarify the essential points here.

Between elections, parties are typically forced to deal with a variety of incidents or events that affect how the public evaluates them in terms of character-based valence attributes. The most intuitive example here would be political scandals. Recall that Stokes argued that the significance of a valence issue such as corruption stemmed from 'how closely rival parties are linked with the universally approved symbol of honesty and the universally disapproved symbol of dishonesty' (Stokes 1992: 144). Less clear from his discussion was how parties came to be linked with symbols (attributes) like honesty and dishonesty, but I assume that such linkages are based upon the observable behaviour of political elites. This is where my focus on valence-related events comes to the fore – I assume that, ceteris paribus, if a party becomes enmeshed in incidents where important party attributes are spotlighted, as when the integrity of its members are called into question, then these events will depress the party's public image with regard to integrity, and its image in general.

There are two additional party characteristics which are affected by their members' behaviour. First, I consider the attribute of competence in valence-related terms. As with integrity, competence can be considered in valence terms since all would agree that political elites need to demonstrate competence on the job, and involvement in events, or actions that suggest otherwise, depress the party's image. Second, unity can also be considered in valence terms, as again all would agree that voters prefer a unified party to a divided one. A party whose members publicly feud, for instance, will do little to inspire the public's confidence that they can provide stable, effective leadership. In sum, attributes such as competence, integrity, and unity help define the character and abilities of political representatives, and are intrinsically valued by voters as a result.

To measure parties' character-based valence attributes requires a relatively exhaustive record of significant political events across Europe.[1] *Keesing's Record of World Events* (formerly *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*) is one source appropriate for this purpose. Published every month for over 80 years, *Keesing's* provides objective coverage of global events by drawing on worldwide press, wire services, and Internet sources. This information is then used to create detailed and comprehensive reports regarding a range of events including military conflicts, natural disasters, campaign/election coverage, political appointments and departures, economic reports, scandals, intra-party disputes, and policy announcements. *Keesing's* has been regularly employed by academics to supplement their research.[2]

For each of the nine countries included in the study (France, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Italy, and Britain) a list of news reports was created for each year of the period 1976–2002 by using the comprehensive index which accompanies each yearly collection of *Keesing's*. Each report was then manually content-analysed to determine if it reported events that would affect parties' character-based valence images with respect to competence, integrity, and unity. In order to aid this process, a set of coding guidelines was followed (coding guidelines to accompany the paper are available from the author upon request). Given their relative length, and concerns over brevity, it would be impractical to reproduce the coding guidelines in the paper, but some context is certainly in order. The purpose of the coding guidelines was to assist with three tasks specifically: first, to identify valence events that would affect a given party; second, to categorise events as affecting either a party's competence, integrity, or unity; and, third, to award each valence event identified a score based upon its seriousness (magnitude). Reports that typically produced valence event codings included those covering political scandals such as bribery; personal misconduct (e.g. drugs and/or alcohol abuse); politicians' inappropriate statements or comments (e.g. comments which were racial or anti-Semitic); office-holders' abuse of official powers for personal gain; reports discussing poor performance or a lack of judgement on the part of parties or political elites; and reports of intra-party divisions. The guidelines instructed coders to categorise valence events relating to political elites' behaviour in violation of both social and professional norms as 'integrity' events, while events related to performance in office (such as the handling of a crisis, or those where political elites made controversial remarks or statements) were coded as events affecting 'competence.' Lastly, the guidelines instructed coders to code events covering internal party disputes as 'unity' events.

To aid reliability, and to prevent the coding procedure becoming overly complex, a scoring scheme was adopted that awarded parties a score for each valence event affecting them of either '–2', '–1', '0', '+1', or '+2' depending on the content of the specific valence-related report.[3] To determine the 'seriousness' of any valence event identified, the guidelines instructed coders to consider several factors: how much space (in column inches) the news report received in *Keesing's*, the standing or importance of the party official(s) under scrutiny, the language used in recounting an identified valence event, whether a particular event involved current or former party figures, whether the same event was covered multiple times in different reports (over time), and any reported consequences of the event.[4] Relatively serious events such as abuse of office by a high-ranking party official would typically result in a score of –2 being awarded to the affected party. On the other hand, less significant events, e.g. the arrest of a rank-and-file party member for disturbing the peace, or making a controversial comment, would typically result in a score of –1 being awarded to the party in question.

In theory, the scoring assigned to any relevant events appearing in *Keesing's* news reports could range from +2 (for reported events that reflected very positively on parties' competence, integrity, or unity) to –2 (for reported events that reflected very negatively on the party). However, it was rare for the events reported in *Keesing's* to cast political elites (and thus their parties) in a positive light, so the scores that were awarded to occurrences of valence-related behaviour were almost always negative.[5] In a supplementary appendix (available on request) I provide examples that illustrate the content of *Keesing's* news reports, and of how these reports were coded for evidence of events that would reflect on political elites' character-based valence attributes, and therefore on the parties to which they belonged.

Given the aggregate nature of my analysis, it is necessary to construct a valence measure which allows us to analyse whether changes in parties' character-based valence attributes affects public opinion. I therefore create a measure of valence based around the logic of comparing the valence attributes of right-wing parties relative to left-wing parties.[6] This allows me to examine how public opinion shifts when the character-based valence attributes of right-wing parties decline (improve) relative to those of left-wing parties. There are several different steps in the construction process. Once news reports for the countries of interest had been coded, the valence scores awarded for each example of valence-related behaviour were summed by party for each inter-electoral period. For my purposes, the inter-electoral period started immediately after the preceding election and ran up to the current election. This resulted in a series of cumulative valence scores for each party for each inter-electoral period. In order to calculate the change in each party's valence score from one inter-electoral period to the next, I took the difference between each party's cumulative valence score over the prior inter-electoral period (between $t–1$ and $t–2$), and the current inter-electoral period (between $t–1$ and t). So, if a party had a cumulative valence score of –20 over the course of the prior inter-electoral period, and in the current inter-electoral period it had a cumulative valence score of –5, then the 'change in valence score' between the two periods would be +15 for the party in question (i.e. the change from –20 to –5). The changes in valence scores for each party were then weighted by each party's respective vote share in the previous election, and then summed for all left-wing parties, and for all right-wing parties. Next, the weighted sum of the changes in valence scores for all left-wing parties and for all right-wing parties were averaged by the number of left-wing parties and the number of right-wing parties in a given party system. Finally the weighted average of changes in valence scores for all left-wing parties was subtracted from the weighted average of changes in valence scores for all right-wing parties. The resulting scores were used as the measure of the *change in parties' character-based valence attributes* in the statistical analyses reported below, and indicate whether right-wing parties as a group were (dis)advantaged in terms of their valence-related images relative to left-wing parties as a group, compared to their valence standing during the previous inter-election period. The argument

for weighting parties' valence scores is that such weighting better accounts for the more influential valence-related cues provided by the larger, more visible, parties while discounting the valence-related cues of smaller, marginal parties.

A common concern raised by the process of content analysis is the reliability of any measure produced. Despite coding guidelines, it is possible that a different coder could award different scores to the news reports taken from *Keesing's Record of World Events*. In order to address inter-coder reliability a second coder followed the coding guidelines, and content-analysed and coded the news reports from most of the countries included in the study, and the resulting inter-coder correlations between the author's codings and those of the second coder were as follows: France 0.76; Spain 0.93; Portugal 0.70; Greece 0.75; Germany 0.70; Britain 0.82. These figures suggest that different coders can content-analyse the news reports and award similar scores for any valence events identified.[7]

2. Measuring Public Opinion

The longitudinal measure of public opinion is more straightforward, and is derived from a survey item in the Eurobarometer survey series which has been administered in a number of Western European democracies since the 1970s. The core Eurobarometer surveys are typically administered biannually, and ask approximately 1,000 respondents in each country to place themselves on a left–right ideological scale ranging from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right).[8] The average self-placement within each country serves as the measure of voters' mean left–right opinion. Huber (1989) reports results which suggest that Eurobarometer respondents' left–right self-placements are meaningfully related to their preferences along specific dimensions of policy controversy, and that these self-placements are comparable cross-nationally. I employ this mean left–right ideological data from Eurobarometer surveys dating back to 1976 (the first year the left–right survey item was administered in the Eurobarometer surveys) through to 2002 (the most recent year for which I have data pertaining to character-based valence). In order to calculate the shift in mean left–right opinion in each country included in the study, I simply take the difference between mean opinion in the year of the previous election and the current election. Positive values denote rightward shifts in mean opinion, while negative values denote leftward shifts.

Model Specification

H1 predicts that as right-wing parties' character-based valence attributes decline relative to left-wing parties, the mean left–right opinion shifts to the left, and, conversely, as they improve relative to left-wing parties mean opinion will shift to the right. The basic model specification for H1 is as follows:

$$\Delta MPO(t) = B_0 + B_1[\Delta PCBVA(t)] \tag{1}$$

where:

ΔMPO(t) = The change in mean public opinion (as measured by the Eurobarometer surveys) in the year of the current election at t as compared to the previous election at t–1.

ΔPCBVA(t) = The weighted average of changes in all right-wing parties' valence scores minus the weighted average of changes in all left-wing parties' valence scores between the election at t and the election at t–1.

Equation 1 outlines a simple regression equation for testing H1. The variable ΔPCBVA (change in parties' character-based valence attributes) is set up so that if mean public opinion shifts leftward as a result of right-wing parties' valence-related attributes declining relative to those of left-wing parties, then the parameter estimate on B_1 should be positive and statistically significant. Taking this approach involves making the assumption that the mean left–right position in each country is located to the right of all parties coded as left-wing in the analysis, and vice versa. To test this assumption, I examined Eurobarometer survey 31A (1989), in which respondents were asked to place not only themselves on the left–right ideological scale, but the parties too, and find that this assumption holds.[9]

In addition to the variables described for the basic model specification, I include several additional variables in order to control for factors which could potentially influence shifts in public opinion. First, I analyse a specification which includes a lag of the key independent variable, the changes in parties' character-based attributes between the election at t–1 and the election at t–2. The justifications for doing so are three-fold. First, to the extent that parties earn a bad reputation due to the behaviour of their members, the valence-related cues provided to voters by those parties carry the potential to resonate beyond the current inter-electoral period. In other words, over the course of the current inter-electoral period, public opinion may shift in response to changes in parties' valence-related images over the course of the prior inter-electoral period. Second, and related, time lags may intervene before voters update their left–right ideological orientations in response to parties' valence-related cues. Evidence supporting this position comes from an important study by Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009), who also include a lag of their key independent variable in various time-series model specifications, and find that parties' policy-related messages exert lagged effects on their electoral support. Third, employing a lag of the key independent variable also addresses concerns over endogeneity problems in the model specification since sceptics could plausibly argue that parties receive greater negative valence-related media coverage when public opinion moves away from them (perhaps because the media is emboldened to attack parties when they lose popularity). However, evidence of lagged effects regarding the impact of valence on mean public opinion is not subject to this concern. Therefore, to evaluate the possibility that time lags intervene before the public responds to changes in parties' character-based valence attributes I incorporate

a variable *Δ Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes t–1* which denotes the change in the weighted average of right-wing parties' valence scores minus the change in the weighted average of left-wing parties' valence scores between the prior election, and the election prior to that (*t*–1 and *t*–2 respectively).

Second, I consider whether a party (or parties) was in government at the time of the election at *t*, since it has been well-documented in past research that, *ceteris paribus*, governing parties in Western Europe systematically lose support over time (Adams *et al*. 2006; McDonald and Budge 2005; Paldam 1991). A plausible interpretation of this evidence relating to the so-called 'cost of governing' hypothesis would be that public opinion shifts away from governing parties, and so it is important to control for incumbency here. Accordingly I include a simply *In Government* dummy variable which takes the value of one if right-wing parties were holding office at the time of the current election at *t*, and zero otherwise.

Third, I also present the results of a model controlling for economic factors, since it is plausible that mean public opinion shifts to the left or right in response to shifts in prevailing economic conditions. Therefore, I include two country-level economic variables, *Δ Unemployment* and *Δ Inflation*, which capture the change in a given country's unemployment rate between the year of the current election at *t* and the year of the previous election at *t*–1, and the change in the inflation rate between the year of the current election and the year of the previous election.[10]

Fourth, I also consider whether mean public opinion responds to changes in parties' policy positions. One potential criticism of the research design may be that I will overestimate the extent to which opinion shifts in response to changes in parties' valence-related images (and thus the valence-related cues parties provide for voters) if I do not also control for parties' policy positions. Therefore I also control for the change in the average of all right-wing parties' policy positions from the election at *t* to the election at *t*–1, and the change in the average of all left-wing parties' policy positions over the same period.[11] I call these variables the *Δ Mean Right-Wing Position* and *Δ Mean Left-Wing Position* respectively. For both variables, positive coefficient estimates indicate that opinion is shifting in the same direction as those parties (right- or left-wing), while a negative coefficient indicates that opinion is shifting in the opposite direction to those parties.

Lastly, I also include a lag of the dependent variable (Δ *Mean Public Opinion t–1*) in several model specifications as an additional control, and to provide a more rigorous test of the hypothesis (for a similar approach see Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011: 11). Table 1 reports summary statistics for the key independent and dependent variables, along with their respective lags.

Analysis and Evaluation of the Valence–Opinion Shift Hypothesis

Depending on model specification, the analyses encompass 42 mean public opinion shifts in nine countries over a 26-year period from 1976 to 2002.[12]

TABLE 1
VARIABLE SUMMARY STATISTICS

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum value	Maximum value
Δ Mean Public Opinion (t)	−0.0007	0.21	−0.49	0.46
Δ Mean Public Opinion (t–1)	−0.0005	0.21	−0.49	0.46
Δ Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes (t)	38.98	1363.18	−2808.52	7127.98
Δ Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes (t–1)	90.29	1507.01	−2808.52	7127.98

Despite the relatively small number of observations, the data are treated as time series cross-sectional data (TSCS), and tests for country-specific effects are performed since running a simple regression on pooled data can result in misleading conclusions if there are unobserved differences between countries' party systems (Green *et al*. 2001; Hsaio 2003). Tests for country-specific heterogeneity indicate that this is not a concern for the model specified to examine the Valence–Opinion Shift Hypothesis. In particular, an F-test for fixed effects and a likelihood ratio test for random effects both failed to reject the null hypothesis of 'no country-specific effects' for the Valence–Opinion Shift Hypothesis outlined above.[13] However, I estimate a country-specific effects (fixed effects) model since I have TSCS data, and am mainly concerned both with intra-country, and over-time variation, of the dependent variable (as opposed to cross-national variation). Another methodological issue is that if public opinion shifts over time due to unobserved forces not accounted for by the model then serially correlated errors may be an issue (Beck and Katz 1995, 1996). The results of a Lagrange multiplier test fail to reject the null hypothesis, and therefore corrections for serial correlation should be unnecessary. However, as noted above, I also present the results of models that include a lag term for the dependent variable in order to alleviate any concerns that the results are not robust to its inclusion.

Table 2 presents the results of empirical analyses designed to assess the Valence–Opinion Hypothesis. Column 1 of Table 2 presents the coefficient estimates for the most basic model, which I label the Basic Valence Model, and which provides support for the Valence–Opinion Hypothesis. The coefficient estimate for the *Δ Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes* variable is both positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) suggesting that, *ceteris paribus*, when the character-based valence attributes of right-wing parties improve (decline) relative to left-wing parties, then mean public opinion shifts to the right (left). The magnitude of the coefficient on the *Δ Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes* variable is also substantively meaningful. Given the coefficient value of 0.00004 and a standard deviation of 1,363.18, a two standard deviation improvement in the change in weighted average of valence scores of right-wing parties relative to left-wing parties would lead to an estimated rightward shift in mean public opinion of approximately 0.11, or a little over a tenth of a point on the 1–10 left–right ideological scale used in the

TABLE 2
DISPLAYING THE EFFECTS OF CHANGES IN PARTIES' CHARACTER-BASED VALENCE ATTRIBUTES ON CHANGES IN MEAN PUBLIC OPINION

| Independent variable	Basic valence model (1)	Lagged valence model (2)	In govt model (RW) (3)	Party shift model (4)	Economic effects model (5)	Full model (6)
Δ Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes t	0.00004***	0.00007***	0.00006***	0.00005***	0.00009***	0.00008***
	(0.00001)	(0.0000006)	(0.0000008)	(0.0000008)	(0.00002)	(0.00002)
Δ Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes t-1		0.00007***	0.00006***	0.00005***	0.00004**	0.00006***
		(0.00001)	(0.00002)	(0.00001)	(0.00002)	(0.00002)
In Govt (RW)			-0.06	-0.06	-0.09	-0.03
			(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.10)	(0.13)
Δ Mean RW Party Position				0.002	0.006**	0.006
				(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Δ Mean LW Party Position				-0.002	0.005	0.004
				(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Δ Unempl.					-0.08***	-0.06**
					(0.02)	(0.03)
Δ Inflation					-0.004	-0.0006
					(0.01)	(0.006)
Δ Mean Public Opinion t-1						-0.20
						(0.16)
Constant	-0.002***	-0.03***	0.004	0.001	-0.05	-0.07
	(0.0004)	(0.002)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.06)
R^2	0.08	0.39	0.40	0.26	0.72	0.74
N	42	33	33	32	24	24

Robust standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.
Note. Analyses employ a fixed effects time series cross-sectional linear regression, using the xtreg command in Stata 12. Dependent variable for all models is the change in mean public opinion (as measured using Eurobarometer survey data) from election t to election $t-1$. Variables calculated as change from previous election, except for the *In Government* variable which is a dummy variable coded as 1 if the government composition consisted of a right-wing party or parties at the time of the current election. R^2 is calculated as the within-group estimator.

Eurobarometer surveys. While this may appear to be a relatively small shift, the average of the absolute shifts in mean public opinion for the countries included in the dataset over the time period examined is only 0.17. To more clearly demonstrate the relationship between public opinion and party valence, Figure 1 displays the marginal effects of the change in average weighted valence scores (for right-wing minus left-wing parties) on mean public opinion shifts as measured using Eurobarometer survey data.[14]

Column 2 of Table 2 reports the results of a model which I label the Lagged Valence Model, and is very similar to the basic model specification, but that also includes a lag of the key independent variable to explore the possibility that public opinion responds to lagged changes in parties' character-based valence attributes. The coefficient estimate for the *Δ Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes (t–1)* is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) indicating that voters do indeed respond to lagged changes in parties' character-based valence attributes. Interestingly, the coefficient estimate for the lagged version of the key independent variable is comparable in magnitude to the current version of this variable (0.000066 vs. 0.00007). Furthermore, and of particular importance, taking the values of the coefficient estimates for both the *Δ Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes* variable, as well as the lagged version of this variable, reveals a more sizeable substantive effect of changes in parties' valence-related attributes on public opinion shifts (0.000066 + 0.00007 = 0.000136). This implies that a two standard deviation improvement in the change in weighted average of valence scores of right-wing parties relative to left-wing parties would lead to an estimated rightward shift in mean public opinion of approximately 0.37, i.e. more than one-third of a point on the 1–10 left–right ideological scale used in the Eurobarometer surveys.

FIGURE 1
GRAPH SHOWING MARGINAL EFFECTS OF CHANGES IN THE WEIGHTED AVERAGE
OF VALENCE SCORES FOR RIGHT-WING PARTIES MINUS LEFT-WING PARTIES ON
MEAN PUBLIC OPINION SHIFTS AT *T*
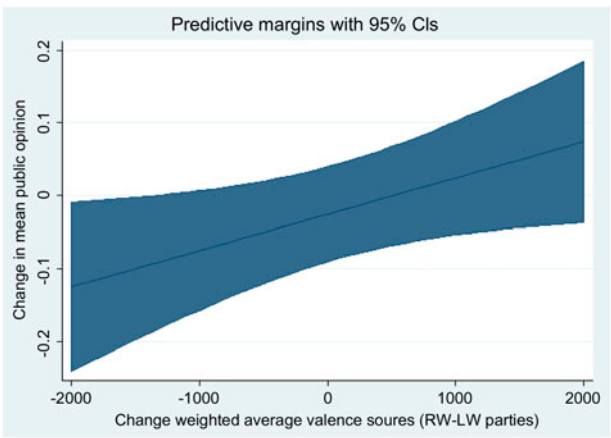
Column 3 of Table 2 reports a model specification, in which I also control for whether the government at the time of the election was right- or left-wing in nature. The coefficient estimate for the *In Government* variable is negative, indicating that opinion does shift left, and away from right-wing parties in office, but the coefficient is not statistically significant at conventional levels. Therefore, I find no support for the argument that being in government can affect shifts in public opinion independent of parties' character-based valence attributes. Column 4 of Table 2 presents the results of the Party Shift Model. This specification includes variables capturing the average shift of all right-wing parties, and of all left-wing parties based upon policy data taken from the Comparative Manifesto Project. Neither the *Δ Mean RW Party Position* or *Δ Mean LW Party Position* variables reaches statistical significance suggesting that mean public opinion shifts between the current election at t and the prior election at $t–1$ do not respond to the average party shifts of either right-wing or left-wing parties over the same time period. These results accord with the findings of Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009), who similarly find that party support is not affected by parties' policy shifts over the current inter-electoral period. Column 5 of Table 2 presents the results of the Economic Effects Model, which includes controls for prevailing economic conditions. While the coefficient estimate on the *Δ Inflation* variable does not reach statistical significance, the coefficient estimate for the *Δ Unemployment* variable does ($p < 0.01$).[15] The negative coefficient indicates that as unemployment increases, mean public opinion shifts to the left. Finally, column 6 reports the results of a specification which I refer to as the Full Model. While tests for serial correlation suggest that including a lag of the dependent variable was unnecessary, I include a lag of the dependent variable (along with the aforementioned control variables) in order to ensure that my results are robust to this specification, especially since some scholars argue that the inclusion of lagged terms can provide a more stringent test of one's hypotheses (e.g. Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011: 1162). The results continue to support my substantive conclusions.[16]

Additional Concerns

One point worth raising concerns the possibility that the analyses may be biased by extreme outlier observations, particularly since the number of observations is relatively small, more so when lagged variables are included. Figure 2 shows a scatterplot graph of the key independent variable *Δ Parties' Character-Based Valence Attributes* against the dependent variable Δ *Mean Public Opinion*. The figure highlights one extreme value in particular, this being the change in the weighted average of right-wing parties' valence-related attributes minus the change in the weighted average of left-wing parties' valence-related attributes for the UK between 1997 and 2001. During this period the British Labour Party dealt with a number of incidents involving high-profile party figures (including ministers), faced criticism for their handling of certain crises, and had to deal with several well-publicised

FIGURE 2
SCATTERPLOT GRAPH OF CHANGE IN MEAN PUBLIC OPINION BY CHANGE IN
AVERAGE WEIGHTED VALENCE SCORE (RW PARTIES – LW PARTIES)
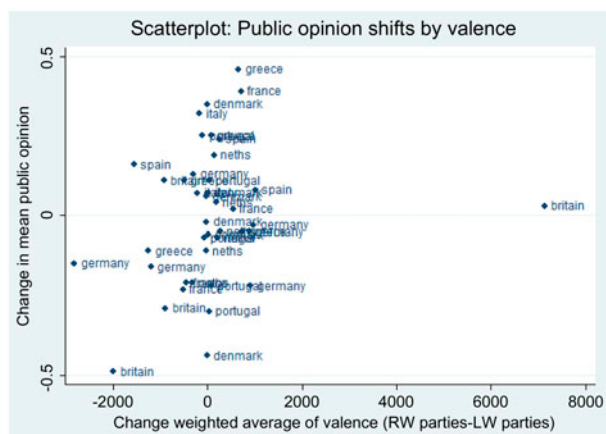
Note: Descriptions of variables are given in the text. Graph shows clear outlier value for britain 1997–2001.

intra-party disputes, all of which proved damaging to their overall valence-related image. Accordingly, I re-ran the model excluding this particular observation in case it was driving my results in any way, but I find the substantive findings reported in Table 2 still hold.

Finally, one might also expect the results of the analysis to be sensitive to the exclusion of niche parties, i.e. those parties which are classified as either Communist, Green, or Nationalist according to the Comparative Manifesto Projects' classifications of party families (see Budge *et al*. 2001) since so-called mainstream parties typically garner the majority of valence-related media coverage, and due to their size, the public is plausibly more responsive to changes in the character-related valence of such parties. Re-running the analyses using only observations of mainstream parties' valence also produces results substantively similar to those reported in Table 2.[17]

Summary and Discussion

To summarise, I find empirical evidence that public opinion responds to changes in parties' character-based valence attributes. In particular, I find support for the Valence–Opinion Hypothesis, which states that when the valence-related images of right-wing parties worsen relative to left-wing parties, then mean public opinion shifts away from right-wing parties, and *vice versa*. I also find that it is not only changes in parties' valence-related images over the course of the current inter-electoral period that cue voters to shift their opinions, but changes in parties' valence-related images over the course of the prior inter-electoral period. In other words, a party whose members become

embroiled in scandals, mishandling of crises, and damaging intra-party squabbles can expect the cumulative effect of these events to impact on public opinion in the present and in the future.

On this point, my discussion as to 'why' European publics adjust their left–right orientations in response to parties' valence images has been based around the extant literature emphasising 'cueing effects'. To date this literature has focused exclusively on the policy-related cues elites provide to voters. The results of the study suggest it would be fruitful to further explore cueing effects resulting from valence-related dimensions of evaluation. In this respect, I build upon the novel research of Brader, Tucker, and Duell (2012), who draw attention to the importance of party traits (albeit not in the manner in which I do here) when considering the effectiveness of elites' policy cues on voters. In line with these authors' arguments I contend that one plausible interpretation of the empirical results is to highlight a condition which also makes voters more or less receptive to parties' policy-based cues. Put simply, voters are more likely to absorb parties' policy-related messages if they perceive those parties as competent, honest, and unified.

However, future research should attempt to draw out more fully the interaction between parties' valence-related images and their success in providing policy-related cues. For example, with individual-level data and analyses, it may be possible to analyse, and more fully appreciate, how voter characteristics impact on this policy cueing process. Related, extensions of the research presented here should also consider how changes in party valence are related to opinion shifts among various sub-constituencies, since it is certainly plausible that the general effects of valence on opinion demonstrated in this study may well be stronger (weaker) for partisans versus non-partisans. To appropriately model such effects and avoid endogeneity concerns would require the use of panel data, and this is now available for several of the countries included in the study, and therefore offers the opportunity to shed even greater light on the valence–opinion nexus.[18] Individual-level data would also allow for a more thorough examination of system-level effects such as those related to electoral laws. To augment future research in this respect, I also aim to create codings for more countries, and extend the time period covered by the study to the present day.

It also makes sense to think about whether these findings have any strategic implications for parties. Those parties whose members behave relatively better (or at least do a better job of hiding their mistakes) will most likely find their credibility, and thus their ability to persuade voters to adopt their policy preferences, greatly improved.[19] To the extent that parties' valence-related images are beyond their control, however, the question arises as to what parties can do when the public shifts away from those parties' policy positions. Examining this scenario from the perspective of political representation, research by Ezrow *et al.* (2011) suggests that mainstream European parties tend to be responsive to shifts in mean public opinion, and so to the extent that negative changes in parties' character-based valence attributes drives public opinion away from those affected parties, then they are likely to respond by shifting their policy

positions in the same direction. Interpreted this way, the empirical results are encouraging since they also suggest a strengthening of mass–elite linkages with respect to representation.

Notes

1. The data used for the measure of valence must also be comparable cross-nationally as this allows for the possibility of pooling data across countries, since in any single country the universe of elections that can be studied is too small for any credible attempt at statistical analysis. No subjective measures of parties' competence, integrity, or unity currently exist, though opinion polls do occasionally ask respondents to rate parties' competence and integrity. However, such subjective measures are problematic in time-series cross-sectional analysis since the frequency, quality, and comparability of survey research data covering the valence dimensions of evaluation studied here is surprisingly poor. Further, survey-based measures of valence are subject to the problem of respondent rationalisation where respondents' perceptions of political elites' character-based traits are coloured by respondents' policy preferences.
2. A recent search of JSTOR's political science journal articles returned over 670 articles, many appearing in top-tier journals, that have drawn on *Keesing's* as an authoritative source for data. For example, *Keesing's* has been employed to create the 'Terrorism in Western Europe Events Data' dataset (Engene 2007), to provide governing coalition data (Tavits 2008), and for data on party seats (Horowitz and Browne 2008).
3. A similar scoring scheme for content analysis of news stories is employed in Dalton and Duval's study of the effects of British public opinion on European integration (see Dalton and Duval 1986: 124–5).
4. The coding guidelines in the supplementary appendix are available from the author and provide additional details regarding these decision rules. Using column space to evaluate an event's importance is typically the weakest guideline. Of greater import is who was involved in the particular event (a high-ranking party official such as a minister, or a rank-and-file party member), the language used to describe the event in question, its context, and consequences. For example, if a senior party official was involved in an event described using language such as 'serious blow', 'highly embarrassing', 'damaging', 'perceived negligence', 'widespread condemnation', 'major scandal', 'resigned following the disclosure', etc., then the affected party would most likely be given a score of –2 in the appropriate category.
5. The negative bias is not surprising. For instance, if a prominent politician has an extramarital affair this is likely to attract media coverage, but if the same politician stays happily married this does not typically attract equally extensive media coverage. Similarly, the public are most likely far more concerned when a politician abuses their official powers of office than when they do not. The *Keesing's* reports reflect that bad political behaviour draws far more attention than good behaviour. Consequently, the percentage of positive codings is negligible.
6. To classify parties as being either left-wing or right-wing, I rely on the Comparative Manifesto Project's classification of party families. Members of the Communist, Social Democratic, and Green party families were coded as left-wing, while members of the Conservative, Christian, and Nationalist party families were coded as right-wing (see Appendix A of Budge *et al.* 2001).
7. My thanks go to Ronni Abney for her assistance with these additional codings.
8. The standard wording of the left–right ideological self-placement survey item asks, 'In political matters, people talk of "the left" and "the right". How would you place your views on this scale?'
9. See also Adams *et al.* (2004, 2006) on this point. Relatedly, Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister (2011) find that very high percentages of European publics can correctly identify parties as being either leftist or rightist.
10. Economic data was drawn from the World Bank's 'World Data Bank' which includes time-series data for a number of important economic indicators. The data is readily available from the World Bank's website.

11. To measure changes in parties' policy positions I rely on data compiled by the Comparative Manifesto Project, which includes measures of parties' overall left–right policy emphases. For my purposes I calculate the difference between the average of all right-wing parties' policy positions at the time of the current election at *t* as compared to the previous election at *t*–1, and do the same for all left-wing parties.

12. The countries included in the study are all those for which pertinent data regarding parties' character-related valence attributes is currently available (Italy, Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Denmark, and the Netherlands). The time period covered by the study are those years for which I have both valence-related data and data regarding shifts in mean public opinion. Data from Italy is excluded post-1992 due to the radical shake-up the Italian party system experienced, which saw a number of established parties disappearing from the political landscape. Public opinion data for Greece and Spain is only available from 1981 and 1986 respectively.

13. The results of the F-test for fixed effects were $F_{8, 22} = 1.52$, $p = 0.21$, and for the likelihood ratio test for random effects, $X_1^2 = 0.14$, $p = 0.36$.

14. One plausible interpretation of Figure 1 is that much of the significance of party valence occurs at low levels of change. However, as Figure 2 illustrates, this could also be due to the presence of relatively few observations occurring at high values of change. That opinion shifts occur at relatively low levels of change in party valence certainly makes intuitive sense since it may only take involvement in one incident (a notable scandal, for example) for the electorate to evaluate that party differently and to shift, on average, away from it. However, an alternate interpretation relates not so much to the lack of observations occurring at high values of change, but that changes in party valence may produce diminishing responses. In other words, changes in party valence are likely to motivate shifts in public opinion to a point, but thereafter increasingly negative views of parties' character valence cease to have a great impact on motivating opinion shifts i.e. a 'saturation effect' occurs. To adequately test these propositions thoroughly requires a greater number of observations than is currently available but remains fertile ground for future study.

15. Unfortunately, including economic variables in the analyses notably lowers the *N* due to missing data in the World Bank's time-series data. Searches for additional, and comparable, economic data did not reveal an appropriate alternative data source.

16. An anonymous referee suggested that the number of parties in a given system may plausibly affect the results. To test this proposition, I ran an analysis which also controlled for the 'effective number of electoral parties' using data drawn from the 'Comparative Political Data Set I' available online from the Institute for Political Science at the University of Bern. The results also continue to support those reported in Table 2, and the coefficient for the 'effective number of parties' variable was not statistically significant suggesting that the findings hold regardless of the number of parties in a given party system. My gratitude to the referee for making this suggestion.

17. My thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this particular analysis. The results of analyses run using an unweighted measure of party valence, excluding a lag of the key independent variable (change between *t*–1 and *t*–2), as well as employing a lag of the key independent variable but dropping the non-lagged version of this variable (change between *t* and *t*–1) also broadly support the findings reported in Table 2. Results available from the author on request.

18. I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting an exploration of the relative impact of valence on different subconstituencies.

19. The exogenous measure of valence used in the analyses presented here contrasts with research by Serra (2010), who presents a model in which candidate valence is assumed to be endogenous in that candidates can work to improve their valence-related images by furthering their education, and gaining relevant political experience that should improve their 'on the job' competence and so forth.

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