

The Informational Role of Party Leader Changes on Voter Perceptions of Party Positions

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Abstract

According to spatial models of elections, citizen perceptions of party policy positions are a key determinant of voting choices. Yet recent scholarship from Europe suggests that voters do not adjust their perceptions to what parties advocate in their campaigns. We argue that leadership changes enable parties, particularly those in opposition, to redefine their ideological image as having a new leader increases the credibility of party policy offerings. Focusing on Western European parties in the 1979-2012 period, we show that having a new leader is a necessary condition for voters to update their perceptions of opposition parties' left-right placements. For incumbent parties, on the other hand, voters do not use party platforms to form perceptions of party positions, regardless of whether the leader is new or a veteran. Our results have important implications for models of party competition and democratic representation.

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When Tony Blair took over the leadership of the British Labour Party in 1994, he inherited a party that had been incapable of breaking the electoral domination of the British Conservatives for about fifteen years. The Labour party was widely perceived as too leftist to be able to attract enough support to defeat the incumbent Tories, and this was despite the efforts of Neil Kinnock - Labour leader between 1983 and 1992- to moderate the party's position, especially in his later years (Heath et al. 1994; Smith 1994). Even if voter perceptions were also moderating alongside with the party's position (Adams et al. 2012a, b), they did so at a much slower pace. It was not until the election of Tony Blair that Labour's appeals to centrist voters resonated in the electorate. Recast as a left-of-center party, Labour obtained a sweeping victory in the 1997 election.

In this paper, we analyze whether appointing a new leader helps political parties change the attitudes and beliefs that voters have about the party. Specifically, we examine whether, following a leadership change, the policy stances that parties take during an election campaign have a stronger impact on voter perceptions of the party's ideology. Therefore, this paper builds on recent scholarship showing that the role of campaign messages in shaping voter perceptions of party policy positions is null (Adams et al. 2011) or limited (Fernandez-Vazquez 2014). We address these previous findings by arguing that parties under a new leader –the most important political actor in modern day political parties (Poguntke and Webb 2005)— are in a better position to influence public perceptions with their campaign messages.

Our main argument is that electing a new leader increases the credibility of the party's policy stances in a context in which voters are generally skeptical of party policy rhetoric. While adopting new policies under a veteran leader can be seen as flip-flopping, with a new leader these stances are more likely to be interpreted as an actual change in the party's views. The leadership change makes it easier to convince voters that the policy shift is the result of the ideas

brought by the new leader rather than the product of a tactical move. Even when the party's policy promises do not change under the new leader, the party can take advantage of having a leader with no record of broken promises so that voters can give it the benefit of the doubt that the party will follow through on its pledges. For both reasons, we predict that voters are more willing to update their opinion of where the party stands on policy issues following a leader change.

We also expect these effects to be stronger for opposition parties. Incumbents' policy decisions provide voters with information about the policy preferences of parties in government that is more credible than these parties' own policy rhetoric. On the other hand, the main instrument parties in opposition have to redefine their perceived ideological position is to publicly advocate new policies. As a result, any factor that increases the credibility of these policy stances will significantly enhance the capacity of parties to change voter perceptions.

In order to evaluate these hypotheses, we examine the relationship between the left-right tone of party election manifestos and voter perceptions of party positions in seven Western European democracies during the period 1979-2012.¹ Using original data on party leader changes, we test whether running under a new leadership increases the strength of such relationship.

¹ Such geographical and historical scope is very similar to that adopted in Adams et al. (2011) and Fernandez-Vazquez (2014), making our empirical findings more directly comparable to these studies. The seven countries under analysis are Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. We focus on these seven countries due to the availability of voter perceptions and leadership change data.

The empirical evidence supports our argument. Only after a leadership change do voters update their perceptions of opposition parties in line with what the party is advocating in its election platform, as voters ignore these statements of parties led by a veteran leader. On the other hand, election platforms are not consequential for the left-right image of governing parties, regardless of whether the leader is new or veteran, since voters seem to take their cues from incumbent behavior rather than rhetoric.

These findings help make sense of the small or null average effects of election platforms identified in Adams et al. (2011) and Fernandez-Vazquez (2014). Our paper reveals that such findings mask an important heterogeneity: while election campaigns play an important role in shaping perceptions of opposition parties with new leaders, campaign platforms are irrelevant otherwise.

These results also have important implications for the functioning of representative democracy, for political parties, and for the political behavior and election campaign literatures. Election campaigns are supposed to provide an opportunity for political parties to publicly announce the policies they would promote if elected for office. The intended goal is to allow voters to learn about party positions so that they can cast their votes for those parties that closely represent their interests (see the Responsible Party Model, APSA 1950). Otherwise, if voter perceptions are not in line with what parties intend to do as incumbents, their capacity to select politicians based on their policy positions is weakened, thereby depressing the quality of representation (see also Aldrich et al. 2011; Bartels 1996; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; van der Brug 1997). While the extant literature has provided a skeptical view of the capacity of campaigns to change voter beliefs about parties, we show that, after a leadership transition, party campaign messages are able to reshape voter perceptions about opposition parties.

Our findings also have implications for our understanding of the dynamics of party competition. If voters do not listen to parties and learn about their policy positions, then a party that needs to redefine or clarify its ideological reputation in order to increase its electoral appeal will have a hard time using its campaign rhetoric to achieve that goal. Our findings suggest that it is only under a new party leader that voters are willing to listen to party positions. Hence, for a party to be able to persuade voters about its policy position, it may need to replace its party leader first.

Party Leadership Changes and Voter Perceptions

Understanding the policies that each party would implement in office can help voters make informed voting decisions at the ballot box. For this reason, parties make policy offerings in advance of elections and state the policy goals they will target if elected into government. In most cases, European parties elaborate these goals in policy manifestos that they publish in the run up to a campaign and then use as the basis of the messages they deliver to the mass media (Somer-Topcu, 2009a). Politicians also often base their election campaigns on the policy positions they advocate in their election manifestos (Adams et al., 2011).

Existing evidence on whether voters adjust their perceptions of party positions to what parties advocate in their campaigns, however, is bleak. Adams et al. (2011, 2014) show that voters do not update their perceptions in response to shifts in party manifestos, and Fernandez-Vazquez (2014) reports only weak effects of election platforms on voter beliefs.

There are at least two reasons for why voters may be reluctant to adjust their views of party positions to what these parties publicly announce. First, election manifestos are noisy signals: their implications are uncertain because policy statements can be vague, and therefore it

may not be easy for voters to draw precise inferences about parties' future policy behavior. Indeed, there is an emerging literature that emphasizes the uncertainty associated to estimating the policy orientation of election manifestos (Benoit et al. 2009, Mikhaylov et al. 2012, Benoit et al. 2015).

Second, and most important for our argument, election manifestos are not binding and hence parties may strategically take policy stances in order to improve their electoral prospects even if they do not actually intend to follow through on them. As a result, voters may be skeptical of party rhetoric, expect it to be motivated by short-term electoral incentives, and therefore discount campaign policy messages as not credible.² In fact, the recent literature showing that voter perceptions of party positions are shaped by party *actions* like the type of legislation passed (Grynaviski, 2010) and the choice of coalition partners (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013) emphasizes the importance of credibility: these party actions constitute costly signals of parties' policy commitments because they have concrete policy consequences that help reveal parties' preferences. Party policy promises, on the other hand, can be broken and hence are less likely to have the consequences that party actions in office have for voters' perceptions of party positions.

We argue that political parties can reduce voter skepticism towards party policy rhetoric, and increase the credibility of the party election promises if they have a new leader in office for

² Banks (1990), and Callander and Wilkie (2007) elaborate formal models of electoral competition in which parties may promise policies different from the ones they actually intend to carry out. Fernandez-Vazquez (2015), moreover, provides empirical evidence that voters are more willing to update their perceptions when parties take extreme positions on a left-right dimension, as these stances are less likely to be electorally motivated.

the upcoming election. Leadership changes help parties make voters listen to their policy statements and therefore make citizens more willing to update their beliefs about party positions.

On the one hand, if the new leader and his/her team change the party's policy position, voters find these policy shifts more credible under a new leader. A veteran leader that campaigns on new policy positions runs the risk of being accused of opportunism and flip-flopping by rival parties and the media (Sommer-Topcu, 2009a). These depictions of the party as inconsistent and unprincipled can be very costly in terms of votes and donations. As Tomz and Van Houweling have shown (2012a,b), candidates that are perceived as flip-floppers face a substantial loss of electoral appeal. We argue, on the other hand, that new leaders do not face similar risks. When they change the party's policy positions, they cannot be framed as flip-floppers because they do not have a well-established record of previous policy stances. Their policy shifts are more credible, and thus new leaders can use policy shifts to their advantage to convince voters that their new positions are not short-term opportunistic changes. That way they can help voters update their perceptions about party policies.

At the same time, even if party's policy promises stay the same under the new administration voters are more likely to buy into these existing policy positions under the new party leadership. There are no broken records from the past that the new leader is responsible of, and the new leader has a renewed opportunity to follow the existing election policy promises. Voters, therefore, are more likely to update their perceptions of party promises under a new leader, even if the promises largely stay the same.³

³ We show below that shifts in parties' policy offerings are not significantly larger following a leader change. We take this as further evidence that the reason why new leaders make voters

In summary, while voters tend to generally distrust parties' policy rhetoric, they are more open to change their mind about a party if a new politician leads it. Hence, the first hypothesis that we test is the following:

H1: With new party leaders, voters are more likely to update their perceptions of party positions in line with the public stances taken by the party.

While we expect voters to update their perceptions about parties more with new leaders, we also expect this effect to be stronger for opposition parties. Parties that are out of office rely mainly on campaign rhetoric to redefine their policy image and can do it more successfully compared to governing parties. Incumbents, on the contrary, are often evaluated based on their performance in office and can only redefine their ideological reputation through other means, like the choice of coalition partners (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013), their legislative record (Grynaviski 2010) or the orientation of the policies promoted in office (Lupu 2014). As Adams (2012) points out, these are policy actions with specific winners and losers, and therefore constitute more powerful sources of information about a party's ideological identity than public rhetoric and election campaigning. Indeed, Bawn and Somer-Topcu (2012) have shown that voters heavily discount the campaign policy pledges of incumbent political parties. Opposition parties' electoral performance, on the other hand, largely depends on their rhetoric and pledges before the election (see Alvarez et al. 2000 for empirical evidence from the British 1987 election). Therefore, our second hypothesis is as follows:

more willing to update is not the size of policy shifts, but an increase in the credibility of policy promises.

H2: New party leaders help voters update their perceptions of opposition party positions more in line with the public stances taken by the party compared to governing parties.

Note that, in terms of the timing of the leadership change, our argument only requires that the election manifesto be written under the direction of a new leader. This implies that, at some point since the previous election, the party has chosen a new politician as standard-bearer so that, first, the new leader cannot be accused of flip-flopping (i.e. promises certain policy position but then implements them differently), and second, the new campaign policy stances can be credibly attributed to a change in party's leadership. But our theory is agnostic as to whether the precise time gap between the leadership transition and the campaign modulates the credibility of policy rhetoric. Indeed, in the Supporting Information to this article we report evidence that the specific moment in between elections in which the leadership change happens is not relevant for voter updating of party positions.

Research Design

To examine our hypotheses we analyze how voters develop perceptions about party positions in response to party campaign messages. We will consider party positions primarily on the left-right dimension. According to Downs (1957), voters mainly gather information about parties along a left-right continuum, and electoral competition takes place on that dimension. Even today, policies are still frequently described in terms of a left-right mapping by political commentators, scholars, and parties alike. The left-right axis is an 'ideological super-issue' that summarizes positions on several key policy domains (Pierce 1999; McDonald and Budge 2005). As such, research has shown that the left-right dimension is still useful to understand the

structure of party competition in European democracies (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; van der Brug et al. 2005).⁴

We have collected data on voter perceptions of party left-right positions using election surveys conducted over the period 1979-2012 in seven Western European countries: Britain, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Sweden. In order to capture how voters perceive parties after a campaign, we have selected surveys fielded immediately after a parliamentary election. These surveys come from country-specific election studies or the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES).⁵ The common feature of these questionnaires is that respondents were asked the following question in essentially the same wording:

“In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place [PARTY] on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?”⁶

⁴ Pointing out the relevance of left-right politics does not ignore the fact that additional issues arise and influence elections. Yet several scholars have shown that these new issues eventually fold onto the enduring left-right dimension (Hooghe et al. 2002; van der Eijk and Niemoeller 1983).

⁵ The Supporting Information to this article shows the list of all surveys we use as our data sources.

⁶ Most of the surveys we have collected record the voter placement of political parties on a 0-10 scale. For some surveys, however, the scale is a 1-10 one. In these latter cases, we have recoded the data by mapping “1” on the original scale to “0” in the new scale. For the intermediate values ---2 to 9---, we have applied the following rescaling function: $\text{new_scale} = (\text{old_scale} - 1) * (10/9)$

The countries and time periods covered in our dataset are those in which election studies have consistently asked respondents to place political parties on such a left-right scale. In each case, we have computed the *average* placement given to each political party as our measure of perceived left-right position. We therefore have data on the ideological image of all relevant political parties in every country after each parliamentary election.

We define party campaign messages as the policy proposals that parties make in their election manifestos. Party manifestos are written documents that parties publish in the run up to an election stating the policies that the party promises to pursue if elected for office. In European and Westminster democracies, manifestos become the basis of party competition during elections (Budge et al. 2001). Indeed, party elites on the ground agree that their election manifestos constitute the basis for their electoral campaign and significantly shape the electoral competition (Somer-Topcu 2009a).⁷ It is therefore essential to try to understand how voters react to these policy pledges.⁸

⁷ Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu (2011) report interviews that Somer-Topcu (2009a) conducted with party elites (party leaders, members of parliament, campaign directors, and directors of party think tank organizations) from Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria. The evidence from these interviews confirmed the centrality of manifestos for party campaigns and elections.

⁸ Expert surveys constitute an alternative measure of party positions. However, it is likely that party-level factors influence expert perceptions in a similar manner and to a similar extent as they influence voter perceptions. Indeed, in our data the pairwise correlation coefficient between expert placements and average voter placements is 0.95.

We use the Manifesto Project's left-right coding of party campaign manifestos as our main measure of party policy offerings. Scholars in this project have collected party election manifestos and coded the percentage in each document dedicated to fifty-six different issues. Twenty-six of these issue categories have been used to determine the left-right tone of the party program (Laver and Budge 1992). Half of them are considered as defining a left ideology, while the other half is coded as right leaning. The researchers in the Manifesto Project propose a left-right scaling of the manifesto position –the *rile* estimate- that measures the difference in the percentage of text units belonging to right-leaning and left-leaning categories. The *rile* scaling, however, has been criticized for yielding estimates that are biased towards the center (Kim and Fording 1998; Lowe et al. 2011). For that reason, here we employ the alternative scaling proposed by Lowe et al. (2011).⁹ This estimate is computed by taking the log of the ratio of left and right sentences. We have rescaled these logit estimates so that they also take values on a 0-10 scale.¹⁰

⁹ In the Supporting Information document, we replicate our results using the original Manifesto Project left-right scaling –*rile*- (Laver and Budge 1992) as well as the one proposed by Kim and Fording (1998). These robustness checks do not alter the substantive conclusion of our analysis.

¹⁰ Since Lowe et al (2011) scales do not have defined endpoints, we have based the recoding on the *empirical* distribution of the logit scales. Leaving aside a clear outlier –the Swedish Left Party in 1991-, which is excluded from the analyses, the logit left-right estimates range from -3.09 to 2.71. Accordingly, we have mapped the logit values -3.5 and 3 onto, respectively, 0 and 10 in the survey scale. Hence, the original logit estimates have been transformed by applying the following rescaling function: $\text{rescaled_logit} = (\text{original_logit} + 3.5) * 10/6.5$. In any case, using

We have collected original leadership change data in the same seven Western European countries. The leadership change information has been obtained using Keesing's World Archives, secondary literature, and online newspaper archives. Who is perceived as the party leader varies from country to country and even across parties within the same country. To give an example, we code the changes in the parliamentary leaders of the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democratic parties in Britain as official leadership changes. On the other hand, the extraparliamentary party chairperson is identified as the party leader for the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats in Germany, while the parliamentary leader is coded as the head of the party for the German liberals (FDP). The decision on who we should code as the leader of each party is taken based on an extensive reading of the literature and, in some instances, in consultation with country experts. We coded leadership changes as a dummy variable, 0 if there was no leadership change in the current election period, and 1 if there was a leadership change. We also exclude from our data those parties that have a shared leadership position (dual leadership). The details of the leadership change data can be found in the Supporting Information document.

Finally, in order to test the second hypothesis on governing versus opposition parties, we have coded a dummy variable indicating the governing status of each political party. We define as incumbent any political party that has been part of the cabinet at any point between the current parliamentary election and the previous one. To give an example of our coding criterion, we consider the Swedish Moderate party to be an incumbent in the 1982 election because, even though at the time of the campaign it was not part of the government, it had participated in the

the raw Lowe (2011) logit scale does not affect the substantive implications of our analysis. These results are available from the authors upon request.

cabinet at some point since the previous election, concretely between 1979 and 1981. Data on the partisan composition of national governments has been obtained from the February 2014 release of the *European Representative Democracy Data Archive* (Andersson et al. 2014).¹¹

The baseline model that we estimate allows us to determine whether party campaign messages influence how voters perceive the left-right position of these political parties:

$$voter_perceptions_{it} = b_1 + b_2 platform_{it} + b_3 voter_perceptions_{i,t-1} + e_{it} \quad (1)$$

where $voter_perceptions_{it}$ denotes the left-right policy image of party i immediately after the election at time t . $Platform_{it}$ refers to the left-right tone of party i 's election manifesto and $voter_perceptions_{i,t-1}$ indicates voters' beliefs about the party *before* the campaign. We therefore define voter perceptions after an election as the result of both the information obtained in the campaign ($platform_{it}$) and previous experiences with the party summarized in its pre-election ideological image ($voter_perceptions_{i,t-1}$). Modeling evaluations as a combination of memory and new information is common in studies of public opinion change (e.g. Bartels 1993, 2002; Erikson et al. 2002). According to the logic of this approach, the more relevant campaigns are for voter perceptions –i.e. the larger b_2 –, the lesser the role of prior notions about the party –the lower b_3 – and vice versa.

Our main hypothesis states that the above relationship is conditional on party leadership changes. That is, when there is a new leader, we should observe a stronger relationship between the party message and voter perceptions. In order to determine whether a change in the party

¹¹ Our empirical findings do not change if we employ a more restrictive definition of incumbency and code only those parties that participated in the last cabinet in office before the parliamentary election as governing parties. These results are available in the Supporting Information.

leadership empowers the party to change its ideological image, we estimate the following interactive model:

$$voter_perceptions_{it} = b_1 + b_2 platform_{it} + b_3 voter_perceptions_{i,t-1} + b_4(platform_{it} * leaderchange_{it}) + b_5(voter_perceptions_{i,t-1} * leaderchange_{it}) + b_6 leaderchange_{it} + e_{it} \quad (2)$$

Leaderchange_{it} is a dummy variable indicating that there has been a succession in the party leadership since the last parliamentary election. According to this specification, if there has been continuity in the party leadership, the effect of campaign stances and the inertia in the party image are captured by the parameters b_2 and b_3 respectively. On the other hand, if a new politician is guiding the party, the effect of the election platform equals $b_2 + b_4$, and the degree to which the pre-campaign ideological brand carries over after the election is represented by $b_3 + b_5$. Hypothesis 1 states that changes in party leadership open a window of opportunity for the party to publicize a shift in policy stances and therefore we expect b_4 to be positive. As a logical consequence, the initial voter perception should play a less important role in the party image after the election, and hence we expect b_5 to be negative. Since our argument does not make predictions about whether the leader change itself reveals any information about the party, we do not formulate claims about b_6 .

As a corollary to our argument, the second hypothesis implies that new party leaders are more consequential for parties in opposition than for incumbents. Hence, the interactive model in equation 2 is not only estimated for the full sample but also separately for the subsamples of governing and opposition parties.

We estimate the parameters in the baseline and interactive models using OLS. In addition, we follow King and Roberts (2015) and also estimate cluster-robust standard errors as a diagnostic of model misspecification. The result of this diagnostic test –available in the

Supporting Information- shows that OLS and cluster-robust error estimates are very close, which increases our confidence in our choice of empirical model.¹² The Supporting Information includes further diagnostic and robustness checks showing that our results are not affected by the choice of scale of manifesto data, measurement error in the dependent and independent variables, serial correlation in the error term, or the number of data clusters.

Empirical Results

Table 1 presents the results of estimating the baseline and interactive models, first for the whole sample of political parties followed by the interactive equation for governing and opposition parties separately. Column 1 reports the estimates for the baseline equation. They suggest that election manifestos influence voter perceptions of party left-right positions. A one-unit shift in the left-right tone of the election platform induces a change of 0.08 units in the average placement of the party. Such a shift is nonetheless small, particularly in comparison to the degree of inertia in party images. Indeed, the coefficient for the lagged perception is 0.91, which implies that the party left-right image that emerges after the campaign is largely driven by the initial voter beliefs. In sum, these results would suggest that election campaigns have a statistically significant but substantively small effect on party left-right images, which is consistent with previous findings (Fernandez-Vazquez 2014).

¹² We also address the potential downward bias in standard cluster-robust standard errors when the number of clusters is low, approximately below 40 (Cameron et al. 2006, Angrist and Pischke 2009), by adopting the bootstrap methods suggested in Esarey and Menger (2015). As can be seen in the Supporting Information, bootstrapped clustered standard errors yield the same substantive conclusions as OLS or standard cluster robust errors.

Yet such a small *average* impact of party campaigns may be masking a considerable degree of heterogeneity depending on whether the party has recently renewed its leadership or not. According to our first hypothesis, following a leader change the policy stances that the party takes are more relevant for voter perceptions of the party's position. In order to test this claim, we estimate equation 2, which specifies an interaction between the content of manifestos and an indicator of whether the party leader has been replaced since the previous election. These estimates are displayed in the second column of Table 1.

The coefficient for *platform* and that of *voter perceptions (t-1)* denote, respectively, the effect of campaign messages and the inertia in voter perceptions when the party leader has stayed the same since the last election. If a new politician is heading the party, the influence of election platforms is defined by the *sum* of the coefficients for *platform* and *platform X leader change*, while the stability in voter perceptions obtains by adding the *voter perceptions (t-1)* and the *voter perceptions (t-1) X leader change* parameters. In line with our argument, we expect the interaction coefficient *platform X leader change* to be positive and that for *voter perceptions (t-1) X leader change* to be negative.

Table 1: The effect of election platforms on voter perceptions of parties' left-right position.

	Baseline Model	Leader Change Effects	Parties in Government	Parties in Opposition
Platform	0.08* (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.12 (0.07)	0.00 (0.06)
Leader Change		-0.16 (0.26)	-0.10 (0.45)	-0.26 (0.33)
Platform X Leader Change		0.08 (0.07)	-0.12 (0.11)	0.20* (0.09)
Voter Perception (t-1)	0.91** (0.02)	0.93** (0.03)	0.85** (0.04)	0.98** (0.04)
Voter Percep (t-1) X Leader Change		-0.04 (0.04)	0.12 (0.07)	-0.14* (0.06)
Intercept	0.07 (0.16)	0.07 (0.17)	-0.01 (0.37)	0.16 (0.21)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N / R ²	185/ 0.97	185/ 0.97	78/ 0.96	107/ 0.98

Note: The dependent variable in these models is the average voter perception of the party's left-right position as measured in post-election surveys. Columns 1 and 2 present estimates for the full sample. Column 3 restricts attention to parties in office, while column 4 considers the subsample of opposition parties. OLS standard errors are in parentheses.

** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Coefficient estimates for the full sample show that campaign positions do not change voter perceptions of parties with veteran leaders. The impact of election manifestos is very small, 0.06, and it is not statistically different from 0. As a mirror image, the high coefficient for the lagged voter perception, 0.93, indicates that voter perceptions before and after the election are essentially the same. In line with our first hypothesis, the interaction coefficients with *leader change* have the expected sign and would therefore suggest that, under a new leader, the influence of party rhetoric increases and the degree of inertia in voter perceptions decreases. Such differences are not statistically significant, however.

Yet, as our second hypothesis posits, we expect the effect of party policy offerings on voter perceptions to be stronger for opposition parties when they change their leaders. In order to test this hypothesis about how incumbency status modulates the impact of leadership transitions, Columns 3 and 4 estimate the interactive model separately for parties in office and in opposition. Results for parties in government show that party messages do not change voter perceptions irrespective of whether the leader is new or veteran: the effect of manifestos is not statistically different from zero in either case.¹³ This is consistent with previous research indicating that governing parties tend to be evaluated on the basis of their record in office rather than on their policy rhetoric (Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012; Cho and Endersby 2003).

For parties in opposition (Column 4), on the other hand, a leadership change decisively influences how effective party messages are at driving voter perceptions. The coefficients for the interactive terms *platform X leader change* and *voter perceptions (t-1) X leader change* have the expected sign and are statistically significant. Following a leader transition, therefore, voters are more likely to adjust their views of the party's left-right position to what the party advocates in its election manifesto, and hence, there is a lower degree of inertia in party images. Specifically, these estimates show that the effect of party campaigns increases in 0.20 points while continuity in voter perceptions drops 0.14 points whenever a "new face" leads the party.

What is more, these results provide evidence that a leadership change is a *necessary condition* for voters to update their views in line with the party's policy promises. This can be most clearly seen in the marginal effects presented in Table 2. When a veteran leader heads the

¹³ The point estimates for the marginal effect of manifesto left-right positions are 0.12 under a veteran leader and 0 under a new one. In neither case are these effects statistically distinguishable from zero.

party, the estimated effect of election platforms is zero, suggesting that in this scenario campaign pronouncements have no effect on voter perceptions. By the same token, inertia in perceptions is very high. In contrast, a new leader is able to reshape the party’s left-right reputation: even though voter perceptions are still relatively sticky –the marginal effect of the prior perception is 0.84-, party campaigns have a substantial effect on where voters locate the party on a left-right scale –the marginal effect is 0.20-. We can illustrate these results with the following example. According to our estimates, if a party perceived to be located at position 6 proposes policies considered to be at 7, voter perceptions will shift to 6.3 under a new leader but only to 6.04 if the leader has not changed, and the latter shift is not statistically different from 0.

Table 2: Marginal effects depending on whether the party leader has changed or not. Parties in opposition.

	Marginal Effect of Platform	Marginal Effect of Lagged Perceptions
Leader change= 0	0.00 (0.06)	0.98** (0.04)
Leader change= 1	0.20** (0.08)	0.84** (0.04)

OLS standard errors in parentheses. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

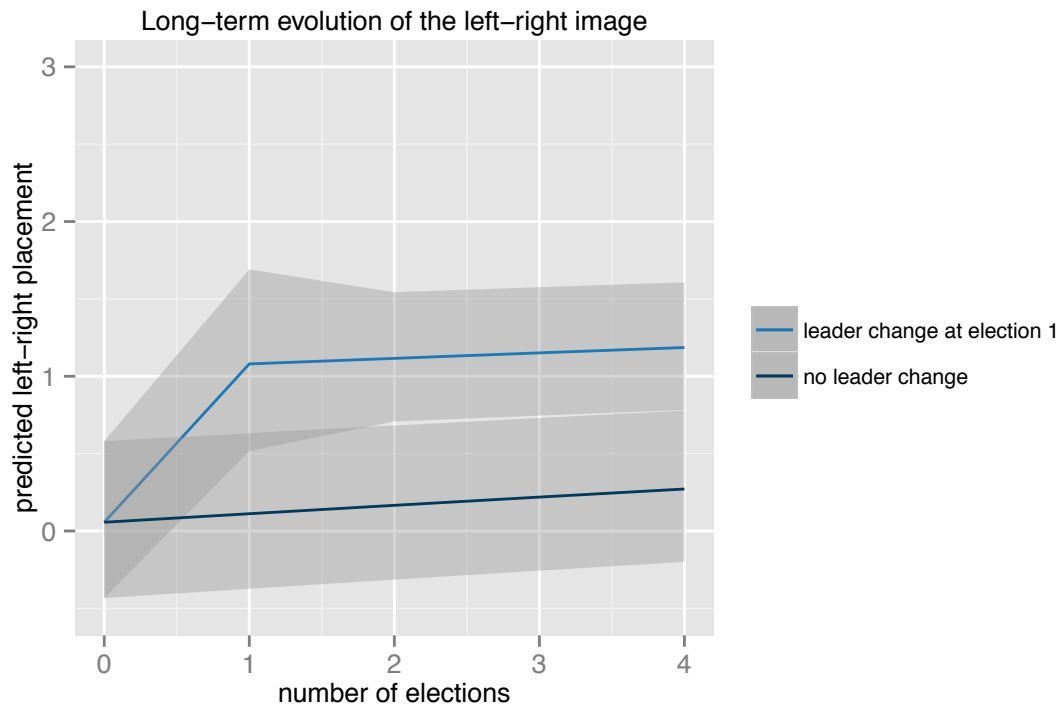
We also leverage our regression results to simulate the long-term evolution of the left-right image of a political party in opposition.¹⁴ Figure 1 plots the predicted average voter perception over four elections. In this example, the initial party placement is 0 and the party’s manifesto advocates policies located at 6 in each election. We consider two scenarios: in the first,

¹⁴ For this purpose, we use Williams and Whitten’s (2011, 2012) Stata package *dynsim*, which is relies on to Tomz et al’s clarify (2003).

the party keeps the same leader over the whole period. In the second, a new leader is elected before the first election and then stays in office until the fourth election.

These predicted values show that, absent a leader change, voter perceptions do not adjust to what the party is advocating in its campaign. The left-right placement of an opposition party led by the same politician does not significantly change despite advocating new policies over several elections. On the other hand, when a party elects a new leader, voter perceptions shift in the following election and then stabilize at the new level.

Figure 1 Predicted evolution of the average party left-right placement with a 95% confidence interval. The case of a party in opposition that advocates policies located at 6 on the left-right scale. Two scenarios: in one, the party leader stays the same. In the second, a new leader is chosen before election 1 and stays in office until the end.



Taken together, the empirical evidence supports our claim that leader changes open a window of opportunity for political parties to redefine their perceived left-right ideology. Our

results suggest that parties in opposition may need to replace their leader if they want to successfully change voters' perceptions about their policy positions. While campaign promises made by a party with a veteran standard bearer do not have consequences for the party's ideological image, after a leader change voters update their views of what the party stands for. In the case of parties in office, on the other hand, election platforms seem to be irrelevant for voter perceptions of party positions either with veteran or with new leaders.

Ruling Out Alternative Explanations

As a further test of our argument that replacing the party leader increases the probability that voters will listen to the party's policy proposals and update their perceptions accordingly, we check whether the empirical patterns we identify can be explained by alternative theoretical mechanisms.

One such alternative story could be that having a new leader is not *per se* what enhances the capacity of parties to change their left-right reputations, but the possibility that leadership transitions correlate with larger shifts in party policy stances, which in turn receive more attention from voters. In order to evaluate this alternative explanation, we test whether it is indeed the case that shifts in the left-right tone of party manifestos between election $t-1$ and t are larger once the party has appointed a new leader. Table 3 reports a difference in means test comparing the size of the policy shifts that parties engage in with and without a leader replacement. It shows that the average size of manifesto left-right shifts is *not* statistically different between parties with stable leadership or with a new leader. In fact, the point estimate for the mean policy shift is lower for parties with new leaders. This test therefore suggests that the increased effectiveness of party campaigns following a leader change is not due to a

concurrent increase in the magnitude of party policy shifts but to the leadership change, which helps parties to advocate their campaign promises more credibly to voters.

Table 3: Average policy shifts, in absolute terms, as a function of whether the party has changed its leader, 0-10 left-right scale. Difference in means two-tailed t-test.

	Average policy shift	Difference	p-value
Under the same leader	0.75 (0.06)	0.11 (0.10)	0.28
With a new leader	0.65 (0.08)		

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

A second alternative account posits that new leaders want to imprint the party’s policy rhetoric with their own policy preferences and therefore favor elaborating less ambiguous party manifestos. These clearer policy offerings could then help voters identify parties’ actual positions and adjust their perceptions. We evaluate the empirical support for this theoretical story by testing whether manifesto left-right positions can be estimated with less uncertainty once a new party official has taken over the leadership. For that purpose we make use of the measurement error estimates in party platform positions computed by Lowe et al. (2011).¹⁵ Table 4 presents the results of a difference in means test comparing the uncertainty –standard error- in estimates of manifesto left-right positions for parties with new and veteran leaders. As can be seen, the differences in the average standard error are neither substantially nor statistically significant. Hence, we can rule out the possibility that having clearer policy stances is what explains that new leaders are more capable of convincing voters about a party’s position.

¹⁵ Benoit et al. (2009) provide a detailed discussion of the bootstrap procedure involved in estimating the uncertainty in manifesto policy positions.

Table 4: Average standard error in party platform position as a function of whether the party has changed its leader, 0-10 left-right scale. Difference in means two-tailed t-test.

	Std error of party platform position	Difference	p-value
Under the same leader	0.25 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.42
With a new leader	0.23 (0.02)		

Note: standard errors in parentheses.

In additional analyses, reported in the Supporting Information document, we show that our results do not change with an alternative definition of incumbency status (using only the parties in the last government before the election rather than using all parties that were in government at any time between the last and current elections), or when we exclude niche parties from our sample. A strand of the literature on party competition has emphasized how mainstream and niche parties diverge in their competitive strategies (Meguid 2005; Adams 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011). Given that in our sample all niche parties are out of office (see the Supporting Information document for the various definitions of niche parties we use), it is plausible that the difference in voter updating between incumbent and opposition parties is driven by the presence of niche parties in the latter subsample. However, the results stay robust when we remove the niche parties from our sample.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study analyzes the question of whether voter perceptions of party policy positions respond to what parties propose in their election campaigns. We address the troubling finding in previous work that suggests that party policy stances do not substantially change voter beliefs (Adams et

al. 2011; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014). We argue that leader changes open a window of opportunity for political parties to redefine their perceived policy position. Electing a new leader, we claim, increases the credibility of party policy offerings and therefore voters are more willing to update their perceptions in line with party rhetoric. We also argue that leader changes are more relevant for opposition parties since voter perceptions of incumbents are likely to be based on behavior in office rather than on policy rhetoric.

Examining voters' perceptions of party positions in seven Western European countries over the 1979-2012 period, we find support for our hypotheses. Voters only update their perceptions of opposition parties' left-right positions when a new leader is heading the party. Leader transitions, on the other hand, are not decisive for voter attitudes towards governing parties since incumbent rhetoric does not affect perceptions regardless of the leader's tenure.

Our findings have implications for our understanding of the dynamics of party competition. We map conditions under which party campaign promises manage to reshape voter opinions about partisan ideologies. Specifically, the evidence we report suggests that the conclusion in Adams et al. (2011) and Fernandez-Vazquez (2014) that party platforms have a minor or no influence on party images is actually hiding an important source of heterogeneity: party campaigns can actually have an important impact on voter perceptions, but only as long as a "new face" is leading the party. Our paper thus contributes to our knowledge of the determinants of voter perceptions of party positions. While the extant research would suggest that voters opinions were responsive to party actions (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013; Grynaviski 2010; Lupu 2014) but not to party rhetoric (Adams et al. 2011; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014), we report robust evidence that campaign platforms can redefine party left-right images, but only under a new leader.

This is good news for democratic representation. Our empirical results show that election campaigns, which provide parties with a chance to publicize their policy offerings, help voters learn about the policy preferences of opposition parties that have elected new leaders. As a result, an opposition party can credibly communicate its position to voters, provided that it has recently chosen a new chairperson. This enhances the capacity of citizens to select the party that best represents their interests. Moreover, the results of this paper are also relevant for intraparty politics as our findings draw a connection between the most important event in the internal life of a political party –electing a new leader- and the success of parties’ electoral strategies. Indeed, it is only after a leader change that an opposition party can successfully reshape the way voters perceive its left-right positions.

This paper also opens the way for further research on the determinants of voter beliefs about party positions and the role that party leaders play in it. The empirical evidence that we have provided points to the *overall* effect of new leaders on voter updating. What remains to be explored is whether the impact of leader changes depends on individual-level traits like partisanship, political sophistication or ideology. In addition to leader changes, other intraparty factors could also condition the effectiveness of policy rhetoric, like party cohesion or shifts in factional dominance. For now, we defer a discussion of these factors to future work.

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Supporting Information

The following supporting information presents detailed descriptions of the data and its sources, describes some diagnostic tests and introduces several robustness checks. The structure of this section is the following:

1. Description of the dataset and the data sources.
2. Diagnostic tests.
3. Robustness checks.

1. Description of the dataset and the data sources

Table 5 lists the countries, time periods and political parties that we have included in the empirical analyses, as well as the elections before which each party had a leadership change:

Table 5: Countries, time periods, political parties, and leadership changes in the dataset.

Country	Time Period	Political Parties	Leader Changes before the following elections
<i>Denmark</i>	1994-2011	Danish People's Party	No leader change
		Conservative People's Party	1994, 1998, 2001, 2011
		Danish Radical Liberal Party	2007
		Social Democratic Party	1994, 2005, 2007
		Socialist People's Party	1994, 2007
		Liberal Party	2001, 2011
<i>Germany</i>	1998-2009	Christian Democratic Union	2002
		Liberal Party	1987, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002
		Social Democratic Party	1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2009
<i>Great Britain</i>	1983-2010	Conservative Party	1992, 2001, 2005, 2010
		Labour Party	1983, 1987, 1997, 2010
		Liberal Democrats ¹⁶	2001, 2010
<i>Netherlands</i>	1981-2012	Christian Democratic Appeal	1986, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2012
		Democrats' 66	1986, 1998, 2002, 2006
		Labour Party	1989, 2002, 2003, 2010
		Socialist Party	2010
		Liberal Party	1982, 1989, 1994, 2002, 2003, 2006
<i>Norway</i>	1981-2009	Labour Party	1981, 1993, 2005
		Progress Party	2009
		Conservative Party	1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2005
		Christian People's Party	1985, 1997, 2005
		Center Party	1993, 2001, 2005, 2009
		Socialist Left Party	1989, 1997
		Popular Alliance/Party	1989, 2004

¹⁶ Due to the merger of the Liberals and Social Democrats in 1988 to form the current day Liberal Democrats, and the dual leadership of the party beforehand, we do not have the party in our data until the 1997 election.

<i>Sweden</i>	1979-2006	Socialist Worker's Party	2000, 2004
		Center Party	1988, 1998, 2002
		Christian Democrats	2006
		People's Party	1985, 1998
		Moderate Party	1982, 1988, 2002, 2006
		Social Democrats	1988, 1998
		Left Party	1994, 2006

Table 6 includes summary statistics of the data used in the empirical models:

Table 6: Summary descriptive statistics of the data used in the empirical analyses.

	Mean	Std. error	Min	Max	N
Voter perceptions	5.4	2.2	0.9	9.0	223
Standard error average voter perception	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.1	223
Platform (Lowe et al 2011)	5.1	1.5	0.6	9.6	217
Standard error in Platform estimates (Lowe et al 2011)	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.9	217
Platform (Kim and Fording scale)	4.6	2.0	0.4	10	217
Platform (CMP rile scale)	4.9	1.1	2.6	8.0	217
Leader change	0.4	0.5	0	1	224
In government	0.4	0.5	0	1	224
In government (more restrictive definition)	0.4	0.5	0	1	224
Niche (Adams 2006)	0.2	0.4	0	1	217
Niche (Meguid 2005)	0.1	0.2	0	1	217
Niche (Wagner 2012)	0.1	0.3	0	1	223
Length tenure	6.4	5.6	0.1	30	224

Table 7 lists the sources for the post-election surveys that we have collected in order to estimate the average left-right placement attributed to each political party after the campaign:

Table 7: List of mass election surveys compiled to measure the average left-right placement of political parties. By country.

Country	Source of Survey Data	Repository
<i>Denmark</i>	Election Study 1994, DDA 2210	Danish Data Archive
	Election Study 1998, DDA 4189	Danish Data Archive
	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 2 (2001)	CSES
	Election Study 2005, DDA 18184	Danish Data Archive
	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 3 (2007)	CSES
	Election Study 2011, DDA 27067	Danish Data Archive
<i>Germany</i>	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 1 (1998)	CSES
	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 2 (2002)	CSES
	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 3 (2005)	CSES
	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 3 (2009)	CSES
<i>Great Britain</i>	British Election Study 1983	ICPSR
	British Election Study 1987	ICPSR
	British Election Study 1992	ICPSR
	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 1 (1997)	CSES
	European Voter Database, 2001 election	GESIS
	Comparative Study of Electoral	CSES

	Systems, module 2 (2005)	
	British Election Study 2010	University of Essex
<i>Netherlands</i>	Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 1981	ICPSR
	Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 1982	ICPSR
	Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 1986	ICPSR
	Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 1989	ICPSR
	Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 1994	ICPSR
	Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 1998	ICPSR
	Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 2002	ICPSR
	Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 2003	ICPSR
	Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 2006	ICPSR
	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 3 (2010)	CSES
	Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, 2012	DANS
<i>Norway</i>	European Voter Database, 1981 election	GESIS
	Election Study 1985, NSD 0064	Norway Social Science Data Services
	Election Study 1989, NSD 0005	Norway Social Science Data Services
	Election Study 1993, NSD 0166	Norway Social Science Data Services
	Election Study 1997, NSD 0393	Norway Social Science Data Services
	Comparative Study of Electoral	CSES

<i>Spain</i>	Systems, module 2 (2001)	
	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 3 (2005)	CSES
	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 3 (2009)	CSES
	1986 General Election Study	CIS
	1989 General Election Study	CIS
	1993 General Election Study	CIS
	1996 General Election Study	CIS
	2000 General Election Study	CIS
	2004 General Election Study	CIS
<i>Sweden</i>	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 3 (2008)	CSES
	2011 General Election Study	CIS
	Swedish Election Study 1979, SND 89	Swedish National Data Service
	Swedish Election Study 1982, SND 157	Swedish National Data Service
	Swedish Election Study 1985, SND 217	Swedish National Data Service
	Swedish Election Study 1988, SND 227	Swedish National Data Service
	Swedish Election Study 1991, SND 391	Swedish National Data Service
	Swedish Election Study 1994, SND 570	Swedish National Data Service
	Swedish Election Study 1998, SND 750	Swedish National Data Service
Swedish Election Study 2002, SND 812	Swedish National Data Service	
Swedish Election Study 2006, SND 861	Swedish National Data Service	

2. Diagnostic Tests

Testing for serial correlation in the error term

We have run a Breusch-Godfrey test to confirm that there is no serial correlation in the error term of our empirical model. As it is well known, the presence of serial correlation in the disturbance biases estimates of the uncertainty in regression coefficients.

This test, presented in Table 8, indicates that we cannot reject the null of no serial correlation.

Table 8 Breusch-Godfrey test of no serial correlation

statistic ¹⁷	p-value
0.91	0.34

Note: This Breusch-Godfrey test relies on the estimates of the baseline model in equation 1.

Estimating cluster-robust standard errors as a misspecification test

King and Roberts (2015) suggest estimating cluster-robust standard errors as a diagnostic of model misspecification. They claim that, if clustered and OLS errors diverge substantially, then it is likely that misspecification affects not only the structure of the disturbance term but also other model assumptions.¹⁸ In that case, they suggest revising the empirical model until OLS and cluster-robust errors converge.

¹⁷ The Breusch-Godfrey statistic is distributed under the null as Chi squared with degrees of freedom equal to the R^2 of the auxiliary regression times the number of observations.

¹⁸ In their own words: “If robust and classical standard errors diverge –which means the authors acknowledges that one part of his or her model is wrong- then why should readers believe that all

We have re-estimated our main empirical model (equation 2) using cluster-robust standard errors and found that robust error estimates do not depart significantly from OLS ones. In fact, the substantive implications of the models estimated with clustered errors are the same as with OLS. This provides additional confidence in our choice of empirical model.

For this comparison of standard errors, we employ three different definitions of data clusters: by party, by year and by election (country X election year). All these analyses focus on the subsample of parties in opposition. Table 9 compares regression results with clustered errors with those obtained using OLS. As can be seen, divergence in error estimates is small. Table 10 scales these differences by computing the difference in estimates as a proportion of the OLS error estimate.¹⁹ As can be seen, except for the case of the *leader change* dummy, differences in standard error estimates are not substantial, between 0 and 25%. Even in the latter case, that difference is equivalent to a shift in the error estimate from 0.04 to 0.05.²⁰

other parts of the model that have not been examined are correctly specified?” (King and Roberts 2015: 160).

¹⁹ Specifically, it computes the ratio (cluster estimate – OLS estimate)/OLS estimate

²⁰ King and Roberts (2015) propose a generalized information matrix (GIM) test of whether differences in error estimates are statistically significant. At the time of writing this manuscript, however, GIM tests have not been implemented in any standard statistical software yet.

Table 9 The effect of election platforms on voter perceptions of parties' left-right position. Interaction model with cluster-robust standard errors. Subsample of parties in opposition.

	OLS errors	Party-clustered errors	Year-clustered errors	Election-clustered errors
Platform	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.07)	0.00 (0.07)
Leader Change	-0.26 (0.33)	-0.26 (0.25)	-0.26 (0.21)	-0.26 (0.25)
Platform X Leader Change	0.20* (0.09)	0.20* (0.08)	0.20** (0.08)	0.20** (0.09)
Voter Perception (t-1)	0.98** (0.04)	0.98** (0.05)	0.98** (0.05)	0.98** (0.05)
Voter Percep (t-1) X Leader Change	-0.14* (0.06)	-0.14* (0.06)	-0.14* (0.06)	-0.14* (0.06)
Intercept	0.16 (0.21)	0.16 (0.21)	0.16 (0.22)	0.16 (0.26)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	107	107	107	107
Number of clusters		30	25	45
R ²	0.98	0.98	0.98	0.98

Note: The dependent variable in these models is the average voter perception of the party's left-right position after the election campaign. Interaction model in equation 2. Standard errors in parentheses: we use OLS classical errors in the first model and cluster-robust errors in the following ones. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 10 Difference between OLS and cluster-robust standard errors as a proportion of the OLS standard error.

	Party-clustered errors	Year-clustered errors	Election-clustered errors
Platform	0.12	0.24	0.22
Leader Change	-0.25	-0.38	-0.24
Platform X Leader Change	-0.09	-0.17	-0.03
Voter Perception (t-1)	0.07	0.13	0.15
Voter Percep (t-1) X Leader Change	0.02	0.15	0.09
Intercept	0.02	0.05	0.26

Note: Cell entries compare cluster-robust with OLS standard errors. The function applied is (Cluster-robust error – OLS error)/OLS error.

3. Robustness Checks

Testing our argument using alternative estimates of manifesto left-right positions.

To make sure that our results do not hinge on the specific scaling of manifesto position that we use (Lowe et al. 2011), we have tested our argument using alternative estimates of manifesto left-right orientations.

Table 11 presents the empirical results using the original Manifesto Project measure of left-right positions (Laver and Budge, 1992). These results do not substantially differ from the ones obtained using Lowe et al.'s scaling procedure: whereas election manifestos do not shape voter perceptions of incumbent parties no matter whether the party leader is new or "old", parties in opposition need to change their leader if they want voters to update their perceptions in line with the party's campaign. In fact, in the latter case, the left-right placement given to a political party with a veteran leader doesn't change as a result of the campaign: the marginal effect of the lagged perception is 0.99 and the effect of the manifesto is essentially 0. Under a new leader, in contrast, the effect of manifestos increases to 0.25 and the degree of inertia drops to 0.84.

Table 11 The effect of election platforms on voter perceptions of parties' left-right position. Separate estimation for parties in government and parties in opposition. Original Manifesto Project estimates (Laver and Budge 1992).

	Parties in government	Parties in opposition
Platform	0.18 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.08)
Leader Change	0.08 (0.53)	-0.50 (0.40)
Platform X Leader Change	-0.16 (0.13)	0.27* (0.12)
Voter Perception (t-1)	0.84** (0.04)	0.99** (0.04)
Voter Percep (t-1) X Leader Change	0.12 (0.07)	-0.15** (0.06)
Intercept	-0.26 (0.45)	0.21 (0.28)
Country FE	Yes	Yes
N / R ²	78/ 0.96	107/ 0.98

Note: The dependent variable in these models is the voter perceptions of the party left-right position after the election campaign as measured in post-election surveys. OLS standard errors in parentheses. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 12 replicates the analysis using Kim and Fording (1998) estimates of manifesto left-right positions. These results also reproduce the same empirical pattern reported above. Leadership transitions do not condition the impact of election manifestos for incumbent parties, as in these cases voters seem to use alternative cues to form their beliefs about party left-right positions. For parties out of office, on the other hand, running under a new party leader is a necessary condition to convince voters that the party has shifted its policy preferences.

Table 12: The effect of election platforms on voter perceptions of parties' left-right positions. Separate estimation for parties in government and parties in opposition. Kim and Fording scales (1998).

	Parties in government	Parties in opposition
Platform	0.09 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)
Leader Change	-0.32 (0.33)	0.12 (0.23)
Platform X Leader Change	-0.08 (0.07)	0.14* (0.07)
Voter Perception (t-1)	0.85** (0.04)	0.98** (0.05)
Voter Percep (t-1) X Leader Change	0.11 (0.07)	-0.14* (0.06)
Intercept	0.21 (0.29)	0.16 (0.18)
Country FE	Yes	Yes
N / R ²	78/ 0.96	107/ 0.98

Note: The dependent variable in these models is the voter perceptions of the party left-right position after the election campaign as measured in post-election surveys. OLS standard errors in parentheses. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Taking into account the presence of measurement error

We address the presence of measurement error in the variables of the model by replicating our analyses using a simulation-extrapolation (simex) technique. Our outcome variable is a sample-based estimate of the population average placement given to a party and therefore is affected by error. In addition, our main predictor variable, the left-right orientation of the manifesto, is a noisy indicator of party left-right stances because, as any text-based estimate of party positions, it is prone to measurement error (Benoit et al. 2009).²¹

Using simex avoids the bias that affects standard regression results with error-prone variables. To do that, the simex estimator generates several simulated datasets that progressively increase the level of measurement error. After fitting a regression model for each of these simulated datasets, simex extrapolates what the estimate would be if the data had no measurement error.²² This procedure requires estimates of the magnitude of measurement error: the standard error of the mean placement for our dependent variable and the uncertainty estimates computed by Lowe et al. (2011) for manifesto data.

Table 13 presents our simulation-extrapolation estimates for both governing and opposition parties. The substantive conclusion that emerges is identical to the one drawn in the “standard” regression analyses. While leader transitions do not influence the effectiveness of incumbent party manifestos, they are a necessary condition for parties in opposition to redefine their left-right image in the campaign.

²¹ The authors discuss several sources of error in text-based estimates.

²² For further information about this estimation procedure, please see Lederer (2006).

Table 13: Simulation–extrapolation estimates of the effect of election platforms on voter perceptions of parties’ left-right position. Separate estimation for parties in government and parties in opposition.

	Parties in government	Parties in opposition
Platform	0.08 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.06)
Leader Change	-0.03 (0.43)	-0.38 (0.35)
Platform X Leader Change	-0.12 (0.11)	0.25* (0.10)
Voter Perception (t-1)	0.87*** (0.04)	0.99** (0.04)
Voter Percep (t-1) X Leader Change	0.11 (0.06)	-0.16** (0.06)
Intercept	0.37 (0.25)	0.10 (0.15)
RMSE	0.38	0.37

Note: Measurement error is specified for both the outcome variable *Voter Perception (t)* and the main predictor *Platform*. We use jackknife standard errors in parentheses. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Adopting a more restrictive definition of incumbency status.

The empirical estimates in Table 14 rely on a classification of incumbent and opposition parties according to the following criterion: governing parties are those that are part of the last cabinet before the parliamentary election. Using this more restrictive definition of incumbency does not challenge our main substantive conclusion: while leader changes are not relevant for incumbent parties, they decisively condition the impact of election manifestos for opposition parties.

Table 14: The effect of election platforms on voter perceptions of parties' left-right position. Parties in government defined as those belonging to the last cabinet formed before the parliamentary election.

	Parties in government	Parties in opposition
Platform	0.14 (0.07)	0.02 (0.06)
Leader Change	0.14 (0.47)	-0.21 (0.32)
Platform X Leader Change	-0.15 (0.11)	0.17* (0.09)
Voter Perception (t-1)	0.86** (0.04)	0.97** (0.04)
Voter Percep (t-1) X Leader Change	0.09 (0.07)	-0.11* (0.05)
Intercept	-0.15 (0.36)	0.13 (0.21)
Country FE	Yes	Yes
N / R ²	70 / 0.96	115 / 0.97

Note: The dependent variable in these models are the voter perceptions of the party left-right position after the election campaign using the post-election surveys. OLS errors in parentheses. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Empirical analyses excluding niche parties

A strand of the literature on party competition has emphasized how mainstream and niche parties diverge in their competitive strategies and the consequences of their policy shifts (Meguid 2005; Adams 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011). It could thus be plausible that voters also react systematically different to the policy offerings of mainstream and niche parties. Given that in our sample all niche parties are out of office, it could be argued that the difference in voter updating between incumbent and opposition parties is driven by the presence of niche parties in the latter subsample.

To address this alternative explanation, we have replicated our analyses excluding niche parties from the dataset. We employ three alternative definitions of “niche” parties proposed by Adams et al. (2006), Meguid (2005) and Wagner (2012), respectively. Adams et al. define niche parties as those presenting relatively extreme ideological positions and include in this category parties belonging to the communist, green or far-right party families. Meguid’s classification also relies on party families but it emphasizes how niche parties focus on issues outside of the class-based cleavage and therefore her definition covers the ethno-regionalist party family and excludes communist parties. The definition proposed by Wagner focuses explicitly on the relative salience of non-economic issues in niche parties’ policy offerings. He considers as niche any party –irrespective of its party family- that devotes a significantly larger attention to non-economic topics compared to the parties it competes with.

Table 15 presents these estimates. As can be seen, no matter what definition of niche is used, results for the subsample of mainstream parties confirm our conclusions.

Table 15 Results excluding niche parties. Three alternative definitions of niche party: Adams et al (2006), Meguid (2005) and Wagner (2012).

	Adams (2006) definition	Meguid (2005) definition	Wagner (2012) definition
Platform	-0.11 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)
Leader Change	-0.28 (0.46)	-0.25 (0.33)	-0.38 (0.34)
Platform X Leader Change	0.28* (0.11)	0.21* (0.09)	0.22* (0.09)
Voter Perception (t-1)	1.05** (0.05)	0.98** (0.05)	0.99** (0.05)
Voter Percep (t-1) X Leader Change	-0.21** (0.06)	-0.15* (0.06)	-0.14* (0.06)

Intercept	0.37 (0.35)	0.20 (0.21)	0.18 (0.21)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
N / R ²	76 / 0.96	96 / 0.97	94 / 0.98

Note: Results for mainstream parties only. OLS standard errors in parentheses. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Assessing the relevance of the timing of leadership changes

As noted in the main text, our argument establishes that party manifestos proposed by leaders elected since the last election generate larger updates in voter perceptions, but it remains agnostic about whether the precise timing of the leadership change matters.

As an exploratory exercise, we estimate an interactive model to assess whether the time passed between the leadership change and the general election influences voters' propensity to adjust their perceptions of where the party stands. For that purpose, we specify the following equation:

$$voter_perceptions_{it} = b_1 + b_2 platform_{it} + b_3 voter_perceptions_{i,t-1} + b_4 length_tenure_{it} + b_5(platform_{it} * length_tenure_{it}) + b_6(voter_perceptions_{i,t-1} * length_tenure_{it}) + e_{it}$$

Where *length tenure* denotes how long the new leader has been in office (in years).²³ This model is estimated for the subsample of parties that have changed their leader since the previous election. Hence, b_5 and b_6 indicate how, conditional on a leader change, the timing of that leadership change modulates the effect of party policy offerings and the degree of inertia in voter perceptions.

²³ Note that this is a continuous variable. Hence, a value of 1.5 in length tenure indicates that the new leader has been in office for 1 year and 6 months.

Estimates in Table 16 suggest that what matters for voters' willingness to update their opinions is that a leader different from the one heading the party in the previous election embodies the new policy offerings. Indeed, there is no evidence that the precise timing of the leadership change matters since the interaction terms *Platform X Length Tenure* and *Voter Percep (t-1) X Length Tenure* are not statistically distinguishable from zero. In other words, once the party manifesto has been drafted under a new leader, the time gap since the leadership election does not affect voters' propensity to change their minds.

Table 16 The timing of leadership changes and the effect of party policy offerings. Subsample of parties that elected a new leader since the previous election.

Platform	-0.10 (0.24)
Length Tenure	-0.40 (0.36)
Platform X Length Tenure	0.12 (0.09)
Voter Perception (t-1)	0.96** (0.11)
Voter Percep (t-1) X Length Tenure	-0.05 (0.04)
Intercept	0.80 (0.96)
Country FE	Yes
N / R ²	42 / 0.98

Note: Results for parties that elected new leaders only. OLS standard errors in parentheses. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Replicating our analyses using bootstrap-based clustered standard errors

A recent strand of literature points out that cluster-robust error estimates may be biased downwardly in the presence of a low number of clusters –below 40 approximately- (Cameron et al. 2006, Angrist and Pischke 2009).

Since the number of clusters in our data is low for some grouping criteria, we have also estimated our models using bootstrap-based estimates of cluster-robust errors because these correct for the possibility of downward bias (Esarey and Menger 2015). Table 17 and Table 18 present the results of estimating our interactive model for the subsample of parties in opposition using, respectively, wild cluster bootstrap and pairs cluster bootstrap errors.²⁴ Note that these bootstrap-based procedures yield t-statistics and confidence intervals, but not standard error estimates (Cameron et al. 2006).

These results show that estimating our model using bootstrap-based cluster errors does not alter the substantive implications of our findings. The impact of opposition party manifestos on voter perceptions is null unless there a new politician leads the party, in which case voters shift their opinion of where the party stands closer to what the party proposes in the campaign.

Table 17: Results of estimating the interactive model using a Wild cluster-robust errors. Subsample of parties in opposition.

	Party-clustered errors	Year-clustered errors	Election-clustered errors
Platform	0.00 [-0.11 , 0.11]	0.00 [-0.13,, 0.13]	0.00 [-0.11 , 0.12]
Leader Change	-0.26 [-0.71 , 0.20]	-0.26 [-0.63 , 0.12]	-0.26 [-0.73 , .21]
Platform X Leader Change	0.20* [0.06 , 0.36]	0.20* [0.08 , 0.34]	0.20* [0.04 , 0.36]

²⁴ Esarey and Menger (2015) provide a detailed description of these bootstrap-based procedures.

Voter Perception [t-1)	0.98** [0.90 , 1.07]	0.98** [0.89 , 1.07]	0.98** [0.90 , 1.07]
Voter Percep [t-1) X Leader Change	-0.14* [-0.25 , -0.04]	-0.14 [-0.25 , -0.04]	-0.14* [-0.24 , -0.03]
Intercept	0.16 [-0.22 , 0.54]	0.16 [-0.23 , 0.53]	0.16 [-0.31 , 0.64]
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	107	107	107
Number of clusters	30	25	45
R ²	0.98	0.98	0.98

Note: linear regression estimates and wild cluster-robust 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Number of bootstrap samples: 1000. Significance t-test: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 18 Results of estimating the interactive model using a pairs-cluster robust errors. Subsample of parties in opposition.

	Party-clustered errors	Year-clustered errors	Election-clustered errors
Platform	0.00 [-0.15 , 0.15]	0.00 [-0.17 , 0.17]	0.00 [-0.18 , 0.18]
Leader Change	-0.26 [-0.73 , 0.21]	-0.26 [-0.67 , 0.15]	-0.26 [-0.78 , 0.26]
Platform X Leader Change	0.20* [0.04 , 0.37]	0.20* [0.01 , 0.40]	0.20* [0.01 , 0.40]
Voter Perception [t-1)	0.98** [0.88 , 1.09]	0.98** [0.86 , 1.10]	0.98** [0.84 , 1.12]
Voter Percep [t-1) X Leader Change	-0.14 [-0.25 , -0.02]	-0.14 [-0.30 , 0.03]	-0.14 [-0.28 , 0.00]
Intercept	0.16 [-0.53 , 0.86]	0.16 [-0.35 , 0.67]	0.16 [-0.53 , 0.85]
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	107	107	107
Number of clusters	30	25	45
R ²	0.98	0.98	0.98

Note: linear regression estimates and pairs cluster-robust 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Number of bootstrap samples: 1000. Significance t-test: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

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