

Is Anybody Listening? Evidence that Voters do not Respond to European Parties' Policy Statements During Elections

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Abstract

Although extensive research analyzes the factors that motivate European parties to shift their policy positions, there is little cross-national research that analyzes how voters respond to parties' policy shifts. We report pooled, time-series, analyses of election survey data from several European polities, which suggest that voters do not systematically adjust their perceptions of parties' positions in response to shifts in parties' policy statements during election campaigns. We also find no evidence that voters adjust their Left-Right positions or their partisan loyalties in response to shifts in parties' campaign-based policy statements. By contrast, we find that voters *do* respond to their *subjective perceptions* of the parties' positions. Our findings have important implications for party policy strategies and for political representation.

Research on political representation in Europe emphasizes the linkages between parties' policy positions and their supporters' policy beliefs. According to this *responsible party model* of political representation, it is normatively desirable that parties' policy programmes – and governing parties' policy outputs – match the views of the party's supporters, a desideratum that reflects Sartori's observation that “citizens in Western democracies are represented *by* and *through* parties. This is inevitable” (1968, page 471, emphasis in original). Over the past thirty years dozens of studies have analyzed the mass-elite policy linkages that the responsible party model highlights (see, e.g., Dalton 1985; Powell 1989; Iversen 1994).¹ These studies typically report reasonably close matches between parties' positions and their supporters' policy preferences, particularly with respect to policy debates over Left-Right social welfare issues (see, e.g., Dalton 1985).

In an evolving political environment wherein both parties and voters shift their policy positions, policy correspondence between political parties and their supporters can be maintained through some combination of party elites responding to their supporters and these supporters responding to party elites, i.e., elites may dynamically adjust their policy positions in response to shifts in their supporters' beliefs, a process we label *party responsiveness*, and party supporters may dynamically adjust their beliefs in response to shifts in their preferred party's policy positions, a process we label *party persuasion*. Alternatively, rank-and-file voters may switch their partisan loyalties in response to parties' policy shifts, i.e. voters may engage in policy-based *partisan switching*. The latter two processes both involve voters responding to parties, and we collectively label these as processes of *partisan adjustments*.

We analyze the dynamics of voters' responses to shifts in European parties' Left-Right positions. We ask the following questions: When parties shift their Left-Right policy statements, as re-

¹ An alternative representation criterion emphasizes the link between government policies and the median voter position in the electorate (see, e.g., Powell 2000; McDonald and Budge 2005).

flected in their election manifestos, do citizens update their perceptions of the parties' Left-Right positions? And, do we observe partisan adjustments in response to parties' shifting policy statements, i.e., do citizens respond to parties' statements by shifting their own Left-Right positions (a persuasion process) and/or their partisan loyalties (partisan switching)?

The surprising answer we provide to each of the above questions is *no*. We find no substantively or statistically significant evidence that voters adjust their perceptions of parties' Left-Right positions in response to the policy statements in parties' election manifestos – a conclusion that is striking given that interviews with European political elites that we conducted (discussed below) suggest that parties campaign on the basis of these manifestos. We also find no evidence of citizens' partisan adjustments in response to parties' policy statements, i.e., we find no evidence that voters adjust their Left-Right positions or their partisan loyalties in response to these policy statements. This latter conclusion holds both for analyses of national election surveys from five European countries², and for separate analyses of Eurobarometer data from 12 countries over the period 1973-2002.³ Simply put, we find that when parties shift the statements in their policy programmes – statements that form the basis for the parties' election campaigns, according to the party elites we interviewed – there is no evidence that voters respond by adjusting their perceptions of the parties' Left-Right positions, their own Left-Right positions, or their partisan loyalties.

By contrast, we find that European citizens do react to their perceptions of parties' Left-Right positions, i.e., citizens adjust their Left-Right positions and their partisan loyalties in response to the parties' *policy images*. Overall, our findings thereby suggest that Left-Right ideology *does matter* to

² The five countries are Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway, the five European polities for which national election survey data are available over a lengthy time period.

³ The twelve countries that are included in the Eurobarometer surveys are Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Denmark, Luxembourg, Greece, Ireland, Belgium, and Italy.

voters, and that they react to parties' perceived ideological shifts. But, because voter perceptions do not track the parties' actual policy statements, there is a disconnect between shifts in elite policy discourse and voter reactions. Voters react to what they *perceive* the parties stand for, but these perceptions do not match up with the actual statements in the parties' policy manifestos, which form the basis for the parties' election campaigns.

Should we Expect Voters to React to Parties' Policy Statements? Theoretical Arguments

We first consider the question: Should we actually expect citizens to update their perceptions of parties' Left-Right positions in response to political elites' policy statements? More specifically, given that our empirical measure of the Left-Right tone of party policy statements is based on content analyses of their election manifestos⁴, we ask: Should we expect voters' perceptions of parties' ideologies to vary with the Left-Right tone of the statements in these manifestos? We believe this is an interesting question, because there are considerations that point in conflicting directions. The two considerations that suggest that voters will indeed react to parties' election manifestos are as follows. First, parties typically publish their manifestos in the run-up to the national election campaign, and previous studies find that voters display heightened interest in (and awareness of) political information that appears around the time of a national election. In particular, Andersen et al. (2005) report analyses of the British electorate over the period 1992-2002, that demonstrate that citizens' information about the parties' policy positions peaked around the times of the national elections held during

⁴ As we discuss below, the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) codings of party policy manifestos provide the only available over-time estimates of the Left-Right tone of parties' policy statements, that generalize across the European party systems and the time periods included in our study.

this period (1992, 1997, 2002).⁵ Andersen et al.'s findings support the arguments presented by Gelman and King (1993), that citizens become more enlightened during the course of national election campaigns due to the intensity of political media coverage during these periods, and also because citizens are especially motivated to seek out political information during election campaigns. Thus, while only a fraction of rank-and-file voters presumably read the parties' election manifestos, we might expect citizens to be especially attentive to media coverage of these manifestos because they are published near the time of national elections (see Topf 1994).

Second, although there is no extant study that analyzes whether the policy statements in parties' election manifestos match their statements in other campaign forums (i.e., political advertisements, candidates' speeches, etc.), we conducted interviews with 26 party elites from Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria, during the summer of 2008, in which these elites stated that their parties make determined efforts to campaign based on their policy manifestos.⁶ This is important because it suggests that parties' manifesto-based policy statements roughly reflect the policies they communicate to the public via other avenues, such as campaign advertisements, party elites' campaign speeches, and media interviews. Typical were the following exchanges:

Q: Does the election campaign usually follow what the election manifesto says?

A: It is very important to have, within the party, and also with the local members...to have a view and an awareness of issues which are important for us and for our voters.

⁵ We note that the national election survey data that we analyze below was collected shortly after the national election campaign took place, so that respondents' political information levels should peak around the time of these surveys.

⁶ These elite interviews encompassed party leaders, members of parliament, campaign directors, and directors of think tank organizations. A protocol of these interviews was that we keep the subjects' identities confidential.

And they have to be in everything we do. So, they have to be central points in our election programs and in our materials and in speeches on television and things like that.⁷

Q: And how much do you think the election manifesto and the issues in the election manifesto stay the same for the CDA during the electoral campaign? Is it the basis for the campaign or does it change a lot?

A: No, no, it is [the basis for the campaign]. We have some essential, very important parts of the party program which are fundamental for the image of the CDA...So, the issues in the party program are image-building issues. So, there is a lot in the manifestos and there are some things which are fundamental for our image.⁸

Q: So, how much do you think the election program is reflected in the electoral campaign? Because, nobody in the public really reads the election program, so do you think that the party closely follows the election program?

A: It's not true that nobody reads the manifesto. We've had, sometimes we've had more than 100,000 copies of the manifesto that were distributed...And of course the party activists read it. The manifesto basically is an outline of the kinds of arguments that we do share so it basically harmonizes the message of the party.⁹

While the considerations discussed above suggest reasons why citizens' perceptions of party ideologies may track the statements in parties' election manifestos, other considerations cast doubt on parties' abilities to shape their policy images via their campaign-based policy statements. First, there is extensive empirical research that argues that large segments of the mass public are inattentive

⁷ Interview with a politician from the Dutch Green party (June, 26, 2008).

⁸ Interview with a politician from the Dutch Christian Democratic Party (June, 26, 2008).

⁹ Interview with a politician from the German Greens (July 3, 2008).

to and uninformed about political issues (e.g., Converse 1964; Zaller 1992), so that even if the electorate is relatively more politically informed around the time of national elections – as the studies discussed earlier suggest – significant segments of the electorate may nevertheless be inattentive to campaign-based media coverage of parties’ policy statements. Second, a separate strand of research suggests reasons why even those voters that register the parties’ shifting policy statements may resist updating their perceptions of parties’ positions: specifically, this research documents *assimilation/contrast* effects whereby voters align their current perceptions of the parties’ positions with their pre-existing political loyalties (see, e.g., Gerber and Green 1999; Achen and Bartels 2006).

There are additional reasons why political parties may face difficulties in shaping their policy images via their campaign-based policy statements. Parties’ new policy pronouncements often provoke rival party elites to publicly deride the focal party’s new initiatives as being “opportunistic,” “pandering,” “insincere,” “unrealistic,” and so on, and these characterizations may confuse voters about the focal party’s actual policy intentions. Furthermore, members of the news media may weigh in with commentary about whether the focal party’s new policy initiatives represent a “tactical” change in strategy as opposed to a fundamental change in policy direction; whether the policy shift is permanent or whether it merely represents a temporary victory for one of the party’s factions; and whether, in the event the party enters the government, the party’s leaders will have the resolve to actually push through the policy reforms they have advocated while in opposition (see, e.g., Stokes 2001). In addition, during national election campaigns both the media and opposing parties may emphasize aspects of the focal party’s policy program that differ from the planks that the party itself prefers to emphasize, i.e., parties cannot unilaterally set the “terms of the debate” for the election campaign via their policy statements.

The Link between Parties' Statements and their Policy Images: Empirical Analyses

We require longitudinal measurements of the Left-Right tone of party policy statements along with voters' perceptions of the parties' positions, in order to analyze whether parties' policy images shift along with their policy statements. Our measures of the Left-Right tone of parties' policy statements are based on the Comparative Manifesto Project's (CMP) Left-Right codings of the parties' election manifestos (Budge et al. 2001). These manifestos are typically published in the run-up to the national election, and, as discussed above, our elite interviews suggest that parties use these manifestos as the basis for their subsequent election campaigns. The procedures used to map parties' policy positions from their election programmes are described in detail in several of the CMP-related publications, so that we only briefly review the process here.¹⁰ The coders match up quasi-sentences in the policy programme with a category of policy (e.g., welfare, defense, law and order, etc.), and take the percentages of each category as a measure of the party's priorities. Based on the mixture of policy priorities, the authors develop an index that measures the overall ideology for the programme of each party in each election year. The ideological scores range from -100 to +100, with higher scores denoting a more right-wing emphasis. We have re-scaled the CMP party scores to a 1-10 Left-Right scale, so that the range of these scores matches that of the voters' perceptions of the parties' Left-Right positions (described below). We label the CMP-based codings of party manifestos as the *party's stated position*.¹¹

¹⁰ For a more thorough description of the coding process, see Appendix 2 in Budge et al. (2001).

¹¹ We note that there is a wide-ranging, often heated debate over the validity of the CMP Left-Right codings of party programs, with particular emphasis on whether these codings capture parties' Left-Right policy positions as opposed to parties' issue priorities (see, e.g., Janda et al. 1995; McDonald and Mendes 2001). While it is outside the scope of this paper to review this debate, we note that the CMP codings have been widely used in research that analyzes the relationship between parties' Left-

Our measures of parties' policy images, i.e., of voters' subjective perceptions of the parties' Left-Right positions, are derived from national election study (NES) data from Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden – the five Western European democracies for which NES data are available for protracted periods.¹² In each of these national election studies, respondents were asked to locate all of the major parties on an ideological scale typically ranging from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right).¹³ We used these survey responses to compute the *perceived party position* for each party in each election.

Model specification

We specify a multivariate regression model in order to evaluate whether parties' policy images shift in tandem with the CMP codings of the Left-Right tone of the statements in the parties' election manifestos. The dependent variable is the change in the party's policy image at the current election compared to its image at the previous election, as measured by NES respondents' mean Left-Right placements of the party. We label this variable [*Party j 's perceived Left-Right shift (t)*], to denote the shift in the focal party j 's perceived position between the current election t and the previous election $t - 1$. Our key independent variables are [*Party j 's stated Left-Right shift (t)*], which denotes the shift in the CMP's Left-Right coding of party j 's election manifesto between the current and the previous election, and [*Party j 's stated Left-Right shift ($t - 1$)*], which denotes the shift in the CMP's coding of party j 's manifesto between the previous election and the election before that. We include

Right positions and survey-based measures of voters' ideological positions (e.g., Adams, Haupt, and Stoll 2009; Ezrow 2007), which is one of the key relationships that we analyze in this paper.

¹² The list of elections included in the surveys is given in the Appendix.

¹³ In cases where the Left-Right scale was not 1-10, we re-calibrated respondents' party placements to a 1-10 scale.

this latter variable to control for the possibility that significant time lags intervene before citizens process parties' policy statements (see, e.g., Erikson et al. 2002; Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009). We also include a lagged version of the dependent variable, in order to control for autocorrelation issues.¹⁴

Our specification for the relationship between voters' perceptions of the parties' Left-Right positions and the Left-Right tone of the party's election manifesto is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Party } j\text{'s perceived Left-Right shift } (t) = & b_0 + b_1[\text{Party } j\text{'s stated Left-Right shift } (t)] \\
 & + b_2[\text{Party } j\text{'s stated Left-Right shift } (t - 1)] \\
 & + b_3[\text{Party } j\text{'s perceived Left-Right shift } (t - 1)] \quad , \\
 (1)
 \end{aligned}$$

where

Party j's perceived Left-Right shift (t) = the change in party *j*'s perceived Left-Right position at the current election *t* compared with its position at the previous election *t* – 1, based on NES respondents' party placements. The variable [*Party j's perceived Left-Right shift (t – 1)*] is similarly defined.

Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t) = the change in party *j*'s Left-Right position at the current election *t* compared with its position at the previous election *t* – 1, based on the CMP's Left-Right codings of the policy statements in the party's election manifestos. The variable [*Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t – 1)*] is similarly defined.

¹⁴ We note that we also estimated the parameters of the model while omitting the lagged dependent variable, and these estimates – which we report in supplementary materials posted on our web site (<http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~ezrow>) – supported substantive conclusions that were identical to those we report below.

Results

Our analysis encompassed 97 stated Left-Right shifts by parties and their supporters in five European party systems, Germany, Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, for which NES data were available over lengthy time periods. The complete set of parties and elections included in the analyses are reported in the appendix. Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations of the observed values of the variables in our data set.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Our analyses encompassed 25 parties, each observed over an average of six elections, and should thus be regarded as time-series cross-sectional data. Estimating a simple regression on the pooled data can lead to erroneous conclusions if there are unobserved differences between partisan constituencies (Hsiao 2003); fortunately, tests for party-specific effects indicate that this is not a concern for the model we estimate. However, there are other methodological concerns to address. The lagged dependent variable included in our specification helps to address the concern of serially-correlated errors (Beck and Katz 1995), and a Lagrange multiplier test fails to reject the null hypothesis of no serial correlation. Another concern is that there may be unobserved, election-specific, factors that influence the positions of parties' partisan constituencies in a particular election. We address these concerns through the use of robust standard errors clustered by election (Rogers 1993).

The parameter estimates for the alternative models that we investigated are reported in Table 2. Column 1 in the table reports parameter estimates for a model where the dependent variable, [*Party j's perceived Left-Right shift (t)*], represents the change in the mean Left-Right position ascribed to the focal party along the 1-10 Left-Right scale by NES respondents at the current election, compared to the mean position that all NES respondents ascribed to the party at the previous election.

To the extent that voters' perceptions of parties' Left-Right positions respond to the actual policy statements the parties publish in their policy manifestos, we would expect positive and statistically significant coefficient estimates on the [*Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t)*] variable – which would indicate that voters adjust their perceptions contemporaneously with parties' stated Left-Right shifts – and possibly on the [*Party j stated Left-Right shift (t – 1)*] variable, which would denote time lags before voters update their perceptions of party positions. However, the coefficient estimates reported in column 1 of Table 2 are small and statistically insignificant, and thus they do not support these expectations. These estimates imply that, ceterus paribus, a one-unit shift in the CMP codings of a party's Left-Right position at the current election (compared to the previous election) is associated with a Left-Right shift in voters' perceptions of the party's Left-Right position of less than one twentieth of one unit, where both the CMP codings and voters' party placements are calibrated along the same 1-10 scale. And, the coefficient estimate on the lagged variable, [*Party j stated Left-Right shift (t – 1)*], is also near zero and statistically insignificant. Furthermore, when we re-estimate the parameters of the model while including country-specific intercepts to control for unobserved, country-specific factors that influence voters' perceptions, the parameter estimates (reported in column 2 of Table 2) support the same substantive conclusions.¹⁵ Thus we find no evidence that voters system-

¹⁵ We conducted additional robustness checks using alternative versions of the dependent and independent variables in equation 1. In one version, we calibrated shifts in parties' stated Left-Right positions (as coded by the CMP) against the shifts of other parties in the party system, i.e. we created a variable labeled [*Party j's relative stated Left-Right shift (t)*] that was defined as the difference between the focal party *j*'s stated Left-Right shift at the current election and the mean stated Left-Right shift of all other parties in the system at the current election. Our logic for this specification was that when voters assess whether a focal party has shifted to the right or left, they may calibrate the party's shift against the shifts of other parties in the system. We also estimated a model where the dependent

atically update their perceptions of parties' Left-Right positions, in response to the actual policy statements that parties present in their manifestos. Given that previous research documents that citizens acquire disproportionate amounts of political information during national election campaigns, and our interviews that suggest that parties campaign based on their manifestos, these results cast doubt on parties' abilities to shape their policy images via their campaign-based policy statements.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Voters' Partisan Adjustments to Parties' Policy Statements: Empirical Analyses

The empirical analyses reported above cast serious doubts on the proposition that European voters engage in systematic partisan adjustments in response to parties' campaign-based policy statements. For if citizens do not even update their perceptions of parties' Left-Right positions when parties' policy statements shift, then it seems unlikely that citizens adjust their partisan loyalties or their own Left-Right positions in response to parties' policy statements. However this logic is not necessarily sound because parties may move citizens indirectly via their policy statements: specifically, parties may communicate their Left-Right shifts to organizations and political interest groups (i.e., trade unions, business organizations, etc.), and these organizations may in turn provide cues that prompt rank-and-file voters to make partisan adjustments. Suppose, for instance, that trade union members hold generally left-wing policy views, and that these members also take political cues from their union's leadership. Then to the extent that union leaders provide more enthusiastic

variable, the party's perceived Left-Right shift, was calibrated against the perceived shifts of other parties in the party system, i.e. we created a variable labeled [*Party j's relative perceived Left-Right shift (t)*]. Our parameter estimates for these alternative specifications – which we report in supplementary materials posted on our web site (<http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~ezrow>) – supported substantive conclusions that were identical to those reported above. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these analyses.

endorsements to socialist, labor, and communist parties when these parties' policy statements shift farther to the left, we might expect that cue-taking union members will more reliably support these parties when the parties advocate more leftist policies – even if the union members themselves do not directly perceive the shift in the focal party's policy statements. The possibility of this type of cue-based partisan switching is supported by extensive research documenting the informational short-cuts that citizens employ to make political decisions (e.g., Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991).

Searching for evidence of voters' partisan adjustments with cross-sectional survey data

In analyses based on panel data we might parse out the extent to which voters' partisan adjustments to parties' stated policy positions reflect partisan switching as opposed to party persuasion. However because the data we analyze is time-series cross-sectional, we instead assay the simpler task of estimating the extent to which *either* of these processes is taking place, i.e. we will search for any evidence of voters' partisan adjustments to European parties' stated Left-Right shifts. Our logic is simple: to the extent that parties' campaign-based policy communications motivate partisan adjustments in the electorate due to partisan switching and/or party persuasion (and, regardless of whether these effects are direct or occur indirectly via cues from political organizations/interest groups), we expect that when a party shifts its policy statements, the mean Left-Right position of the party's supporters will shift in the same direction. This test is very simple, and as discussed below it is incomplete in that even if we find evidence that party shifts correlate with shifts by their supporters, we cannot necessarily conclude that these associations reflect a causal process of partisan adjustment.¹⁶ However if we find that the positions of parties' supporters *do not* shift in the same direction as their

¹⁶ As discussed below, if we observe that party supporters shift in the same direction as their preferred party during the same time period, this may reflect partisan adjustments but alternatively it may reflect parties shifting their positions in response to their supporters.

preferred parties' policy shifts, then we have strong reasons to doubt that partisan adjustments of any kind have taken place. On this basis we proceed.

Model specification

Our longitudinal measure of voters' Left-Right positions and their partisan loyalties is derived from the national election studies described above, from Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. In these surveys the respondents were asked to place themselves on the 1-10 Left-Right scales, and they were also asked to indicate which party (if any) they supported. Our measure of the Left-Right position of each party's partisan constituency in the focal election is the mean Left-Right self-placement of all respondents in that election that reported support for the party.¹⁷

We specify a multivariate regression model to search for evidence of voters' partisan adjustments to parties' Left-Right shifts. As we are interested in how the mean positions of the parties' supporters shift in response to parties' stated Left-Right shifts, we specify a model in which the dependent variable is the change in the party supporters' mean Left-Right position in the current election compared to party supporters' positions in the previous election, as measured by NES respondents' Left-Right self-placements and reported party support. We label this variable [*Party j supporters' Left-Right shift (t)*]. Our key independent variables are again the [*Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t)*] variable, which denotes the shift in party *j*'s stated Left-Right position between the current and the previous election, based on the CMP codings, and the lagged version of this variable. We

¹⁷ The texts of the survey questions relating to party support differed across countries, with some questions inviting respondents to identify the party (if any) they "feel close to," others asking "Of which party are you an adherent?," and so on. Information about these survey questions is available on the European voter trend-file at <http://www.gesis.org/en/research/EUROLAB/evoter/>.

include this latter variable because of the possibility of lagged partisan adjustments to parties' Left-Right shifts. We also include a lagged version of the dependent variable, in order to control for possible autocorrelation issues.¹⁸ We label this the *partisan adjustment specification – CMP codings*:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Party } j \text{ supporters' Left-Right shift } (t) = & \alpha_0 + \alpha_1[\text{Party } j\text{'s stated Left-Right shift } (t)] \\ & + \alpha_2[\text{Party } j\text{'s stated Left-Right shift } (t - 1)] \\ & + \alpha_3[\text{Party } j \text{ supporters' Left-Right shift } (t - 1)] \quad , \quad (2) \end{aligned}$$

where

Party j supporters' Left-Right shift (t) = the change in the mean Left-Right position of party *j*'s supporters at the current election *t* compared to the mean supporter position at the previous election (*t* – 1), based on NES respondents' self-placements and their party support. The variable [*Party j supporters' Left-Right shift (t – 1)*] is similarly defined.

Column 1 in Table 3, which reports the parameter estimates for the *partisan adjustment specification – CMP codings* (equation 2), does not support the hypothesis that voters engage in partisan adjustments in response to shifts in parties' campaign-based policy statements.¹⁹ The estimate on the [*Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t)*] variable implies that, ceterus paribus, a one-unit shift in the CMP codings of a party's Left-Right position at the current election (compared to the previous election) is associated with a Left-Right shift in the mean position of the party's supporters of just 0.07 units, along the same 1-10 scale. Thus we observe no evidence of statistically or substantively significant contemporaneous partisan adjustments by voters in response to shifts in the

¹⁸ We also estimated the parameters of the model while omitting the lagged independent variable, and these estimates supported substantive conclusions that were identical to those we report below.

¹⁹ We estimated the parameters of this model using robust standard errors clustered by party (Rogers 1993).

Left-Right tone of parties' campaign-based policy statements. With respect to lagged effects, the coefficient estimate +.140 on the [*Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t -1)*] variable indicates that when parties shifted their stated Left-Right positions by one unit at the previous inter-election period, then, ceterus paribus, the mean positions of their supporters shift in the same direction by less than one-seventh of one unit at the current inter-election period. However this lagged estimate is not statistically significant.²⁰

As discussed above, the absence of strongly positive statistical associations between shifts in the Left-Right tone of parties' policy statements and the mean Left-Right positions of their supporters provides strong evidence that voters do not react to shifts in parties' campaign-based policy statements, to any substantively significant degree: for to the extent that voters shift either their Left-Right positions (the party persuasion process) or their party support (the partisan switching process) in response to parties' Left-Right shifts, this should create positive statistical associations between Left-Right shifts by parties and shifts by their partisan constituencies. Furthermore, these positive statistical associations should obtain regardless of whether voters respond directly to parties' policy statements, or indirectly via cues from the political organizations and interest groups that monitor these policy statements. Finally, we note that to the extent that our analyses do not control

²⁰ We conducted additional robustness checks using alternative versions of the dependent and independent variables in equation 2. Specifically we incorporated the [*Party j's relative stated Left-Right shift (t)*] variable and the [*Party j's relative perceived Left-Right shift (t)*] variables described above (see note 15), in order to address the possibility that when voters assess whether a focal party has shifted to the right or left, they calibrate the party's shift against the shifts of other parties in the system. Our parameter estimates for these alternative specifications – which we report in supplementary materials posted on our web site (<http://privatwww.essex.ac.uk/~ezrow>) – supported substantive conclusions that were identical to those we report here.

for the reciprocal causal process whereby parties react to voters' policy shifts, this factor should inflate the positive statistical associations between our dependent and independent variables. Thus the fact that we do not observe positive and statistically significant associations between party supporters' Left-Right shifts and shifts in parties' policy statements is striking.

Do citizens respond to parties' policy images?

Our finding that citizens do not systematically adjust their Left-Right positions or their partisanship in response to parties' policy statements raises the question: To what policy-based attributes of parties, if any, do voters respond? An obvious candidate is parties' *policy images*, i.e., citizens' perceptions of the parties' positions. Given our finding that parties' policy images do not track their campaign-based policy statements, it seems plausible that citizens react to these images in lieu of reacting to the parties' actual policy statements. To evaluate this hypothesis we estimated the parameters of a model that was identical to equation 2 *except* that we included two additional independent variables that we introduced above, [*Party j's perceived Left-Right shift (t)*] and [*Party j's perceived Left-Right shift (t - 1)*], which represent the current and lagged shifts in the parties' policy images, i.e., the shifts in voters' perceptions of the parties' positions. By incorporating these perceptual variables into a model that also includes the parties' shifts as coded from their actual campaign statements, we can evaluate the extent to which citizens' partisan adjustments reflect their reactions to their perceptions of the parties' positions, as opposed to voters' reactions to objective measures based on the actual statements in the parties' election manifestos.²¹

²¹ We note that our model does not suffer from multicollinearity problems because the correlation between our measures of parties' shifts based upon their campaign statements versus voters' perceptions of parties' shifts is very low, i.e., the correlation between the observed values of the [*Party j's*

The parameter estimates for this *CMP Codings + Voter Perceptions* specification, which we report in column 2 of Table 3, strongly support the hypothesis that citizens react to their perceptions of the parties' Left-Right shifts, but not to shifts in the Left-Right tone of the parties' actual campaign statements. These estimates reflect strong and positive relationships between Left-Right shifts in the mean positions of party supporters and shifts in voters' perceptions of the parties' left-Right positions: the coefficient estimate +0.635 on the [*Party j's perceived Left-Right shift (t)*] variable indicates that, ceterus paribus, a one-unit shift in a party's perceived position on the 1-10 Left-Right scale is associated with an 0.635-unit shift in the mean position of the party's partisan constituency on the same 1-10 scale, during the same inter-election period. And, the estimate +0.326 on the [*Party j's perceived Left-Right shift (t - 1)*] variable indicates that a one-unit shift in a party's perceived Left-Right position is associated with an approximate 0.3-unit shift in the mean position of the party's partisan constituency during the *subsequent* inter-election period. Both of these estimates are statistically significant ($p < .01$), and they support the hypothesis that voters adjust their Left-Right positions and/or their party support in response to their perceptions of parties' Left-Right shifts – particularly the lagged relationships we identify, which cannot be ascribed to the reciprocal causal process whereby parties react to their supporters' Left-Right shifts. Finally, the parameter estimate on the [*Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t)*] variable, and on the lagged version of this variable, are both near zero and are statistically insignificant, which again supports the conclusion that parties' campaign-based policy statements exert little effect on voters.

Next, we estimated the parameters of a model that was identical *CMP Codings + Voter Perceptions* specification, except that we controlled for additional factors that plausibly influence citizens' Left-Right shifts. To control for national economic conditions (which may motivate citizens to

perceived Left-Right shift (t)] variable and the [*Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t)*] variable is only .05.

shift their Left-Right policy orientations independently of the parties' policy positions) we included the variables [*inflation rate change (t)*], defined as the change in the inflation rate since the last election, and [*unemployment rate change (t)*], defined as the change in the unemployment rate since the last election. And, to control for unmeasured, country-specific, factors that influence citizens' Left-Right positions, we included country-specific intercepts. The parameter estimates for this model, which we report in column 3 of Table 3, again support the hypothesis that citizens react to their perceptions of the parties' Left-Right shifts, but not to shifts in the Left-Right tone of the parties' actual campaign statements.²²

Robustness checks based on an alternative data set: The Eurobarometer surveys

²² We estimated the parameters of two additional specifications in an effort to control for statistical issues that might affect our substantive conclusions. First, while we find no evidence of a *general* relationship between parties' stated policy shifts and shifts in their supporters' positions, it seems possible that there are "threshold effects", whereby voters react to party policy shifts if these shifts are sufficiently large. Second, we estimated a second alternative version of our CMP Codings + Voter Perceptions specification, in which shifts in parties' perceived positions were defined as the difference in the party's position as perceived by all respondents *except* for the party's supporters in the focal election. We estimated the parameters of this *Voter Projection* specification in order to evaluate the hypothesis that the positive relationship that we estimate between parties' perceived Left-Right shifts and shifts in their supporters' Left-Right self-placements is due to party supporters *projecting* their own positions onto their preferred party. Our analyses for these alternative specifications – which we report in supplementary materials posted on our web site (<http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~ezrow>) – support substantive conclusions that are identical to those we reported above.

While we have so far uncovered no evidence that voters adjust their partisanship or their Left-Right positions in response to parties' campaign-based policy statements, our analyses encompass only five European electorates, namely Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway (the five European countries for which NES data is available over long time periods). In order to evaluate whether our conclusions generalize to other European electorates, we re-estimated the parameters of the partisan adjustment specification (equation 2) using alternative measures of partisan constituencies' Left-Right shifts that were derived from Eurobarometer surveys. These surveys have been administered in the following Western European democracies beginning in the early 1970s: Britain, Italy, Denmark, France, Portugal, Greece, Spain, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, and Germany.²³ These surveys contain the same item in each year in each country, asking approximately one thousand respondents per country to place themselves on a scale running from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right), and also to indicate the party (if any) that they support.²⁴ We used these Eurobarometer items to construct the variables [*Party j supporters' Left-Right shift (t)*] and [*Party j supporters' Left-Right shift (t - 1)*], that we used as our dependent variables in the NES-based analyses described above. (We note that we cannot use these data to construct measures of voters' perceptions of party shifts, because the Eurobarometer surveys do not ask respondents to locate the parties' Left-Right positions.) We then re-estimated the parameters of equation 2 on all partisan constituency Left-Right shifts that are covered in the Eurobarometer surveys – 296 party constituency shifts in

²³ We note that Spain and Portugal were not included in the Eurobarometer surveys until 1981 and 1986, respectively.

²⁴ In each Eurobarometer survey respondents are asked to indicate their party support by answering the question: "If there were a 'general election' tomorrow, which party would you support?"

twelve European democracies, roughly triple the number of party shifts in our NES-based analyses.²⁵ Column 4 in Table 3 presents the parameter estimates, which display the same patterns as the estimates based on the NES data: the coefficient estimates on the key independent variables, [*Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t)*] and [*Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t - 1)*], are almost exactly zero, so that there is no evidence of statistically or substantively significant partisan adjustments by voters in response to shifts in parties' policy statements.²⁶

In summary, we find no evidence that citizens react to shifts in European parties' campaign-based policy statements by significantly shifting either their own Left-Right positions or their partisan loyalties. This conclusion holds regardless of whether we measure party supporters' Left-Right shifts using national election study data from five countries (Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway), or Eurobarometer data from twelve European democracies. Simply put, we find no evidence that the mean Left-Right positions of party supporters move in tandem with the Left-Right policy statements that parties publish in their election manifestos. By

²⁵ These analyses covered 82 parties competing in 69 elections. We estimated the parameters of this model using robust standard errors clustered by party (Rogers 1993), and a Lagrange multiplier test fails to reject the null hypothesis of no serial correlation.

²⁶ We re-estimated the parameters of equation 2 on several different subsets of parties using the Eurobarometer data, in order to explore whether voters' partisan adjustments to parties' campaign-based policy statements are mediated by the *type of party* or by the characteristics of the *party system*. These supplementary analyses included separate estimates on all governing parties, and on all opposition parties; on all left-wing parties, and on all right-wing parties; on the British, Dutch, and Italian parties, i.e., the three party systems in the Eurobarometer surveys that Benoit and Laver (2006, chapter 5) identify as revolving primarily around Left-Right economic issues. All of these analyses continued to support our substantive conclusions.

contrast, we find a strong and positive relationship between citizens' *perceptions* of parties' Left-Right shifts, and the Left-Right shifts of these parties' supporters.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our finding, that voters react strongly to their *perceptions* of parties' Left-Right shifts but not to parties' *actual* shifts as coded by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), raises troubling questions about the nature of mass-elite policy linkages. In situations where parties shift the Left-Right orientations of the policy statements that they publish in their election manifestos, we find no evidence that voters respond by adjusting their own Left-Right positions, their partisan loyalties, or even their perceptions of the parties' Left-Right positions. These findings are striking given that previous research concludes that citizens display heightened levels of political attention around the time of election campaigns, and that our elite interviews suggest that parties campaign on the basis of their manifestos.

While our findings may appear surprising, we have noted considerations that cast doubt on parties' abilities to shape their policy images during political campaigns, including the fact that many citizens are inattentive to politics; that rival parties and media elites may challenge the sincerity of the focal party's policy promises; that citizens tend to assimilate new political information into their pre-existing schemas; and, that citizens must balance the policy statements that parties issue during election campaigns against parties' statements (and behavior) during the pre-campaign period. It is this balance of conflicting considerations that prompted us to undertake this research project. We have diligently searched for evidence that citizens react to the policy statements that parties commu-

nicate during election campaigns. We have found no such evidence, and we believe this is an interesting result.²⁷

At the same time, we emphasize that while our findings suggest that parties do not significantly move voters via the manifestos that underpin their election campaigns, our findings do not support the sweeping conclusion that European political parties cannot make successful policy-based appeals to voters. In this regard, we note that European elites, in particular those from governing parties, have an additional, policy-based, tool at their disposal: namely, elites may move rank-and-file voters via their legislative policy behavior as opposed to their policy rhetoric. We note that the influential work of Carmines and Stimson (1989) and Erikson et al. (2002) on American politics concludes that when politicians change their legislative policy behavior, then at least some segments of the public assimilate these changes and react by shifting their partisan loyalties and/or their policy positions (see also Hetherington 2001; Gerber and Jackson 1993). Although there is little research to date that traces how European party elites' actual policy behavior – as reflected in their legislative voting patterns – moves the public (but see Bartle et al. 2007), there are theoretical reasons to expect these effects to be at least as strong in Europe as they are in the United States. In particular, the dis-

²⁷ We also note that our findings accord with the conclusions reached in several earlier studies, which find that party elites have limited capacities to move the electorate via their policy statements. Thus Steenbergen et al. (2007, Table 1) find that party elites exert a cuing effect on their supporters' attitudes towards European integration that is much weaker than the reciprocal influence of supporters' influences on the parties' positions, while Hobolt and Klemmensen (2008) conclude that the range of voters' issue concerns moves, but is not significantly moved by, the issue diversity of party leaders' speeches. In a similar vein, Hellwig et al. (2008) report cross-national results suggesting that citizens' perceptions of the diversity of the policy offerings in the party system are largely unrelated to objective measures of this diversity, as computed from the statements in parties' election manifestos.

ciplined party-line voting that we observe in European parties' parliamentary delegations may send a more easily detectable "signal" to the electorate than does the more heterogeneous policy behavior of American political elites (see, e.g., Adams, Green, and Milazzo forthcoming).

An immediate direction for future study is to consider whether there are (unusual) situations where party elites can in fact issue policy statements that dramatically transform their party's policy image. One promising case study is the British Labour Party during the 1992-1997 period, when the party's policy image shifted dramatically towards the center under the leadership of John Smith and then Tony Blair – a shift that is captured by the CMP codings, which document a sharp rightward shift in Labour's policy statements between 1992-97.²⁸ With respect to this point, we suspect that two crucial variables that mediate the public's response to parties' shifting policy statements are, first, the *political skills* of the elites who attempt to shift their party's policy image, and, second, the *political circumstances* these elites confront, that can either enhance or diminish their abilities to communicate their policy message to the general public. "New Labour" under Tony Blair, for instance, was the rare case of a preternaturally talented political leader who, by virtue of his ability to unify a traditionally fractious party, to portray a decisive, competent, and trustworthy image to the British electorate, to focus media attention upon the party's policy initiatives, and to devise arresting and persuasive language to frame these initiatives, was able to convince voters that the party had truly changed (see, e.g., Seyd 1998). Blair, moreover, benefited from a set of propitious political circumstances, chiefly that the rival Conservative Party was largely discredited in the eyes of the public during this period by a series of highly-publicized political scandals and internal divisions, so that the

²⁸ The mean NES respondent placement of the Labour party shifted from 3.24 in 1992 to 4.47 in 1997 (along the 1-10 Left-Right scale), one of the largest shifts in a party's policy image in our data set. Furthermore, the shift in the CMP codings of British Labour's policy programmes between 1992-97 is the largest coded right-ward shift in our dataset.

Conservatives were unable to effectively raise questions about the sincerity (or permanence) of Labour's new policy direction (see Norton 1998). We suspect that this "perfect storm" of variables – namely, the advent of an extremely talented, telegenic, and articulate Labour party leader at a time when the party's chief rival was at a politically low ebb – accounts for Blair's success in dramatically shifting Labour's policy image.

While the above discussion suggests interesting hypotheses about the factors that mediate mass-elite policy linkages, we defer consideration of possible explanations of our findings for future research. In particular, in future research we hope to re-estimate our models using alternative measures of parties' Left-Right positions (provided that these become available), to assess whether these estimates support the same substantive conclusions as the analyses we have reported here, which rely on the CMP codings of party manifestos. However, our primary goal in this paper has been to evaluate whether citizens react to the Left-Right tone of parties' campaign-based policy statements, not why citizens react – or, as we find, do not react – to these statements.

Appendix: Parties and Elections Included in the Empirical Analyses

Germany (elections of 1976, 1983, 1987, 1990, 1998, 2002)

CDU-CSU Christian Democrats (CHR)
Greens (ECO)
FDP Free Democrats (LIB)
SPD Social Democrats (SOC)

Great Britain (elections of 1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001)

Conservatives (CON)
Labour (SOC)
Liberals (LIB)

Netherlands (elections of 1981, 1982, 1986, 1989, 1994, 1998)

CDA Christian Democrats (CHR)
D66 Libertarians (SOC)
PvdA Labour (SOC)
VVD Liberals (LIB)

Sweden (elections of 1979, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002)

CP Centre Party (AGR)
FP Liberals (LIB)
Greens (ECO)
KdS Christian Democrats (CHR)
MSP Conservatives (CON)
SdaP Social Democrats (SOC)
VP Communists (COM)

Norway (elections of 1969, 1973, 1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997)

DNA Labour (SOC)
FrP Progress Party (ETH)
H Conservatives (CON)
KrF Christian Peoples Party (KRF)
SP Centre Party (AGR)
SV Left Socialists (COM)
V Liberals (LIB)

Notes. The initials in parentheses denote the “party families” to which parties belong, where “ECO” denotes Ecology; “COM” denotes Communist; “SOC” denotes Social Democratic; “LIB” denotes Liberal; “CHR” denotes Christian Democratic; “CON” denotes Conservative; “NAT” denotes Nationalist; “AGR” denotes Agrarian; “ETH” denotes Ethnic and Regional; “SIN” denotes Special Interest. Party family designations are taken from the Comparative Manifesto Project, where the third digit of the party identification code represents a party’s family.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics: Dependent and Independent Variables

	MEAN VALUE	MEAN ABSOLUTE VALUE
<i>Party j supporters' Left-Right shift (t)</i>	-0.04 (0.44)	0.30 (0.33)
<i>Party j shift (t) – voter perceptions</i>	-0.03 (0.42)	0.33 (0.25)
<i>Party j shift (t) – CMP codings</i>	0.01 (0.58)	0.44 (0.38)

Notes. The numbers in parentheses are the standard deviations of the reported values. All of the variables are calibrated along a 10-point scale running from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). The measures of party supporters' Left-Right shifts, and of voters' perceptions of parties' Left-Right shifts, are drawn from National Election Study data from Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. The complete list of elections and parties included in the data set is given in the appendix.

Table 2. The Relationship between Changes in the Left-Right Orientations of Party Manifestos and Shifts in Voters' Perceptions of Party Positions (N=97)

	Basic Model (1)	Country-Specific Intercepts (2)
<i>Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t)</i>	.039 (.089)	.047 (.089)
<i>Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t - 1)</i>	.100 (.074)	.103 (.074)
<i>Party j's perceived Left-Right shift (t - 1)</i>	.046 (.144)	.032 (.136)
Britain		.157 (.344)
Germany		.068 (.125)
Norway		-.031 (.132)
Sweden		.068 (.125)
Intercept	-.017 (.046)	-.051 (.119)
Adjusted R ²	.02	.04

** $p \leq .01$; * $p \leq .05$, two-tailed tests.

Notes. Standard errors are in parentheses. For these analyses the dependent variable was the change in voters' perceptions of the party's Left-Right position at the current election compared to the previous election, based on respondents' party placements from National Election Study data from Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden (see Appendix A for the complete list of elections and parties included in the data set). The independent variables are defined in the text. In column 2 the baseline country is the Netherlands.

Table 3. Relationship between Shifts in Party Supporters' Left-Right Positions and Parties' Left-Right Shifts

	Partisan Adjustments Specification – CMP Codings (1)	CMP Codings + Voter Perceptions (2)	Economic Conditions¹ (3)	Eurobarometer data² (4)
<i>Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t)</i>	.070 (.119)	.037 (.063)	.027 (.066)	.027 (.037)
<i>Party j's stated Left-Right shift (t – 1)</i>	.140 (.141)	.067 (.088)	.040 (.109)	-.002 (.028)
<i>Party j's perceived Left-Right shift (t)</i>		.635** (.075)	.645** (.062)	
<i>Party j's perceived Left-Right shift (t – 1)</i>		.326** (.066)	.374** (.084)	
<i>Inflation rate change (t)</i>			-.021 (.013)	
<i>Unemployment rate change (t)</i>			-.010 (.012)	
<i>Party j supporters' shift (t – 1)</i>	-.056 (.137)	-.277 (.152)	-.332 (.173)	-.381** (.079)
<i>Intercept</i>	-.057 (.046)	-.046 (.030)	-.045 (.044)	-.038 (.024)
Number of cases	97	97	97	296
Adjusted R ²	.033	.471	.496	.121

** $p \leq .01$ * $p \leq .05$, two-tailed tests.

Notes. Standard errors are in parentheses. The analyses reported in column 1 are based on the specification given by equation 2 in the text, where the dependent variable is the change in the mean Left-Right self-placements of the party's supporters in the year of current election compared to the previous election, as computed from NES data from Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden (see Appendix A for the complete list of elections and parties included in the analysis). The independent variables are described in the text.

¹ For this model we estimated country-specific intercepts, which were as follows (standard errors in parentheses): Germany -.011 (.010); Britain -.175 (.123); Norway .034 (.071); Sweden .001 (.094). The Netherlands is the baseline country. We also estimated country-specific intercepts (available upon request) for the models reported in columns 4-5.

² The analyses reported in this column are based on the specification given by equation 2 in the text, and are computed from Eurobarometer data from twelve European countries.