

Voter Discounting of Party Campaign Manifestos. An Analysis of Mainstream and Niche Parties in Western Europe, 1971-2011

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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 paper 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 paper confirms previous work suggesting that voters disregard the platforms of incumbent parties. These findings have implications for democratic representation, party competition and electoral volatility.

1 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.¹

The central argument in this paper 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 argument separately for mainstream and for niche parties. According to previous work, mainstream

¹In the words of Downs (1957, p. 39): “[The voter] cannot merely compare platforms; instead he must estimate in his own mind what the parties would do were they in power.”

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 (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2017; Bawn and Somer-Topcu, 2012). The findings in this paper 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 paper. For mainstream parties, while campaigning on extreme policies significantly changes opinions about a 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 non-centrist 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 paper 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 towards party rhetoric (e.g. [Adams et al., 2011, 2014](#)). On the other, 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 an short-term electoral strategy.

Finally, by mapping conditions in which campaign platforms influence opinions about parties, this paper 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 paper helps identify the scenarios in which the campaign is more likely to affect a party's electoral fortunes.

2 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 (Merrill and Grofman, 1999; Adams et al., 2005; Jessee, 2009; Lacy and Paolino, 2010). This framework is also widely used by media pundits to analyze candidates' and parties' electoral strategies.²

For that reason, there is a growing scholarly interest in understanding the determinants of voter perceptions of party positions. Regarding parties in government, several papers 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 legislation passed (Grynaviski, 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

²As an illustration, see the NYT's recent piece on how the new British Labour leader might be too left-wing to succeed in a general election, nytimes.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 washingtonpost.com/is-ted-cruz-too-conservative-for-republican-primary-voters/.

the type of topics that political parties choose to emphasize and to scale their stances on policy issues (Benoit et al., 2014; Grimmer and Stewart, 2013; Lucas et al., 2014; 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 papers 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).

3 Argument

This paper 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's 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 position 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](#)).³ 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 non-centrist 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

³[Karreth et al. \(2013\)](#), however, argue that vote gains associated to ideological moderation may be short-lived.

argument yields the opposite prediction: Voters will consider centrist stances to be more credible than non-centrist 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 below, the empirical evidence in this paper confirms these previous findings.

The argument in this paper 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 paper claims that voters discount party platforms because they consider that parties may not be sincere, i.e. 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.

4 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, post-election 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 non-exclusively European in scope, focuses on these countries.⁴

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 post-election survey.⁵ 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 (Pierce, 1999; McDonald and Budge, 2005). As such, research has shown that the left-right dimension is useful to understand party competition in Western European democracies (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006; Brug et al., 2005). 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 dataset includes as many data points for each party as elections have been held during the time frame of the study.⁶

⁴For a reference, see https://visuals.manifesto-project.wzb.eu/mpdb-shiny/cmp_dashboard_dataset/ [Last accessed June 28th 2017].

⁵The average placement is used as a summary statistic of the distribution of placements attributed to the party.

⁶An alternative approach to test the argument would be to rely on individual-level survey data and estimate a multi-level 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 multi-level dataset. A second take would be to use panel surveys.

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.⁷ I have expanded this database to include recent elections that were not part of the original data.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 in [Somers-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 ([McDonald and Mendes, 2001](#); [Benoit and Laver, 2007](#)).¹¹ [Lowe et al. \(2011\)](#) scale avoids this problem because it

⁷For further information about this database, please refer to the following website: www.gesis.org/en/services/data-analysis/survey-data/international-election-studies/the-european-voter-project/ [last accessed December 31st 2016].

⁸These include the election studies of Sweden (2002, 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)

⁹In such cases, I have mapped the extreme values into 0 and 10, and applied the function $newscale = (oldscale - 1) \cdot \frac{10}{9}$ to the intermediate values.

¹⁰The data is maintained and updated by [Volkens et al. \(2013\)](#).

¹¹Rile 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 towards zero, thereby suggesting a shift in party position towards the center even though the number of mentions to left and right issues has remained constant

does not take into consideration “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.¹² As a robustness check, the [Online Appendix](#) presents a replication of the empirical analyses using [Kim and Fording \(1998\)](#) scaling of manifesto data, which also addresses the problem of centrist bias in Rile estimates. The substantial conclusion of my paper 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 re-estimate 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. Lastly, 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* dataset ([Cusack et al., 2007](#)). Table [A8](#) in the [Online Appendix](#) provides summary statistics of the data.

4.1 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

([McDonald and Mendes, 2001](#); [Benoit and Laver, 2007](#)). This potential centrist bias would be particularly worrisome for my analyses because it would overestimate the number of centrist manifestos

¹²Given 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: $\text{transformed_logit} = (\text{original_logit} + 3.5) * 10/6.5$

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 (*Voter Perceptions_t*) is thus defined as a weighted average of the party image before the campaign (*Voter Perceptions_{t-1}*) and the position stated in the campaign manifesto (*Platform_t*), where the relative weight of each factor is determined by the α parameter. The model assumes that α is bounded between 0 and 1 and that the sum of the two coefficients equals 1. The coefficients for *Platform_t* and *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 α , the closer the post-election party image to the position stated in the campaign. In other words, the party image shifts as a result of the election manifesto in a proportion α 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*):

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

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,¹³

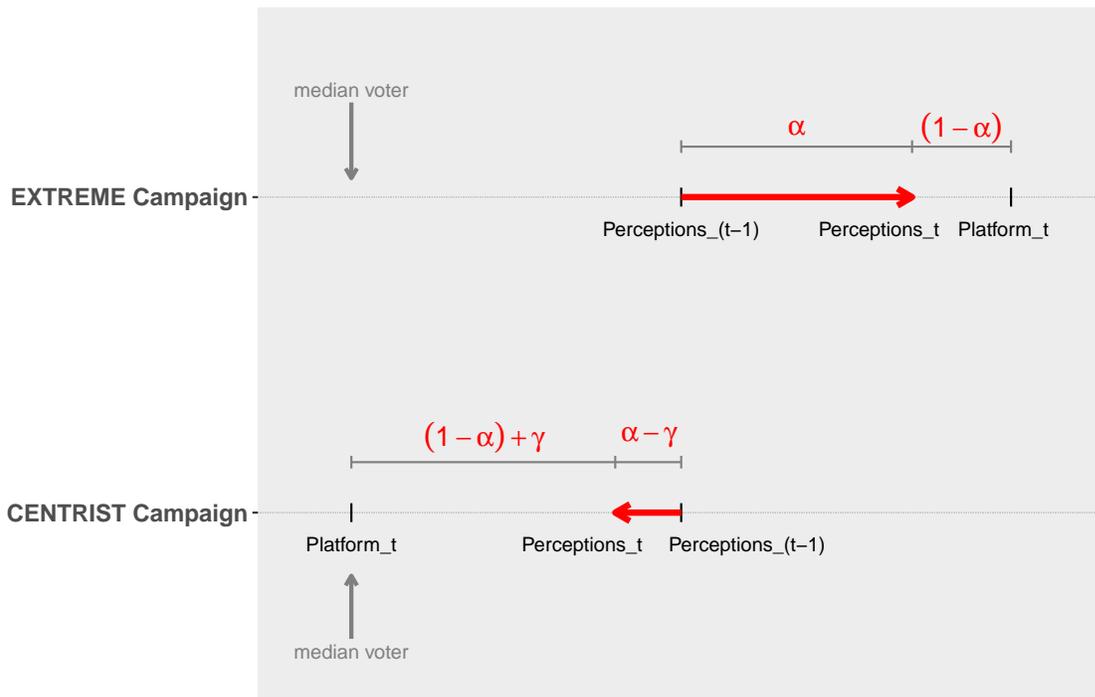
¹³The position of the median voter is captured using the median self-placement on the left-right scale in the previous post-election survey.

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 4.¹⁴ 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 γ 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 α 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 non-centrist 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 $\gamma_{mainstream} > 0$. The graph in [figure 1](#) illustrates this empirical prediction. For niche parties, in contrast, the argument predicts that non-centrist platforms have a smaller impact and hence the expectation for niche parties is that $\gamma_{niche} < 0$. As above, 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.

¹⁴In other words, $\text{Voter Perceptions}(t-1) = 4$.

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. α 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 $\gamma > 0$.



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 opinion trends have also been approached as a process that combines memory and current events (Erikson et al., 2002).¹⁵ Within the field of electoral competition, Enelow and Munger (1993) propose a formal model of elections in which voter policy expectations from each

¹⁵As Erikson et al. (1998, p. 910) put it: “macropartisanship incorporates not only the political and economic news of the present but also the accumulation of news from the past.”

candidate are a weighted average of the previous and the current policy stance. Lastly, this approach has also been adopted in a previous study of the effect of campaigns on voter perceptions (Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014).

5 Evidence for Mainstream Parties

This section presents test the argument for mainstream parties. Table I 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 α 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 tests 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 no seem to have an impact on voter perceptions. The coefficient for Platform is smaller than in the full sample and it is not distinguish-

able 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 position.

Table I: Baseline Models. The impact of campaigns on voter perceptions as a function of whether the platform is centrist or not. Lowe et al. (2011) logit scale.

	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

Significance levels: *: 10% **: 5% ***: 1%
clustered standard errors at the party level

Table II tests the argument in this paper by estimating the interactive model presented in equation 2. It allows to compare the effect of centrist and extreme manifestos for the left-right image 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 non-centrist manifesto on the party's left-right image 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.¹⁶ As the interaction coefficients show, these differences between centrist and extreme platforms are statistically significant. The contrast between the impact of centrist and non-centrist 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 towards more centrist positions.

¹⁶The standard error of this marginal effect is 0.05.

Table II: Interaction Models. The impact of campaigns on voter perceptions as a function of whether the platform is centrist or not. Lowe et al. (2011) logit scale.

	All parties	Governing	Opposition
voter perceptions (t-1)	0.54** (0.21)	0.80*** (0.19)	0.36 (0.28)
voter perceptions (t-1) * 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 * 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

Significance levels: *: 10% **: 5% ***: 1%

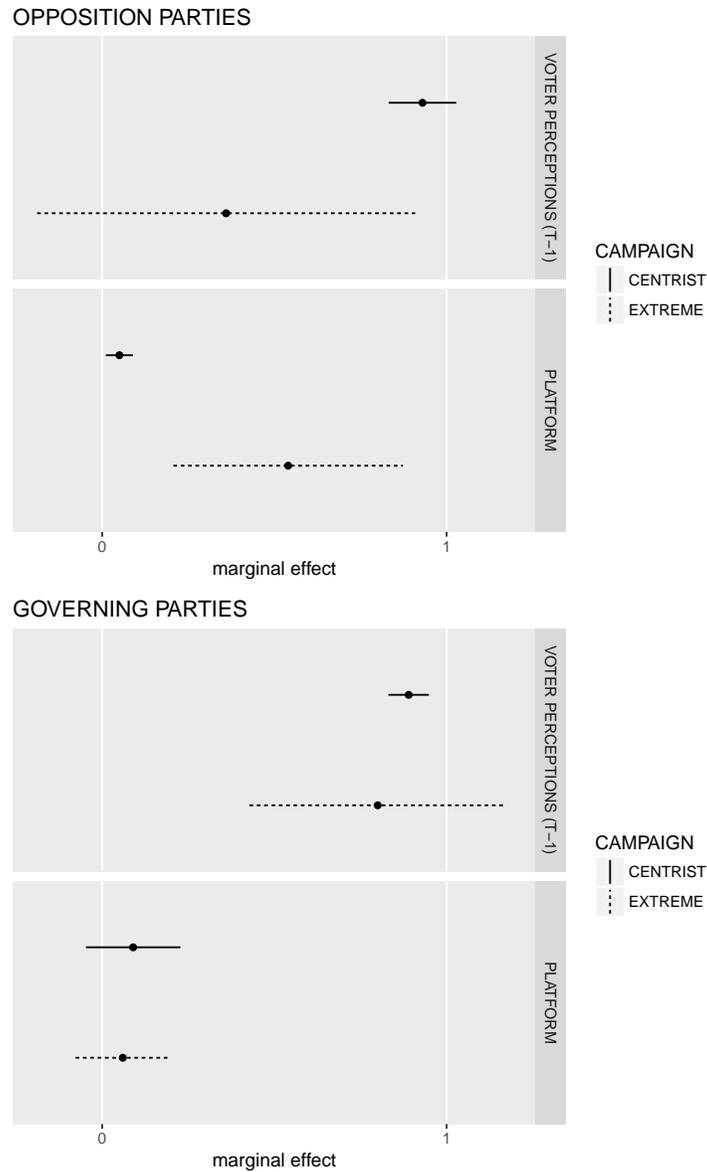
clustered standard errors at the party level

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 the effect equals 0.06 with a standard error of 0.07. Hence, the left-right image of governing parties is 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 paper. 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 * 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 * Centrist Shift—, which indicates that, with a centrist platform, the party's post-election image is almost the same as the pre-election one.

The effect of non-centrist 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 non-centrist 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 vs non-centrist manifestos.

Figure 2: Comparing Opposition and Governing Parties. The marginal effect of campaign platforms on party policy images. Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals. **Main-stream Parties.**



Note: The top pane in each plot reflects the estimated marginal effects for Voter Perceptions (t-1), i.e. the average left-right placement attributed to the party before the campaign. The bottom pane in each plot reflects the marginal effect for Platform, i.e. the left-right tone of the party's election manifesto.

5.1 Ruling Out an Alternative Explanation

In this section I rule out an alternative explanation for the empirical pattern presented above. 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 paper 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 vs non-centrist 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 to centrist manifestos is higher than that for non-centrist ones.

Table III 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 to centrist manifestos is *not* higher than that of non-centrist ones. The difference in uncertainty between centrist and non-centrist 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.

Table III: Comparing the uncertainty of centrist and extreme manifestos. Difference in means test. Mainstream political parties. Standard errors in parentheses.

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

Significance levels: *: 10% **: 5% ***: 1%.

Uncertainty is measured as the standard error in estimates of manifesto left-right positions (Benoit et al., 2009; Lowe et al., 2011).

The [Online Appendix](#) presents several additional robustness checks. It displays the results of estimating the 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 non-centrist ones.

6 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 IV 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 available because there are only 5 observations of niche parties in government during the period of study.¹⁷

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, 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.

Table IV: The impact of campaigns for niche parties. Lowe et al. (2011) logit scale.

	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

Significance levels: *: 10% **: 5% ***: 1%

clustered standard errors at the party level

¹⁷These 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.

Table V tests the paper’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 non-centrist 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-a-vis extreme manifestos because niche parties do better electorally when they are seen as more ideologically extreme.

Table V: The impact of campaigns for **niche parties**. Lowe et al. (2011) logit scale.

	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

Significance levels: *: 10% **: 5% ***: 1%

clustered standard errors at the party level

7 Discussion

This paper 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 for 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 paper’s theoretical argument. While extreme campaign platforms affect the perceived left-right position of mainstream parties, endorsing centrist policies in the manifesto is inconsequential for these parties’ left-right image. 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 non-centrist manifestos, voters’ perceptions remain unchanged. Lastly, 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 paper 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 than the marginal effect of a one-unit shift towards 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 paper 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 manuscript has focused on the perceived left-right position 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 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 paper 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 paper also opens the way for further research that explores individual-level differences in the discounting of party platforms. Indeed, the contribution of this paper 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 re-examine 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 paper. 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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A Online Appendix

A.1 Empirical analyses using Kim and Fording (1998) scales

The main empirical analyses have been replicated using an alternative scaling of manifesto positions proposed by [Kim and Fording \(1998\)](#). Like the logit scales ([Lowe et al., 2011](#)), [Kim and Fording](#)'s index addresses the centrist bias allegedly present in the original Manifesto Project's *Rile* scale. The "fix" that Kim and Fording introduce is straightforward: As with *Rile*, the estimate of a manifesto position is the difference in the proportion of right and left-leaning text units, but they compute these proportions over the total number of positional sentences, discarding those that are neutral or uncoded.¹⁸

The empirical results obtained with these alternative manifesto data lead to the same conclusions as the ones using the logit scale. [Table A1](#) reports the results of estimating the baseline model. It presents estimates for the full sample of mainstream parties and separately for governing and opposition parties. For the full sample we observe that manifestos have an impact on voter perceptions although this impact is of moderate magnitude, in line with [Fernandez-Vazquez \(2014\)](#). In addition, the content of platforms is not relevant for the image of governing parties, as described in the main text. Reassuringly, the campaign platforms of opposition parties can have an impact on voter perceptions. In sum, baseline results are qualitatively the same irrespective of whether we use [Lowe et al. \(2011\)](#)'s logit scales or [Kim and Fording \(1998\)](#)'s.

¹⁸[Kim and Fording \(1998\)](#)'s alternative left-right estimate is computed as:

$$\text{Kim_index} = \frac{r - l}{r + l} \cdot 100$$

where r and l denote the number of right and left-leaning sentences, respectively.

Table A1: Baseline Models. Mainstream parties. The impact of campaigns on voter perceptions as a function of whether the platform is centrist or not. **Kim and Fording (1998) scale.**

	All parties	Governing	Opposition
voter perceptions (t-1)	0.90*** (0.02)	0.89*** (0.03)	0.91*** (0.04)
platform	0.07*** (0.02)	0.05 (0.03)	0.10*** (0.03)
intercept	0.18 ** (0.07)	0.41*** (0.13)	-0.03 (0.16)
R^2	0.94	0.94	0.94
RMSE	0.4	0.4	0.4
N	185	84	101

Significance levels: *: 10% **: 5% ***: 1%
clustered standard errors at the party level

Table A2 test the argument in the paper for mainstream parties. It compares the impact of platforms that involve a centrist shift with those that signal a centrifugal movement. Results for governing parties confirm that platforms are not consequential for these parties: No matter whether the manifesto signals a centrist shift or not, its effect on the party’s perceived position is small —0.08 if there is a centrist shift, 0.07 otherwise— and neither of these effects is statistically distinguishable from zero. When looking at the subsample of parties in opposition, the evidence supports the argument in the paper: When a mainstream party adopts a more centrist manifesto, voters discount it as less credible than when the party endorses a more extreme one. The effect of the platform is only 0.03 in the first case while it rises to 0.27 in the second. These results confirm that the evidence presented in the main text is *not* an artifact of using [Lowe et al. \(2011\)](#)’s approach to scale manifesto positions.

Table A2: Interaction Models. Mainstream parties. The impact of campaigns on voter perceptions as a function of whether the platform is centrist or not. **Kim and Fording (1998) scale.**

	All parties	Governing	Opposition
voter perceptions (t-1)	0.64*** (0.13)	0.81*** (0.11)	0.59*** (0.20)
voter perceptions (t-1) * centrist shift	0.28 ** (0.13)	0.09 (0.12)	0.33 * (0.19)
platform	0.21*** (0.07)	0.08 (0.05)	0.27*** (0.09)
platform * centrist shift	-0.16 ** (0.07)	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.24 ** (0.09)
centrist shift	-0.53 (0.38)	-0.50 (0.46)	-0.31 (0.62)
intercept	0.78 ** (0.35)	0.69 * (0.38)	0.61 (0.60)
R^2	0.94	0.94	0.95
RMSE	0.4	0.4	0.4
N	185	84	101

Significance levels: *: 10% **: 5% ***: 1%

clustered standard errors at the party level

A.2 Dealing with measurement error: Simulation-Extrapolation estimates

In this section I report the results of replicating the interaction model using a simulation-extrapolation procedure (simex) in order to address measurement error in manifesto data. For that purpose, I follow [Benoit et al. \(2009\)](#), who suggest using simex to estimate models using text-based data as a predictor. The rationale is that the process of producing a text is inherently random, and therefore any text-based estimates will be affected by measurement

error. The simex estimation technique creates several simulated datasets with increasing levels of measurement error. The empirical model is estimated in each of these simulated datasets. The final estimates are extrapolated from the results obtained in these simulated datasets to a hypothetical setting with no measurement error.¹⁹ In order to use simulation-extrapolation, estimates of the measurement error in the covariates are needed. These have been made available by [Lowe et al. \(2011\)](#). These authors estimate the uncertainty in the point estimates of manifesto positions by bootstrapping the coded text-units.

I have re-estimated the empirical models with mainstream parties but taking into account the manifesto-specific uncertainty in [Lowe et al. \(2011\)](#) logit scales. The results, reported in [table A3](#), yield the same conclusion as those presented in the main text. For governing parties, campaign platforms are not relevant, irrespective of whether they adopt centrist or non-centrist positions. This is both in line with results presented in the main text and with previous research ([Bawn and Somer-Topcu, 2012](#); [Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2017](#)). There is empirical support for the argument both when looking at the subsample of opposition parties. Whether the manifesto endorses centrist or extreme policies makes a very large difference. With a platform signaling a centrist shift, the effect of the Platform is 0.04 and that of Voter Perceptions (t-1) is 0.93. Hence the manifesto has a negligible impact and the post-election perceived position is largely explained by the pre-election one.

With a non-centrist platform, in contrast, the relative weight of the manifesto and the initial perceived position is reversed. The coefficient for Voter Perceptions (t-1) is statistically undistinguishable from zero (-0.09) and that of Platform is very high (0.86). Hence, these estimates suggest that, if the platform is not centrist, it substantially reshapes the party's perceived position. In sum, the simulation-extrapolation approach indicates that, once we take measurement error into account, the difference for opposition parties in the effectiveness of centrist and extreme manifestos appears even starker.

¹⁹For further information about this estimation procedure, please see [Lederer and Küchenhoff \(2006\)](#).

Table A3: The impact of campaign platforms as a function of whether the party runs a centrist campaign or not. [Lowe et al. \(2011\)](#) scale. **Simulation-Extrapolation (SIMEX) estimates.** **Mainstream parties.**

	All parties	Governing	Opposition
voter perceptions (t-1)	0.20 (0.20)	0.73* (0.33)	-0.09 (0.26)
voter perceptions (t-1) * centrist shift	0.70*** (0.20)	0.15 (0.33)	1.02*** (0.26)
platform	0.60*** (0.14)	0.10 (0.22)	0.86*** (0.18)
platform * centrist shift	-0.54 ** (0.15)	-0.01 (0.23)	-0.82*** (0.18)
centrist shift	-0.73 (0.47)	-0.54 (0.75)	-0.97 (0.59)
intercept	0.93 * (0.43)	0.77 (0.70)	1.09 * (0.53)
RMSE	0.42	0.4	0.41
N	185	84	101

Significance levels: *: 10% **: 5% ***: 1%

Jackknife standard errors in parentheses.

A.3 Models with Fixed Effects

This section presents further tests of the argument as it applies to mainstream parties. First, I check whether the empirical results are robust to specifying country fixed effects. Next, I confirm that empirical results are not affected qualitatively if party fixed effects are included in the regression equation. [Table A4](#) presents regression estimates for the models with country fixed effects. The evidence is largely in line with the estimates presented in the main text ([table II](#)). First, for governing parties the type of platform —centrist or non-centrist— does not seem to matter for its impact: Interaction coefficients for Platform

and for Voter Perceptions _{$t-1$} are not statistically distinguishable from zero. For opposition parties, who rely on campaign communication to signal changes in their policy position, the nature of the manifesto is very consequential, however: While a platform indicating a centrist shift has a negligible effect of 0.02 and we cannot reject the null hypothesis of zero effect, if the manifesto signals a centrifugal shift the mainstream's party image changes substantially. The effect in this case is 0.52. The difference in the effect of centrist and non-centrist manifestos also emerges in how similar the post-election perception is to the pre-election one. With a centrist platform, the marginal effect of Voter Perceptions _{$t-1$} is 0.93, i.e. the party's post-election image is largely accounted for by the pre-election one. With a non-centrist platform, in contrast, the effect is much smaller 0.35, which suggests that there is much less stability in voter perceptions about the party.

Table A4: The impact of campaigns on voter perceptions as a function of whether the platform is centrist or not. Lowe et al. (2011) logit scale. Country Fixed Effects. **Mainstream parties.**

	All parties	Governing	Opposition
voter perceptions (t-1)	0.52*** (0.15)	0.79*** (0.25)	0.35 * (0.20)
voter perceptions (t-1) * centrist shift	0.38 ** (0.16)	0.08 (0.25)	0.58*** (0.20)
platform	0.36*** (0.10)	0.11 (0.16)	0.52*** (0.14)
platform * centrist shift	-0.29 ** (0.11)	0.06 (0.17)	-0.50*** (0.15)
centrist shift	-0.33 (0.43)	-0.47 (0.72)	-0.33 (0.54)
intercept	0.48 (0.41)	0.04 (0.71)	0.77 (0.50)
Country FE	✓	✓	✓
R^2	0.95	0.95	0.96
RMSE	0.4	0.4	0.4
N	185	84	101

Significance levels: * : 10% ** : 5% *** : 1%

Table A5 presents the estimates of models with party fixed effects. These models reproduce the findings reported in the main text. First, platforms do not seem to matter for the perceived position of governing parties. Whether the manifesto is centrist or not, the estimated effect is small in magnitude (-0.08 in the first case, 0.07 in the second) and in neither case can we reject the null hypothesis of no effects. Results for the full sample and for the subsample of opposition parties offer support for the argument: Adopting a centrist platform has a small -0.09 — and statistically insignificant effect on the party’s perceived

position. If the manifesto is non-centrist, on the other hand, the estimated effect is substantial in magnitude 0.47. In toto, we can conclude that models with country or fixed effects *also* support the argument advanced in the paper.

Table A5: The impact of campaigns on voter perceptions as a function of whether the platform is centrist or not. **Mainstream parties. Party Fixed Effects.**

	All parties	Governing	Opposition
voter perceptions (t-1)	0.28 *	0.72***	0.06
	(0.15)	(0.24)	(0.22)
voter perceptions (t-1) * centrist shift	0.28 *	-0.31	0.50 **
	(0.15)	(0.25)	(0.21)
platform	0.28***	-0.08	0.47***
	(0.11)	(0.16)	(0.15)
platform * centrist shift	-0.26 **	0.15	-0.38 **
	(0.11)	(0.18)	(0.16)
centrist shift	0.11	1.08	-0.52
	(0.43)	(0.76)	(0.60)
intercept	2.27***	1.90 **	2.53***
	(0.46)	(0.84)	(0.67)
Party FE	✓	✓	✓
R^2	0.41	0.33	0.42
RMSE	0.4	0.4	0.4
N	185	84	101

Significance levels: *: 10% **: 5% ***: 1%

A.4 The Long-Term Effect of Campaign Platforms

To illustrate the difference in the effect of centrist and non-centrist platforms on parties' perceived positions, this section presents several plots with the predicted outcome depending

on the type of platform that the party campaigns on. Given that the empirical models are dynamic—they include a lagged dependent variable—I follow the strategy proposed by Williams and Whitten (2012) and report the predicted perceived party position over the long-term.

I present four plots, two for mainstream parties and two for niche ones. In each plot the initial perceived position is the same and what varies is the position advocated in the manifesto—as scaled by Lowe et al. (2011)—. Predictions are generated up to four election periods *after* the new platform is adopted. These prediction plots report evidence in support of the argument in the paper.

The first plot, figure A1, presents the predicted evolution of a mainstream party’s image that is initially placed at position 3 on the left-right scale. The blue line defines the evolution of the party’s perceived position if it proposes a more centrist manifesto located at position 4. The red line, in contrast, reflects the prediction when the party proposes a more extreme manifesto (located at 2). Both predictions include their corresponding confidence intervals. As a benchmark, the black line plots the predicted pattern if the manifesto endorses the same position where the party is initially placed, i.e. 3 on the left-right scale. As can be seen, while proposing a more centrist manifesto barely moves the party’s perceived position in that direction, proposing a more centrist one significantly shifts the party’s image in the expected direction. This is consistent with argument in the paper.

Figure A1: Predicted evolution left-right image. Mainstream Party. **Initial perceived position: 3**

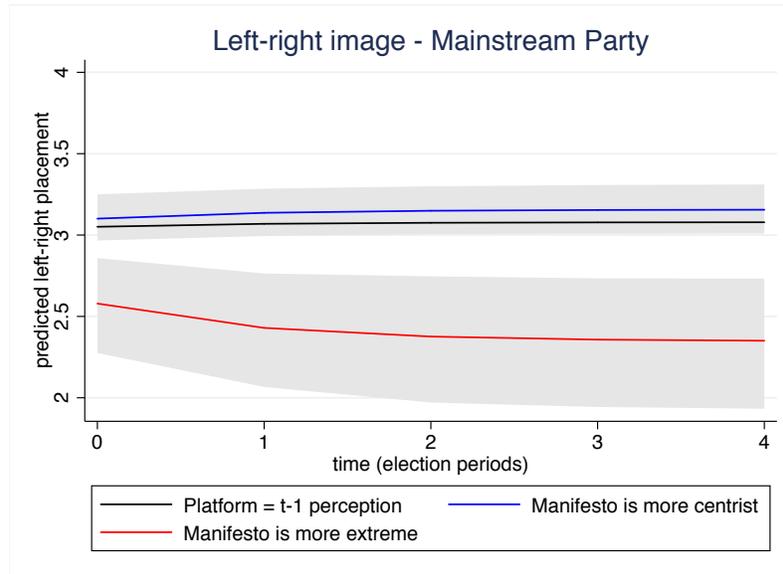


Figure A2 also refers to a mainstream party but changing its initial perceived position. Namely, a political party is initially perceived (on average) at position 7 on a 0-10 left-right scale. The red line and its confidence interval indicate the predicted perception of the party if it chooses a more extreme manifesto at position 8. The blue line and its confidence interval report the predicted evolution of the party's image if it adopts a more centrist manifesto at position 6. The benchmark of comparison is the black line, i.e. the expected perception if the party campaigns on a manifesto that mimics the initial party reputation (position 7). While the prediction with the more centrist manifesto is practically undistinguishable from the benchmark, the predicted image with a more extreme manifesto shifts significantly in that direction. This long-term prediction thus provides further evidence that campaigning on more extreme positions has a stronger effect on mainstream parties' images than campaign on centrist ones.

Figure A2: Predicted evolution left-right image. Mainstream Party. **Initial perceived position: 7**

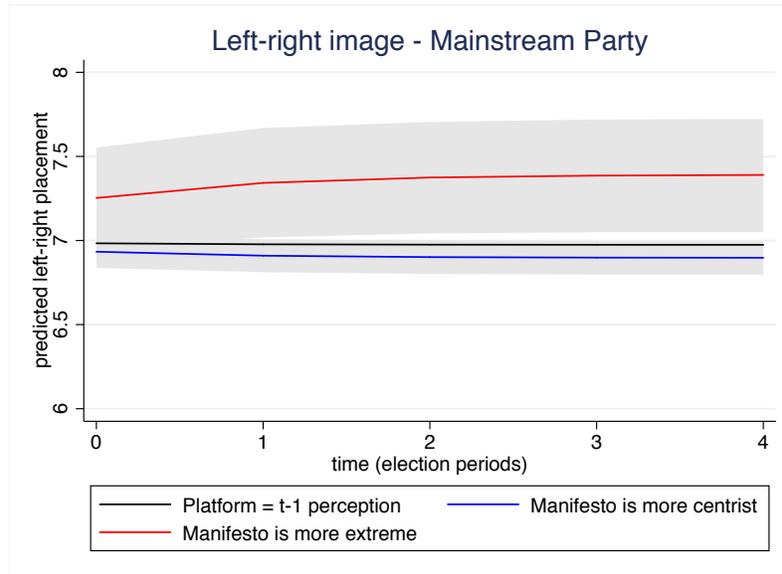
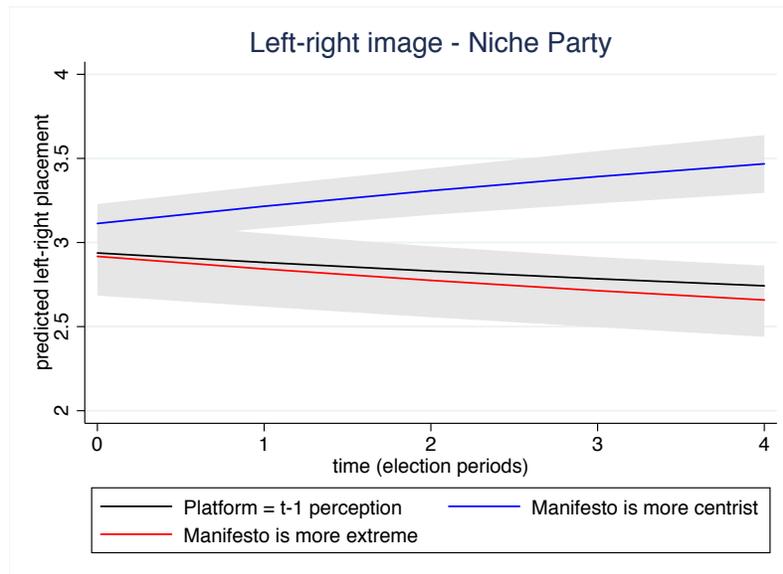


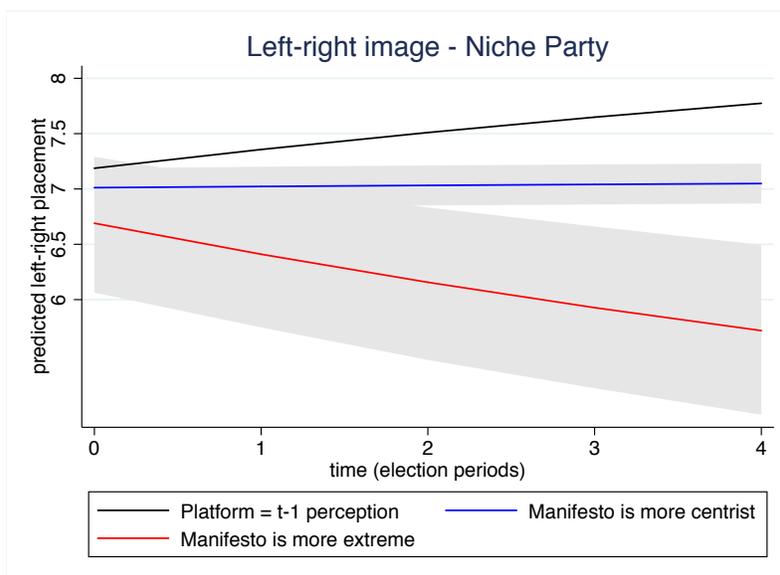
Figure A3 turns the attention to niche parties. It presents the predicted values of the dependent variable for a niche party that is initially perceived at position 3. The red line and its confidence interval reflect the expected evolution of a party that runs the campaign on a more extreme platform (at 2). The blue line corresponds to the prediction when the party decides to move closer to the center with a manifesto at 4. The benchmark is again defined by the black line that reflects the predicted pattern if the party stays put by endorsing the position 3 in its manifesto. In line with the argument in the paper, for niche parties the effectiveness of centrist vs extreme platforms is reversed. While a extreme platform is barely distinguishable from the benchmark, adopting a more centrist platform tends to move the party closer to the center. This effect is particularly apparent when comparing the evolution between the centrist platform and the benchmark. Note, however, that the difference in the expected outcome between a centrist and an extreme platform is only statistically significant after two election periods.

Figure A3: Predicted evolution left-right image. Niche Party. **Initial perceived position: 3**



Lastly, [figure A4](#) plots the predicted values for a niche party that is initially perceived to be at position 7 on a 0-10 left-right scale. The red line refers to the scenario where the party adopts a more extreme manifesto at 8. The blue line, as before, corresponds to the scenario where the party presents a more centrist platform (at 6). The black line corresponds to the benchmark of comparison, in which the party campaigns on the same position where it is initially perceived. The evidence in this figure suggests that adopting a more extreme platform does not help the party to be perceived as more extreme. Indeed the perceived position shifts in the opposite direction. Consistent with the argument, a centrist platform is more effective: Relative to the benchmark, adopting a centrist manifesto helps the party be perceived as closer to the center. Note how, as in the previous example, the difference in the impact of centrist and extreme manifestos is *not* statistically obvious in the short-term. The difference only becomes statistically significant after three election periods. This is largely due to the high uncertainty around the predicted impact of extreme manifestos.

Figure A4: Predicted evolution left-right image. Niche Party. **Initial perceived position:** 7



A.5 Additional descriptive statistics

Table A6 summarizes the countries and time periods that these election studies cover.

Table A6: Countries and time periods included in the empirical analyses.

Country	Time period	Number of elections	Number of parties
Sweden	(1979-2006)	9	7
Netherlands	(1971-2010)	13	8
Norway	(1977-2009)	9	7
Germany	(1976-2009)	10	5
Great Britain	(1983-2010)	7	3
Denmark	(1994-2011)	6	10
Spain	(1986-2008)	7	3

Table A7: List of parties and elections included in the dataset. In **bold**: years in which the party is in opposition.

Party name	Elections
<i>Great Britain</i>	
Conservative Party	1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010
Labour Party	1983, 1987, 1992, 1997 , 2001, 2005, 2010
Liberal Democrats	1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010
<i>Denmark</i>	
Center Party	1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011
Christian Democrats	1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011
Conservative Party	1994, 1998, 2001 , 2005, 2007, 2011
Liberal Party	1994, 1998, 2001 , 2005, 2007, 2011
People's Party	1998, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011
Progress Party	1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007
Radical Liberal Party	1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011
Red Green Coalition	1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011
Social Democratic Party	1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011
Socialist Party	1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011
<i>Germany</i>	
Christian Democrats	1976, 1983 , 1987, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005 , 2005, 2009
Green Party	1983, 1987, 1990, 1998 , 2002, 2005, 2009
Left Party	1990, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2009
Liberal Party	1976, 1983, 1987, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2009
Social Democrats	1976, 1983, 1987, 1990, 1998 , 2002, 2005, 2009
<i>Netherlands</i>	
Christian Democrats	1981, 1982, 1986, 1989, 1994, 1998, 2002 , 2003, 2006, 2010
Democrats 66	1971, 1972, 1981 , 1982, 1986, 1989, 1994 , 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2010
Green Left	2002, 2003, 2006, 2010
Pim Fortuyn League	2002, 2003, 2006
Labor Party	1971, 1972, 1981 , 1982, 1986, 1989 , 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006 , 2010
Party for Freedom	2006, 2010
Socialist Party	2002, 2003, 2006, 2010
Liberal Party	1971, 1972, 1981, 1982 , 1986, 1989, 1994 , 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2010

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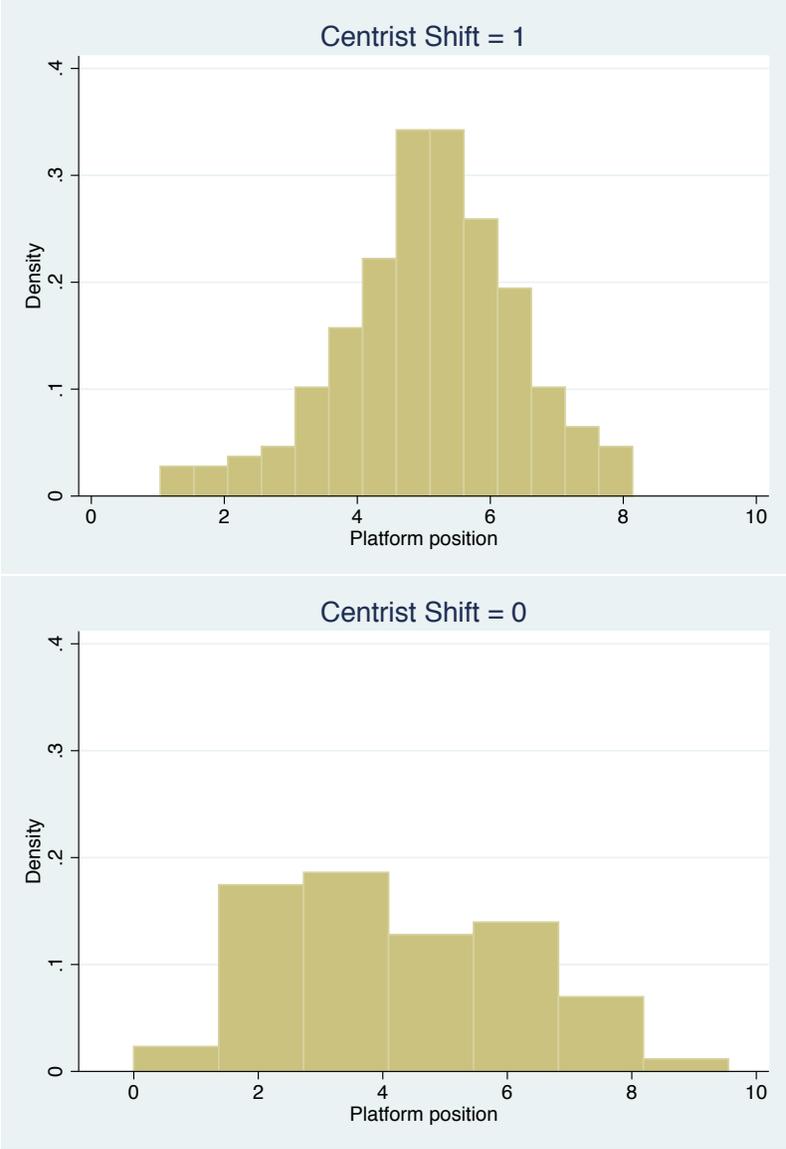
Party name	Elections
<i>Norway</i>	
Christian Democratic Party	1977, 1981 , 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997 , 2001, 2005, 2009
Conservative Party	1977, 1981 , 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001 , 2005, 2009
Labor Party	1977, 1981, 1985 , 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005 , 2009
Liberal Party	1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997 , 2001, 2005, 2009
Progress Party	1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009
Socialist Party	1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001 , 2005, 2009
<i>Sweden</i>	
Center Party	1979, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1998, 2002, 2006
Christian Democrats	1982, 1985 , 1988, 1991 , 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006
Green Party	1988, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006
Moderate Party	1979, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1991 , 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006
Social Democrats	1979, 1982 , 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994 , 1998, 2002, 2006
Left Party	1979, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006
Liberal Party	1979, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1991 , 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006
<i>Spain</i>	
Conservative Party	1986, 1989, 1993, 1996 , 2000, 2004, 2008
Left Party	1986, 1989, 1993, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008
Socialist Party	1986, 1989, 1993, 1996, 2000, 2004 , 2008

Table A8: Summary statistics of the variables in the models.

Name	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max	N
<i>Voter Perceptions</i>	5	2.2	0.7	9	310
<i>Platform (logit scale)</i>	4.9	1.6	0	9.6	317
<i>Std error in Platform (logit scale)</i>	0.3	0.2	0.1	1.1	317
<i>Platform (Kim et al. scale)</i>	4.3	2.1	0	10	317
<i>Centrist (logit scale criterion)</i>	0.7	0.5	0	1	293
<i>Centrist (Kim et al. criterion)</i>	0.6	0.5	0	1	293
<i>In Government</i>	0.3	0.5	0	1	342

To confirm that there is common support for interaction terms, the following figure plots the distribution of the variable Platform both when Centrist Shift == 1 and also when Centrist Shift == 0.

Figure A5: Distribution of campaign platform positions (Platform) as a function of the moderating variable Centrist Shift



The following figure provides descriptive information on the difference between platform positions —Platform— and the party’s previous left-right image —Voter Perceptions (t-1)—. This gives a sense of the magnitude of the policy movements that political parties attempt to signal with their campaign manifestos.

Figure A6: Distribution of difference between platform positions —Platform— and the party’s previous left-right image —Voter Perceptions (t-1)—

