

The Credibility of Party Policy Rhetoric

Survey Experimental Evidence

Pablo Fernandez-Vazquez*

*Postdoctoral Fellow, Carlos III - Juan March Institute, Madrid. Email: pablo.fernandez.vazquez@uc3m.es. Website: <http://pablofernandezvazquez.com>

Abstract

Democratic elections are expected to help citizens elect like-minded incumbents. The issue positions that political parties publicly take are thus supposed to inform voters of each party's policy preferences. I argue, however, that voters are aware that policy offerings are also a strategic tool to win elections and that parties may campaign on policies that get them elected and do otherwise in office. Hence, citizens are more skeptical of party stances that might be electorally motivated. I have tested this argument with a survey experiment fielded in the United Kingdom that exposes respondents to Conservative and Labour Party statements on immigration and the National Health Service. I report consistent evidence that respondents discount more heavily the party statements that are likely to be electorally beneficial. This finding has key implications for democratic representation, spatial models of elections and public opinion change.

Keywords: Voter Updating; Policy Issue; Party Communication; Spatial Competition; Survey Experiment; Crowd-Sourcing; Parliamentary System; Great Britain.

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One of the most important tasks of a politician is to make speeches, give interviews, hold press conferences or participate in debates. Politicians talk, and their messages frequently include references to their views on policy issues. Indeed, a growing literature in political science analyzes such political rhetoric by identifying the topics that politicians choose to discuss or by scaling their position on issues (Benoit et al., 2016; Grimmer and Stewart, 2013; Lucas et al., 2014; Volkens et al., 2014). From a normative standpoint, these policy stances are supposed to be a guide of what political parties intend to do if elected for office and thereby help voters choose like-minded candidates at the polls.

Policy offerings are also an instrument that parties can modulate to attract voters (Downs, 1957). Since incumbents are not bound by their campaign promises, parties may strategically advocate policies that help them get elected even though they do not intend to carry them out (Stokes, 2001). To the extent that voters are aware of this, they may be reluctant to use a party's public policy declarations to infer what the party would do in government. I argue that such skepticism is more pronounced when the party proposes policies that can increase its electoral appeal because these proposals may respond to electoral pressures rather than reflect the party's actual preferences. Adopting unpopular stances, on the other hand, is not likely to be part of a vote-seeking strategy and therefore becomes a more credible signal of what the party intends to do.

This paper tests the argument that voters discount policy rhetoric that is more likely to respond to vote-seeking incentives. For that purpose, I have designed a survey experiment in which respondents place political parties on an issue *before* and *after* being exposed to a statement made each by each party on that issue. Fielded in the United Kingdom in August 2015 using a convenience sample of British adults enlisted through CrowdFlower, an online crowdsourcing platform, the survey questionnaire focuses on respondents' perceptions of where the Conservative and Labour parties stand on two of the most relevant current policy issues: government regulation of immigration flows and funding of the National Health

Service (NHS). On both of these issues, public opinion has a clear leaning: Regarding immigration, most respondents favor restricting the entry of new immigrants, while regarding healthcare there is wide agreement that the government should devote more resources to the NHS.

According to the argument, policy statements taking popular positions are more likely to respond to electoral incentives, and therefore they will be less effective at changing voter expectations. This is precisely what the empirical results suggest. I report consistent evidence on both issues that changes in respondents' perceptions of a party are *smaller* if the party takes stances that respondents consider to be in line with the preferences of most voters. Such difference in voter updating is larger for the Labour Party on immigration and the Conservatives on the NHS, two scenarios where vote-seeking pressures to change the party brand are stronger. I also show that these results are not an artifact of using a convenience sample and can therefore be extrapolated to the British electorate.¹

This evidence has important consequences for party competition. It shows that parties have a limited capacity to develop an issue reputation that matches citizen preferences because, even when the party shifts its stance on the issue, voters discount such shifts as not very credible. In the case of Great Britain, this implies that the Labour Party can have a hard time persuading voters that it has become tougher on immigration, while the Conservative Party will have trouble credibly signaling that it is truly committed to the National Health Service. It also provides a mechanism that explains the stability of issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996; Bélanger, 2003) because parties that are disadvantaged on an issue will struggle to credibly adopt the position of the party that “owns” it. Finally, my results help account for the finding in Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu (2011, 2014) and Fernandez-Vazquez (2014) that party campaigns have a small effect, at best, on voter perceptions of party left-right positions.

¹In addition, I provide evidence that the empirical results are not driven by respondents' party id.

Argument

According to spatial models of party competition, citizen expectations about the policies that each party would promote in office drive voting choices. There is, in fact, a wealth of empirical evidence showing that voters tend to choose parties that they perceive to be have similar policy preferences (Merrill and Grofman, 1999; Adams, Merrill and Grofman, 2005; Jessee, 2009; Lacy and Paolino, 2010).² For this reason, major survey programs like the ANES or the CSES systematically ask respondents about their perceptions of where parties stand on issues. Hence, a key approach to explain electoral outcomes is to examine how citizens form and update their beliefs about party policy positions.

In addition to government decisions, which seem to provide credible information about incumbent parties' policy preferences (Grynaviski, 2010; Lupu, 2014; Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013), voters could also learn about parties' future policy choices from their public declarations and campaign promises. The extant evidence that we have indicates, however, that party campaign stances do not have a strong influence on voter perceptions of party positions (Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu, 2011, 2014; Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014).³

There are three main reasons why politicians' messages may fail to shape citizens' notions of what each political party stands for: 1) lack of exposure, 2) noise, and 3) lack of credibility. First, to the extent that voters are inattentive to politics, political discourse may simply go unnoticed. Obtaining information on parties and candidates may be costly (Downs, 1957) and citizens may choose media sources with little coverage of politics (Prior, 2007). Second, even if citizens do observe what politicians say, such rhetoric can be vague and therefore it

²The idea that the contrast between citizen preferences and perceived candidate positions defines election outcomes has permeated public discussions of campaigns and electoral competition. As an illustration, see dailymail.co.uk/Miliband-Left-wing-win-election-says-Blair.html, telegraph.co.uk/David-Cameron-draws-up-immigration-laws-to-foil-Ukip.html, or washingtonpost.com/is-ted-cruz-too-conservative-for-republican-primary-voters/.

³These authors use party manifestos, coded by the Manifesto Project, as proxies for the policies parties campaign on before the election.

may be difficult for voters to draw precise inferences about parties' future behavior (Tomz and Van Houweling, 2009; Somer-Topcu, 2015). Indeed, there is a growing literature that emphasizes the intrinsic uncertainty attached to estimating the policy preferences of political actors from spoken and written communication (Benoit, Laver and Mikhaylov, 2009; Mikhaylov, Laver and Benoit, 2012; Benoit et al., 2016).

This paper focuses on the third explanation: the problem of credibility in politicians' issue stances. The policies that parties publicly advocate can be a potential cue into what the party intends to do if given the chance to be in government, but they are also a tool to attract voter support. In fact, one of the main tasks of spatial models of elections is precisely to identify the policy offerings that a party should make in order to maximize its vote share. Given that campaign promises do not bind incumbents (Alesina, 1988), the pursuit of votes may lead political parties to take popular policy stances in order to get elected and later reverse course once in office. Consider, for example, the notable cases that Stokes (2001) identifies of Latin American incumbents who campaigned on widely popular policies while anticipating that they would implement a different course of action in government. Hence, when a party adopts a position that could improve its electoral prospects, voters cannot be sure whether that stated position reflects its actual intentions or instead responds to short-term vote-seeking incentives and thus may be later abandoned in office. In contrast, advocating policies that few voters espouse is more likely to reflect the true preferences of the party.⁴

This logic also emerges in formal models of party competition that do away with the (unrealistic) assumption that campaigns are binding commitments. The models in Banks (1990) and Callander and Wilkie (2007) show that, in equilibrium, some party types lie

⁴The cases that Stokes reviews fit this pattern. Policy switches occurred only among incumbents who ran on policies that most voters approved (security-oriented). All presidential candidates who campaigned on the less popular option (efficiency-oriented policies), in contrast, kept their promises and fulfilled their mandates (Stokes, 2001, figure 1.1, page 3).

about their policy intentions and campaign on policies close to the median voter in order to get elected, even if they do not intend to carry them out. Hence, campaigns espousing the views favored by the median voter are less informative about future incumbent behavior. The rationale is that voters cannot determine whether such popular campaign proposals reflect the actual party views or are instead a strategy to maximize the party's support.

There are several reasons why parties may intend to implement policies that are at odds with voters' preferences. Parties may have their own policy goals that reflect either their intrinsic preferences ([Wittman, 1973](#)) or capture by special interests. Alternatively, parties may have private information suggesting that what citizens want will actually yield negative results. Once they get into office they implement an unpopular policy because, according to their private information, it will provide the best social outcomes ([Stokes, 2001](#)).

Whatever the cause, in all these cases the party's policy intentions are hard to sell to voters and therefore the party may have incentives to conceal its plans behind campaign promises that are electorally appealing. Even if voters dislike deviations from election pledges ([Tomz and Van Houweling, 2012b](#)), a policy switch can still be the optimal decision: First, the reversal in policies may not be easily observable by voters ([Ferejohn, 1999](#)). Second, even if it is, provided that ensuing outcomes are good, voters may revise their views and support the incumbent's policies. Third, even assuming that the outcomes are unpopular, the incumbent may attribute the policy shift to a change in external factors. From the point of view of voters, this implies that the behavior of parties who campaign on widely favored policies is harder to predict than that of parties announcing unpopular measures. As a result, voters will be less willing to update their beliefs about a party's position when it advocates policies that could benefit it at the polls.

Approach

In order to test this empirical expectation, I have designed a survey experiment that analyzes how a party’s public statements on an issue affect voter perceptions of where the party stands on that issue. I here report the results of fielding two versions of this experiment in the United Kingdom, one regarding immigration and the other concerning the National Health Service (NHS) —a major government-funded health care program—. ⁵ Both experiments focus on the two main British political parties, Conservative and Labour. ⁶ The questionnaires were fielded in August 2015, almost one year prior to the Brexit referendum. The UK is a suitable case to explore the determinants of changes in voter perceptions of party positions since British political parties have well-defined policy images that strongly predict voting decisions on election day (Alvarez and Nagler, 1998; Cho and Endersby, 2003; Alvarez, Boehmke and Nagler, 2006). Both immigration and the NHS are, moreover, consistently ranked by the British public as the two most important issues facing the country. ⁷ These issues also play a prominent role in the communication strategies of British parties, and are even the object of entire policy speeches. ⁸

In addition to being central to public debates, British public opinion has a clear leaning on both issues. On immigration, restricting entry is by far the most popular option. According to a recent wave of the British Election Study, on a scale where 0 means that there should be “many fewer” immigrant and 10 means that there should be “many more”,

⁵The National Health Service is a publicly funded healthcare system that is free for British citizens.

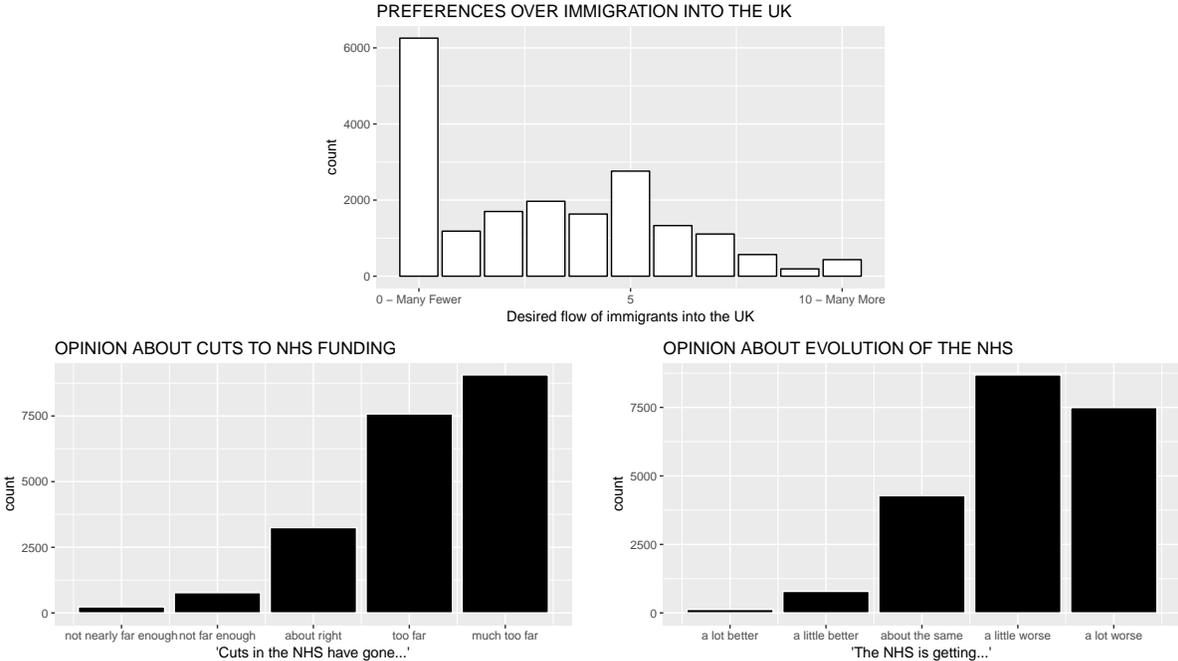
⁶Despite the rise in support for smaller parties like the Scottish National Party (SNP) or United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Conservatives and Labour jointly occupy 86% of the seats in the House of Commons.

⁷IPSOS MORI’s opinion polls provide monthly data on issue rankings, which can be accessed in this link: www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2420/Issues-Index-Archive.aspx [last accessed July 13th 2016].

⁸In the last few months the outgoing Prime Minister David Cameron has devoted entire speeches to immigration ([link](#)) and to the NHS ([link](#)), and so has the leader of the Labour Party until 2015, David Miliband [here](#) and [here](#). [Links were last accessed on July 14th 2016]

the median response is 3, and one third of all participants place themselves on the most extreme anti-immigration position (Figure 1, top row).⁹ Indeed, demanding “many fewer” immigrants appears to be the modal option not only in England, but also in Wales and Scotland (Figure A2 in the Online Appendix). Regarding the National Health Service, a vast majority of respondents consider that government funding for the NHS is insufficient: 72% declare that cuts in NHS spending have gone too far and more than 3 in 4 respondents also believe that the NHS has gotten worse (Figure 1, bottom row). Taken together, this evidence indicates that a wide majority of the British public supports immigration restrictions and a more generous funding of the National Health Service.

Figure 1: British public opinion on immigration and health care.



NOTES: The data source is the British Election Study Internet Panel, wave 7. Weights have been applied to match a representative sample of the UK public. Figure in the top row refers to preferences about immigration. The two figures in the bottom row concern the National Health Service.

⁹Data and documentation for Wave 7 of the British Election Study Internet Panel can be found at www.britishelectionstudy.com/data-object/wave-7-of-the-2014-2017-british-election-study-internet-panel/. [Last accessed January 4th 2017]

The distribution of public opinion on immigration and health care has consequences for party competition. It generates incentives for both the Conservative and Labour parties to be perceived as tough on immigration and committed to public funding for the NHS. According to the theoretical argument, in this context voters anticipate that anti-immigration and pro-NHS statements are more likely to be electorally motivated than pro-immigration and anti-NHS ones. This is indeed what is observed in a pilot survey: More than 80% of respondents consider that a party that advocates restricting immigration to the UK is seeking “to obtain more votes”. This proportion drops to 30% if the party advocates opening immigration to the UK (Table I). Regarding a promise to increase funding for the NHS, 90% of respondents judged that such promise can help the party increase its popularity among voters.¹⁰ The argument thus predicts that voters will *not* find anti-immigration and pro-NHS statements informative about the party’s ideology and will thus discount them as less credible than pro-immigration and anti-NHS declarations.

Table I: The perceived motivation behind party statements on immigration. Conservative and Labour parties.

		TYPE OF STATEMENT			
		Restrict immigration	Open immigration	Difference	CI
PARTY	<i>Vote seeking?</i>				
Conservative	yes	84%	32%	52%	[62%, 42%]
	no	16%	68%		
Labour	yes	82%	32%	50%	[60%, 39%]
	no	18%	68%		

NOTES: Pilot survey fielded in July 2015. Online convenience sample. N = 181.

The electoral incentives that the Conservative Party and Labour face are not symmetrical, however. On each of the two issues, one party is exposed to stronger electoral pressures

¹⁰This percentage comes from a separate pilot study. The specific statement reads: “We will be hiring more doctors, nurses, midwives and care workers, and putting the right values back at the heart of the NHS. The NHS there when you need it.” The wording of the question is: “*Do you think this statement can make the politician that made it more popular among voters?*”.

to change its issue reputation than the other party. On immigration, the Conservatives are already perceived to be tougher and more aligned with the preferences of most voters than Labour. Using the 0-10 scale above where 0 means anti-immigration and 10 pro-immigration, the median placement attributed to the Conservatives is 4 whereas that of Labour is 6. Labour’s reputation vis-à-vis the NHS is, in contrast, more favorable than that of the Conservatives. A majority of voters —65%— considers that the NHS would be better under Labour than under the Conservative government.¹¹ Given these relative issue advantages, the argument predicts a difference in discounting across these two parties for each policy issue. On immigration, the Labour Party faces more intense vote-seeking pressures and therefore the discounting of “tough” immigration stances relative to “soft” ones should be larger for Labour than for the Conservatives. On the NHS, in contrast, skepticism towards promises of investing into the NHS should be deeper for the Conservatives than for Labour.

Survey experiments offer advantages to study the consequences of party issue rhetoric. While previous work on the effect of party stances relies on aggregate data ([Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu, 2011, 2014](#); [Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014](#)), I have designed a within-subject experiment that provides individual-level information on *changes* in voter perceptions of party positions by asking respondents to place the party on the issue scale *before* and *after* observing an issue statement made by a top party official. Most importantly, a survey experiment can help isolate the effect of message credibility from that of other determinants of shifts in opinions like voter attentiveness and message clarity. To do so, I follow [Mutz \(2011\)](#) and induce respondents to pay attention to the party’s issue statement. I also include an indicator of whether the respondent actually reads the message in order to rule out the possibility that a lack of change in opinion is due to the respondent’s failing to observe the policy message. Second, to ensure that the statement in each experimental condition

¹¹Source: Wave 7 of the British Election Study.

conveys a clear meaning, I crowd-sourced the evaluation of the clarity of several Labour and Conservative real party issue messages and selected statements that were considered to be clear by crowd coders.

Questionnaire Design

In order to measure changes in perceptions of party issue positions, respondents are asked to place political parties on the relevant issue scale, either immigration or the NHS, before and after observing a party statement on that issue. At the pre-treatment stage, respondents also provide their own position on that issue. I capture both party and respondents' issue positions on a 0-10 scale, which is now a standard approach to measure issue placements and is employed in both CSES surveys and British Election Studies. The question wording for each issue is presented in [Table II](#). The endpoints of each scale represent clear and tangible opposites to ease the interpretation of the issue dimension — *open vs close borders*, *increase vs decrease NHS funding*—.

Table II: Survey item measuring perceptions of party positions and individual self-placements. Immigration and National Health Service.

IMMIGRATION

Thinking about the issue of **immigration** to the UK, what do you think the government should do? Use the 0-10 scale below where

0 means that the government should **close borders for new immigrants** &

10 means that the government should **open borders for new immigrants**

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

Thinking about the issue of government **funding for the National Health Service (NHS)**, what do you think the government should do? Use the 0-10 scale below where

0 means that the government should **decrease funding for the NHS** &

10 means that the government should **increase funding for the NHS**

Relative to previous survey-experiments that seek to estimate changes in beliefs about politicians' issue positions ([Tomz and Van Houweling, 2012a](#)), my approach has the ad-

vantage of explicitly measuring respondents' initial (pre-treatment) beliefs. Such a within-subjects design, however, introduces a source of potential consistency bias: respondents may have incentives to place a party on the same position before and after the treatment so as to appear internally consistent. To minimize this risk, I have placed several demographic and attitudinal questions between the pre and post-treatment party placement items. Note that, in any case, such consistency bias cannot explain why some statements may generate larger shifts in respondents' opinions than others.

The experimental manipulation consists of exposing respondents to a short statement made by a leading Conservative or Labour politician on the relevant policy issue, immigration or the NHS. In the first case, the message may either advocate controlling immigration or restricting immigration flows. In the second, it may either propose higher funding for the NHS or reductions in the levels of public spending for this service. Assignment to each type of statement is randomized and so is the ordering between the Conservative and the Labour issue messages.

The procedure to select the party statement in each condition has been the following. First, I have identified recent speeches made by prominent members of each party and extracted short statements expressing the party's view on the issue.¹² Second, I have crowdsourced the scaling of these texts in order to identify the appropriate statement for each manipulation. Using crowdsourcing to code political text is an approach that [Benoit et al. \(2016\)](#) have employed with promising results. I have thus employed the same recruiting

¹²The source for Conservative Party immigration statements is a November 2014 speech given by Prime Minister David Cameron—[Cameron November 2014](#)—, while the source of Labour Party immigration statements are speeches made by its then leader Ed Miliband and other members of his shadow cabinet between March 2014 and April 2015. Links can be found here: [Miliband December 2014](#), [Miliband April 2015](#), [Hartman March 2014](#), [Cooper November 2014](#), and [Balls September 2014](#). Regarding funding for the National Health Service, I have collected speeches by the Conservative Prime Minister and his Chancellor of the Exchequer—links available here: [Osborne December 2014](#), [Osborne September 2014](#), [Osborne April 2015](#), [Cameron May 2015](#), and [Cameron May 2015](#)—, and statements made by the Labour leader and some shadow cabinet members—links here: [Balls September 2014](#), [Burnham September 2014](#), [Miliband September 2014](#), and [Miliband November 2014](#). Note that these speeches were broadcast to the mass media and therefore are addressed to the general public.

platform that they use, CrowdFlower, and requested online contributors to complete three tasks: to place several party statements on the 0-10 issue scales above, to evaluate the message clarity, and to assess whether the message could make the party more popular among voters.

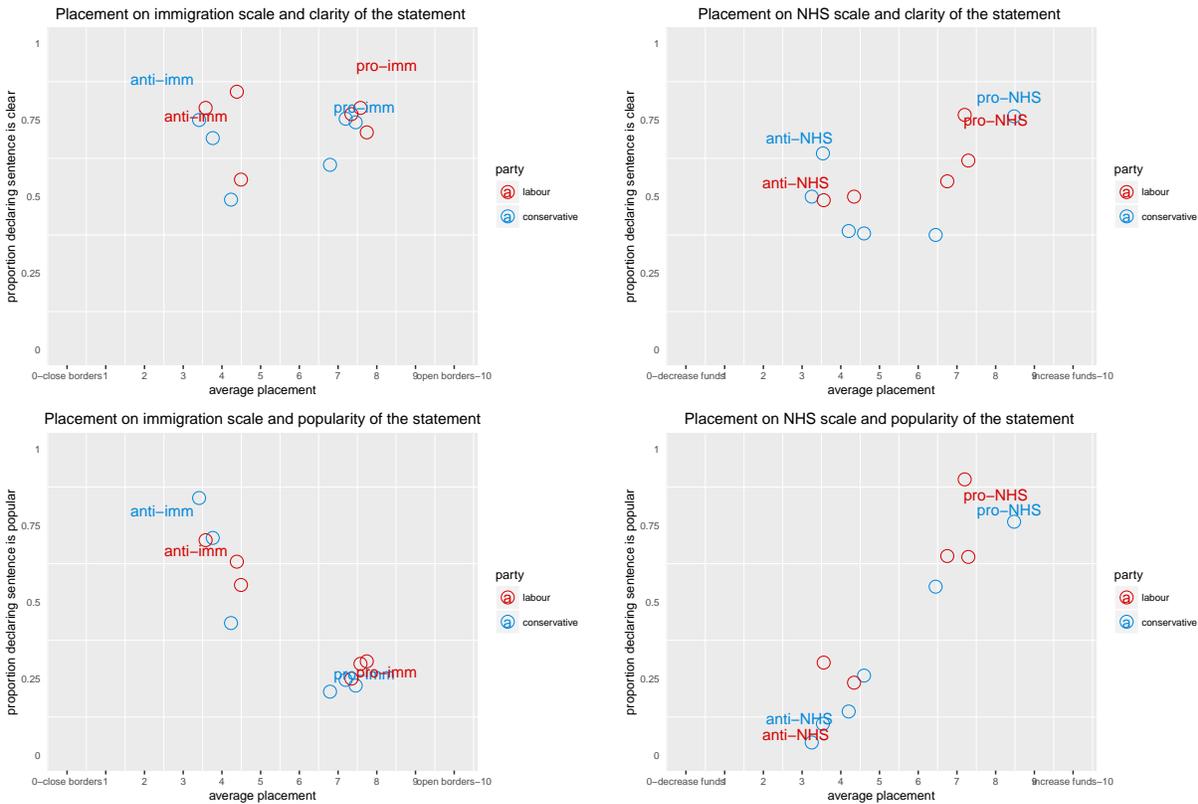
Figure 2 plots the results of this evaluation of immigration and NHS statements. The average placement on the issue scale appears on the horizontal axis. The vertical dimension on the top plots denotes the proportion of participants that consider the message to be clear, while the bottom plots indicate the proportion that perceives the stance to be electorally motivated. The pair of statements selected for each issue and party is denoted by the labels *pro-imm*, *anti-imm*, *pro-NHS*, and *anti-NHS*. Hollow circles represent statements that were not selected.

As can be seen in the figure, the statement chosen for each experimental condition represents the most extreme message.¹³ This ensures that each party’s pair of statements reflects distinct positions on each issue. Selected statements also have a clear meaning for most coders. In addition, there is a strong relationship between the orientation of the statement and the probability that it is perceived as electorally motivated: crowd coders tend to perceive anti-immigration statements as more popular than pro-immigration ones, and the same happens for pro-NHS statements relative to anti-NHS ones. Table III and Table IV display the text of the selected manipulation statements.

The treatment is administered as follows: each survey respondent is exposed to two issue statements, one per party and in random order. The political party responsible for the statement is identified, but not the specific politician who delivered it. To motivate participants to carefully read each text, the questionnaire item includes a multiple-choice

¹³There is one exception, the pro-NHS Conservative statement: there is another message with a slightly more extreme meaning, but it was not considered to be clear enough and therefore I decided not to use it.

Figure 2: The choice of manipulation texts. Left column: issue of immigration flows. Right column: issue of government funding of the National Health Service.



NOTES: Average issue position, perceived clarity and electoral motivation for each of the party messages evaluated as potential manipulation statements. Conservative and Labour statements are denoted by the blue and red color, respectively. The pair of statements eventually selected as manipulations are indicated by text labels. Those that were not chosen are represented by hollow circles.

question that lists four words and asks participants to identify the word that is *not* in the text.¹⁴ Figure 3 illustrates the appearance of the experimental treatment.

Using actual statements to represent party stances on an issue presents both advantages and challenges. Previous survey experiments that manipulate information about party policy stances have tended to use an explicit spatial metaphor: respondents are told that the candidate or party has taken a position on an issue scale, where that position varies across treatment groups (Lacy and Paolino, 2010; Sniderman and Stiglitz, 2012; Tomz and

¹⁴Mutz (2011) discusses this technique as a strategy to increase respondent attention to experimental manipulations.

Table III: Manipulation Statements. Issue: Regulation of immigration flows.

	anti-immigration	pro-immigration
Conservative	“The number of migrants we are seeing is far higher than our local authorities, our schools and our hospitals can cope with. So many people, so fast, is placing real burdens on our public services.”	“Our openness is part of who we are. We should celebrate it. We should never allow anyone to demonise it. We are Great Britain because of immigration, not in spite of it.”
Labour	“People want there to be control of immigration. And I agree. That means strengthening our borders, with proper entry and exit checks. And we will introduce those checks.”	“Over many centuries Britain has benefited from the ideas and talents of those who have come here from abroad. We need migration to get the top talent and investment we need, for our world class universities to compete internationally, or to meet skills shortages in the NHS.”

NOTES: *Anti-immigration* denotes statements in favor of restricting new immigration flows while *Pro-immigration* indicates messages advocating easing the entry of new immigrants.

Table IV: Manipulation Statements. Issue: Government funding of the National Health Service.

	Decrease funding	Increase funding
Conservative	“We’re going to have to go on controlling spending. This year I can confirm that we will be spending £10 billion less than set out in our original plans.”	“We will secure the future of the National Health Service by increasing the health budget, integrating healthcare and social care, and ensuring the National Health Service works on a 7 day basis.”
Labour	“We will continue to face tough spending constraints. We are setting out how we can save money [in the NHS]”	“It is time to care about our NHS. So we will set aside resources so that we can have in our NHS 3,000 more midwives, 5,000 more care workers, 8,000 more GPs and 20,000 more nurses. An NHS with time to care.”

NOTES: *Decrease funding* denotes statements in favor of reducing government spending in the National Health Service, while *Increase funding* indicates messages advocating higher spending in the NHS.

Van Houweling, 2012a). The downside of this approach is that the manipulation may fail to treat respondents if they do not believe that the party or candidate has actually taken such a stance. An alternative is to drop party labels or candidate names as in Tomz and Van Houweling (2012a), but this rules out the possibility of measuring prior perceptions and

Figure 3: Example of how respondents are exposed to the experimental condition: Statement on immigration by the Conservative party favoring restricting entry of new immigrants. Includes a follow-up question to motivate respondents to read the text.

Please read carefully the following statement recently made by a prominent member of the **Conservative Party**:

"The number of migrants we are seeing is far higher than our local authorities, our schools and our hospitals can cope with. So many people, so fast, is placing real burdens on our public services."

Having read this text, please select below the **word** that is **not mentioned** in the statement above.

control	number
local	public

limits the external validity of the study. Using real party statements, on the other hand, reduces the degree of control over the effect of the experimental manipulation since the same statement may be interpreted differently by each respondent. To address this challenge, I include a manipulation check asking participants to place the meaning of the statement on the same 0-10 issue scale (Figure A4 in the Online Appendix).

To determine whether the respondent considers the party statement to be electorally motivated, the questionnaire asks participants to identify which policy alternative is more widely supported within the electorate.¹⁵ Specifically, participants are asked to indicate “irrespective of your own opinion on this issue, what do you think is the view that most British citizens espouse?” The possible answers for the immigration issue are: i) restricting entry of new immigrants or ii) ease entry of new immigrants. For the NHS, the options are: a) decreasing spending in the NHS or b) increasing spending in the NHS. With this individual-level information on perceptions of where public opinion stands on an issue, it is

¹⁵The screenshot that displays this survey item is shown in Figure A5 in the Online Appendix.

possible to infer the type of statements that the respondent is more likely to see as electorally beneficial and thereby test whether such messages generate smaller shifts in opinions.

The order in which questionnaire items are presented is the following. After some initial demographic questions, respondents report their issue preference and provide their pre-treatment opinion on where each party stands. Additional demographic items precede the administration of the party statements, which are followed by the *post-treatment* question tapping respondents' beliefs about where each party is placed. Having the post-treatment party placement item immediately after the issue messages are administered probably captures the maximum potential effect of the statements, which may go against finding evidence of voter discounting. Finally, the manipulation check and the item eliciting perceptions of how public opinion leans on the issue appear towards the end of the survey.

Implementation

The survey questionnaire for each issue has been administered online to a convenience sample of British adults recruited through CrowdFlower. Much like Amazon's MTurk, CrowdFlower is a web-based crowdsourcing platform that can enlist survey respondents and compensate them for their participation.¹⁶ The main advantage of CrowdFlower over MTurk is that it has a better capacity to recruit contributors from Great Britain. Recruiting survey samples through crowdsourcing platforms or social media is an increasingly common practice in social science research (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz, 2012; Samuels and Zucco, 2012; Paolacci and Chandler, 2014). It makes it possible to obtain public opinion data at a lower cost than standard population samples, and this approach can be used as a stand-alone empirical study or as a complement to other data sources.

¹⁶For this study, respondents received \$0.90 after completing the questionnaire, and the median duration of the survey was 6 minutes. Upon completion of the survey, respondents were asked to judge the generosity of the monetary compensation on a 1-5 scale. The average review was 4.

The affordability of this alternative comes at a potential cost, however. While respondents recruited through crowdsourcing platforms are more diverse than other convenience samples like college undergraduates, they tend to be younger and more educated than the populations of reference (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz, 2012; Paolacci and Chandler, 2014). It is therefore possible that patterns found among these online respondents do not generalize to the whole population. To address this potential concern, after estimating the model with the (unweighted) CrowdFlower sample, I replicate the analysis weighting observations to achieve balance on key demographic characteristics with a random sample of British adults interviewed by the British Election Study. For that purpose I follow the method proposed by Rivers (2007). The empirical results remain unchanged.¹⁷ This suggests that the findings using the CrowdFlower convenience sample can be extrapolated to the British electorate.

Empirical model

To test the argument that citizens are more skeptical of party statements that may respond to vote-seeking incentives, I estimate the following interactive model:

$$\text{update} = \beta_1 \text{shift in position} + \beta_2 \text{shift in position} X \text{popular direction} + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

where *Update* represents the change in the respondent’s perception of where the party stands after observing the party’s issue statement.¹⁸ *Shift in position* denotes the perceived change in the party’s issue stance, understood as the difference between the position the party advocates in the statement and the position that the respondent attributed to the party before the treatment. To give an example, for a survey taker that places the Conservative

¹⁷A demographic comparison between the CrowdFlower sample and the British electorate appears in subsection A.1 in the Online Appendix.

¹⁸Hence, *Update* is defined as the difference between the position that the respondent attributes to the party after the treatment and the one she attributed before the treatment.

Party initially at position 4 and interprets the party statement as a 6, *Shift in position* takes the value of 2. Finally, *Popular direction* denotes whether the respondent interprets the party statement as a shift towards the position that most British citizens support. Using the previous example—a pro-immigration shift—, *Popular direction* will take the value of 1 if the respondent thinks that most citizens favor easing the entry of immigrants and 0 if she thinks that most voters favor restricting immigration. *Popular direction* is therefore an indicator that the respondent considers the party message to be electorally motivated. I estimate this equation separately for each party, Conservative and Labour, and for each policy issue, immigration and the National Health Service. The empirical results will thus include four sets of regression coefficients, one for each issue and party pair.¹⁹

The effect of statements on voter opinions is defined in this model by β_1 if the party is shifting its public stance *away* from the most popular positions, and $\beta_1 + \beta_2$ if the respondent interprets the shift as a move *towards* the most popular views. My argument predicts that voters find electorally beneficial rhetoric less credible, and therefore we should observe that $\beta_2 < 0$ so that $\beta_1 > \beta_1 + \beta_2$. Comparing across parties, it also implies that discounting should be larger for the Labour Party on immigration and for the Conservative Party on funding for the NHS. These expectations are supported by the evidence that I present in the next section. They are also borne out by the results that I present in [subsection A.4](#) of the [Online Appendix](#) using an alternative empirical model in which all right-hand side variables are measured before the treatment.

¹⁹The empirical model does not specify an intercept, thereby assuming that the constant term is equal to zero. Doing otherwise would mean that even when there is no perceived shift in stances, respondents still change their views of the party’s position. At any rate, including such intercept term does not alter the substantive implication of the empirical results.

Evidence

The results from the manipulation check indicate that survey participants interpreted the Labour and Conservative statements in each experimental condition as expected. [Table V](#) reports how respondents mapped the meaning of each party message onto the corresponding issue scale.²⁰ Each cell displays the average position that respondents attributed to each manipulation statement. It shows that participants placed pro-immigration messages closer to the “open borders” endpoint than anti-immigration ones. Similarly, pro-NHS statements are seen as more favorable to increasing NHS funding than those in the anti-NHS experimental condition. All these differences in the interpretation of each type of party declaration are large and statistically significant. Respondents’ understanding of each type of party declaration is such that parties’ pre-treatment perceived positions lie in between each treatment, and therefore both types of statements are being interpreted, on average, as a policy shift in the expected direction: anti-immigration statements as a movement towards tougher immigration controls and pro-immigration statements as a shift towards a looser immigration policy. The same applies to the National Health Service. Hence, the results of this manipulation check suggest that, if respondents do not fully update their placement of Labour and the Conservatives after observing their issue statements, it is not because they have failed to understand the meaning of these declarations. Discounting therefore becomes a more plausible reason to explain such a pattern.

The Effect of Party Statements

In order to estimate whether party issue stances have an effect on voter perceptions, I first compare the average post-treatment placement of Labour and the Conservative Party across experimental groups. [Figure 4](#) plots these *across-subjects* effects. This graph shows that

²⁰[Figure A4](#) displays the wording and format of this manipulation check.

Table V: Manipulation checks. Respondent placement of Labour and Conservative issue statements in each treatment condition.

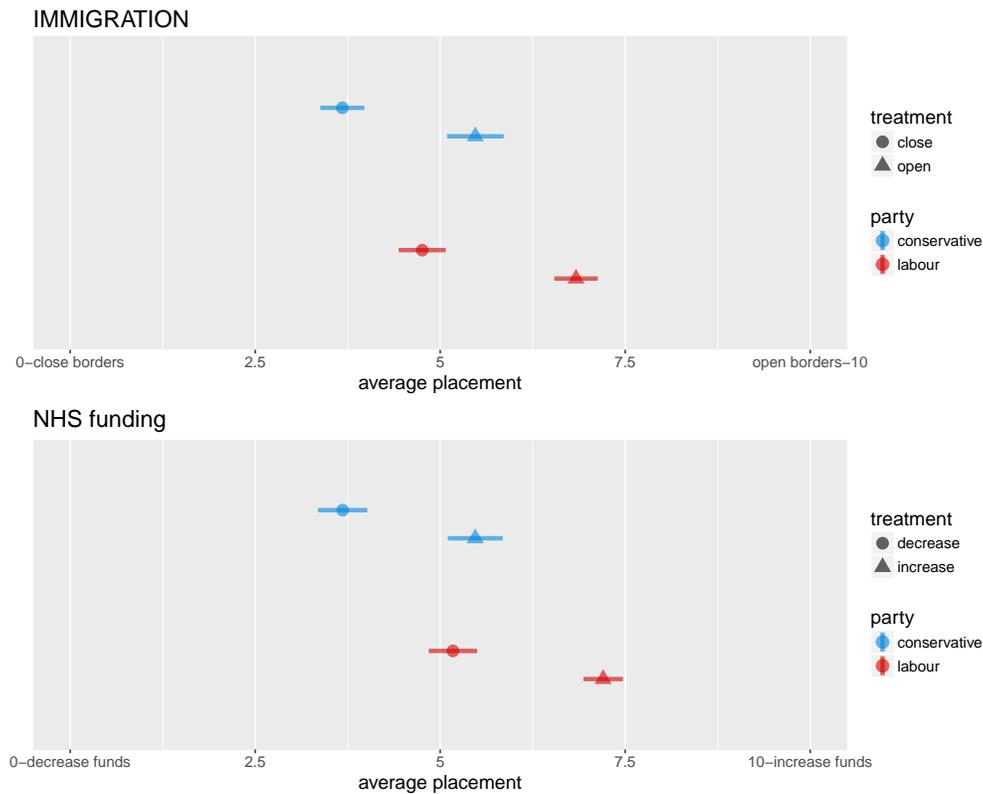
IMMIGRATION				
	anti-immigration	pro-immigration	difference	pre-treatment party placement
Conservative	2.7	6.9	4.2*	4.2
Labour	4.1	7.5	3.4*	5.7
NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE				
	anti-NHS	pro-NHS	difference	pre-treatment party placement
Conservative	3.2	7	4.2*	4.4
Labour	4.2	7.8	3.4*	6.7

NOTE: Average placement on a 0-10 scale and difference in means t-test. Regarding immigration, 0 represents a “close borders” policy and 10 an “open borders” option. For NHS funding, the “decrease funding” alternative is captured by 0 while 10 indicates “increase funding”. Pre-treatment party positions are also included on the rightmost column as reference. t-test p-values: * < 5%

respondents’ perceptions of where each party stands on the issue diverge after observing the party’s message. Those who read a party statement defending immigration subsequently see the party as more open to immigration than those exposed to a proposal to restrict it. Statements on NHS funding generate a similar split in post-treatment opinions. This pattern, moreover, holds for both the Labour and Conservative parties. Taken together, these *across-subjects* results indicate that party statements can change respondents’ beliefs about party positions. To examine whether the *size* of the opinion shift depends on the perceived motivation behind the party’s policy rhetoric, I turn to the *within-subjects* evidence.

I estimate the parameters in [Equation 1](#) in order to test the argument that respondents are less willing to change their opinion about where a party stands if the party makes statements that may be vote-seeking. I also estimate a baseline equation as benchmark. Results are displayed in [Table VI](#), which provides separate estimates for each issue and each political party. The results of the baseline model confirm the across-subject evidence: a shift in the party’s public stance changes perceptions of the party’s underlying preferences. The

Figure 4: Across-subjects comparison. Average post-treatment party placement on immigration and the NHS with 95% confidence intervals.



NOTES: These are 0-10 issue scales. Blue dots and lines indicate evidence for the Conservative Party, while red refers to results for the Labour Party. For the issue of immigration, circles represent average placements for the “close borders” treatment group and triangles for the “open borders” one. In the case of the NHS, circles plot data for the group exposed to a “decrease funding” statement and triangles for an “increase funding” one.

coefficient for *Shift in position* in this baseline model suggests that respondents who perceive a one-unit shift between the party issue statement and its initial reputation change their opinion of where the party stands in about 0.5 units on average. The estimated impact of statements is thus substantial, which may be due in part to the fact that the post-treatment perceptions are measured closely after the statements are administered.

The effect of statements on perceptions, however, varies depending on whether the statement is perceived to be electorally motivated or not. The interaction coefficient for *Shift in position X Popular direction* is negative for both parties and both issues, suggesting that shifts towards the view shared by most voters are more heavily discounted than movements

towards less popular positions. Such differences in the magnitude of the update appear larger and are statistically significant for the Labour Party on immigration and the Conservatives on the NHS. Adding demographic and attitudinal controls to the model does not alter this finding (Table A3 in the Online Appendix).

Hence, the empirical evidence is consistent with the logic of the argument: electoral pressures to change the party brand are stronger for Labour on immigration and for the Conservative Party with respect to the NHS. In these cases it is easier for citizens to identify which type of policy rhetoric is more likely to be driven by vote-seeking incentives. To give an example, a voter is more likely to think that promising to increase NHS funding is electorally motivated if it comes from the Conservative Party than if it comes from Labour, because Labour is already seen as the party that is most clearly committed to the National Health Service.

As further evidence of discounting of vote-seeking issue stances, I re-estimate the models above but splitting the samples according to the position that the respondent thinks most citizens espouse on that issue, i.e. “restrict immigration” or “ease immigration”; “decrease NHS funding” or “increase NHS funding”. Figure 5 presents the marginal effects for the two scenarios where differential discounting is most clear: the Labour Party on immigration and the Conservative Party on the NHS. This graph provides further support for the argument that respondents are less willing to believe party rhetoric that may be electorally motivated. For individuals who view immigration controls as the most popular option, the anti-immigration statement generates smaller updates than the pro-immigration stance. As a mirror image, for participants who believe, instead, that most citizens prefer easing immigration flows, such stances generate smaller changes in perceptions than anti-immigration proposals. The difference in this second case is not statistically distinguishable from zero (p-value=0.14), probably due to the small size of this subsample. A very similar pattern also applies to perceptions of the Conservative Party’s position on the NHS. Among respon-

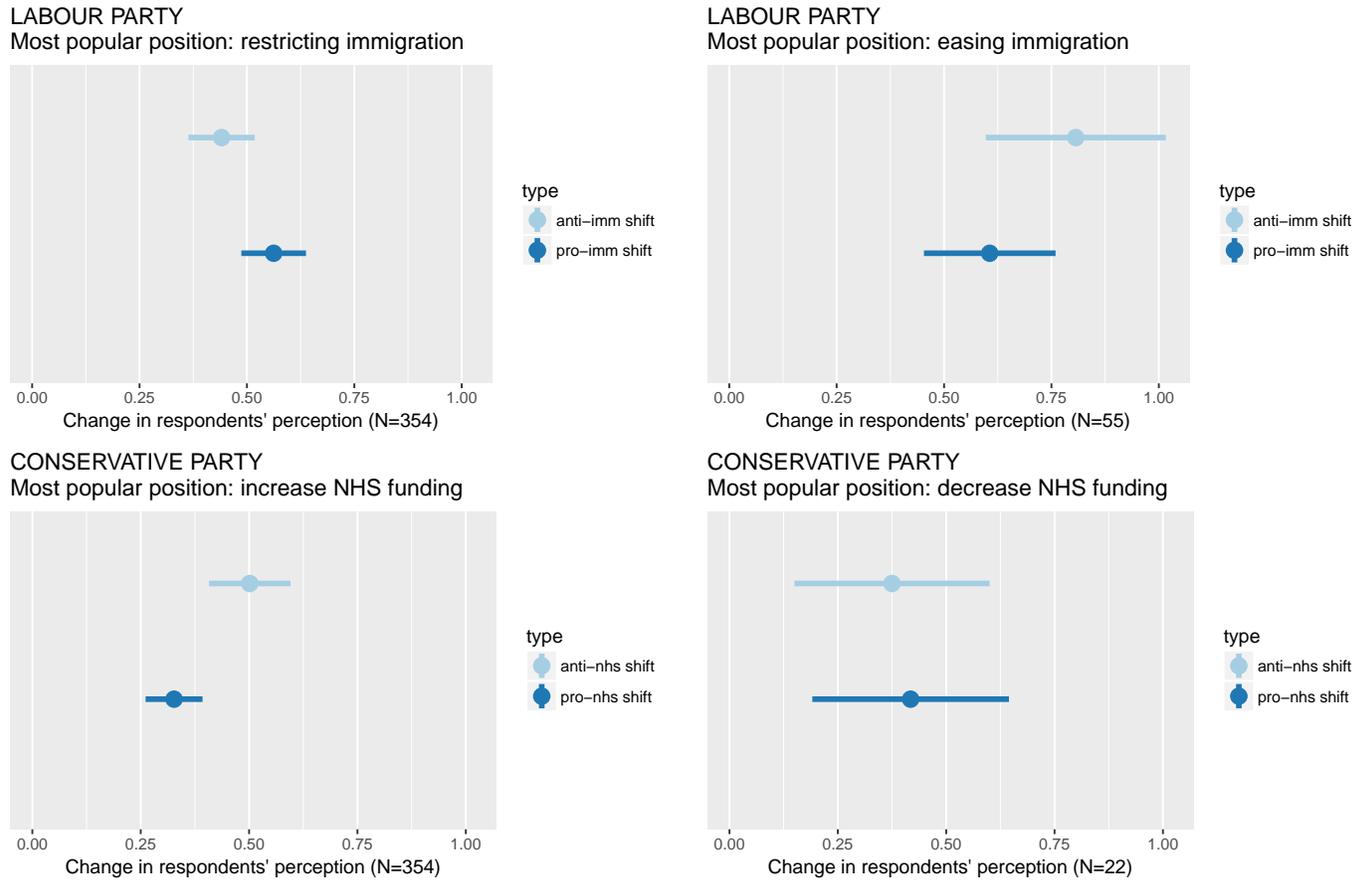
Table VI: Change in respondents’ perceptions of where the Conservative and Labour Parties stand on immigration and the NHS depending on whether the respondent perceives the policy shift to be motivated by vote-seeking incentives (“Popular direction”).

IMMIGRATION				
	CONSERVATIVE		LABOUR	
shift in position	0.5 *	0.5 *	0.6 *	0.59 *
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.02)	(0.04)
shift in position X popular direction		-0.04		-0.12 *
		(0.06)		(0.05)
R^2	0.40	0.46	0.53	0.54
N	457	319	457	330
NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE				
	CONSERVATIVE		LABOUR	
shift in position	0.4 *	0.49 *	0.55 *	0.57 *
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.05)
shift in position X popular direction		-0.17 *		-0.05
		(0.06)		(0.06)
R^2	0.38	0.39	0.53	0.56
N	406	281	406	289

NOTES: The dependent variable is the update in respondents’ placements of the Conservative and Labour parties. *Shift in position* denotes the difference between the placement of the manipulation statement and the pre-treatment placement of the party. *Popular direction* indicates that the party statement represents a shift in the direction that most voters espouse. OLS standard errors in parentheses. p-values: * < 5%

dents who agree that most voters want increases in public funding for the NHS, promises to invest more resources in this service are found less credible than announcements of spending controls. In contrast, for those who see cuts in NHS funding as the most popular option, such stances are met with more skepticism. In this case the difference is not statistically different from zero, but that is probably due to the very small size of the subsample. Taken together, the plots in [Figure 5](#) suggest that respondents exposed to the same message react differently depending on whether they think that the party stance espouses the view shared by most voters. This offers clear support for the argument that citizens are more likely to discount party rhetoric that they perceive to be electorally motivated.

Figure 5: Marginal effect of issue statements on voter perceptions depending on whether the party moves closer to the position that most citizens espouse or not.



NOTES: Graphs in the top row refer to shifts in perceptions of where the Labour Party stands on the issue of immigration flows. On the left pane, I plot estimates for respondents who consider that restricting immigration is more popular. The right one reflects estimates for those that believe that more citizens prefer the easing of immigration flows. The bottom row reports evidence on the Conservative Party vis-à-vis NHS funding. The left pane on this row displays marginal effects among those who consider that most citizens favor increases in NHS funding. Estimates for those who think that reductions in NHS funding is a more popular alternative are provided on the right pane.

External Validity

To confirm that the empirical findings can be extrapolated to the population of British adults, I replicate the analyses in [Table VI](#) applying weights to make the sample representative of the British electorate. The benchmark that I use is the pre-campaign wave of the 2010

British Election Study Panel Survey.²¹ CrowdFlower respondents are, on average, younger and more educated than the British adult population. The sample is also more ethnically diverse than the British public as a whole. These differences seem to be characteristic of online contributors: [Berinsky, Huber and Lenz \(2012\)](#) identify similar patterns among Amazon MTurk workers. To address these imbalances, I compute propensity-score based weights that denote the probability that each CrowdFlower observation would be part of a representative sample ([Rivers, 2007](#)).

The discounting of electorally motivated statements also arises in the weighted regression. The estimates are almost identical to those obtained with the unweighted CrowdFlower sample: interaction coefficients are negative, and those for the Labour Party on immigration and the Conservatives on the NHS are statistically significant. These results confirm that party statements are met with more skepticism when they are likely to be part of a vote-seeking strategy. This implies that the pattern of updating that I have found is not an artifact of using a convenience sample. Hence, the evidence in these survey experiments can be used to make inferences about the British electorate as a whole.

Implications for Party Competition

The discounting of policy shifts towards more popular positions has consequences for the capacity of political parties to redefine their issue reputations. Indeed, 86% of respondents consider that “restricting entry of new immigrants” is the most popular immigration policy alternative. This type of statement also tends to be considered as electorally motivated ([Table I](#)). Similarly, 94% of respondents identify “increases in funding for the NHS” as the most widely supported option regarding NHS policy. With these voter opinions, the

²¹Its main advantage is that it shares many demographic items with my questionnaire. [Table A1](#) in the [Online Appendix](#) compares the demographic characteristics of CrowdFlower contributors against the British Election Study sample.

Table VII: Replication of regression results in [Table VI](#) after applying weights to achieve balance on demographic characteristics with a representative sample of British voting population (British Election Study).

IMMIGRATION				
	CONSERVATIVE		LABOUR	
shift in position	0.49 *	0.52 *	0.55 *	0.58 *
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.02)	(0.04)
shift in position X popular direction		-0.06		-0.10 †
		(0.06)		(0.06)
R^2	0.41	0.47	0.52	0.53
N	451	314	451	325
weights (mean)			1	
weights (std deviation)			0.11	
NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE				
	CONSERVATIVE		LABOUR	
shift in position	0.4 *	0.50 *	0.55 *	0.56 *
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.04)
shift in position X popular direction		-0.17 *		-0.04
		(0.06)		(0.06)
R^2	0.37	0.38	0.53	0.55
N	397	277	397	286
weights (mean)			1	
weights (std deviation)			0.16	

NOTE: Normalized propensity-score based weights, obtained by merging the CrowdFlower and the 2010 British Election Study Internet pre-election samples and fitting a logit model predicting membership in the latter (the *target sample*). Dependent variable: Update in respondents placements of the Conservative and Labour parties, respectively. OLS standard errors in parentheses. p-values: * < 5% † < 10%

discounting of shifts towards the most popular policy position implies that it is harder for political parties to credibly signal that they are tough on immigration or committed to the NHS. The regression results suggest that this is particularly the case for the Labour Party on immigration and for the Conservatives on the NHS.

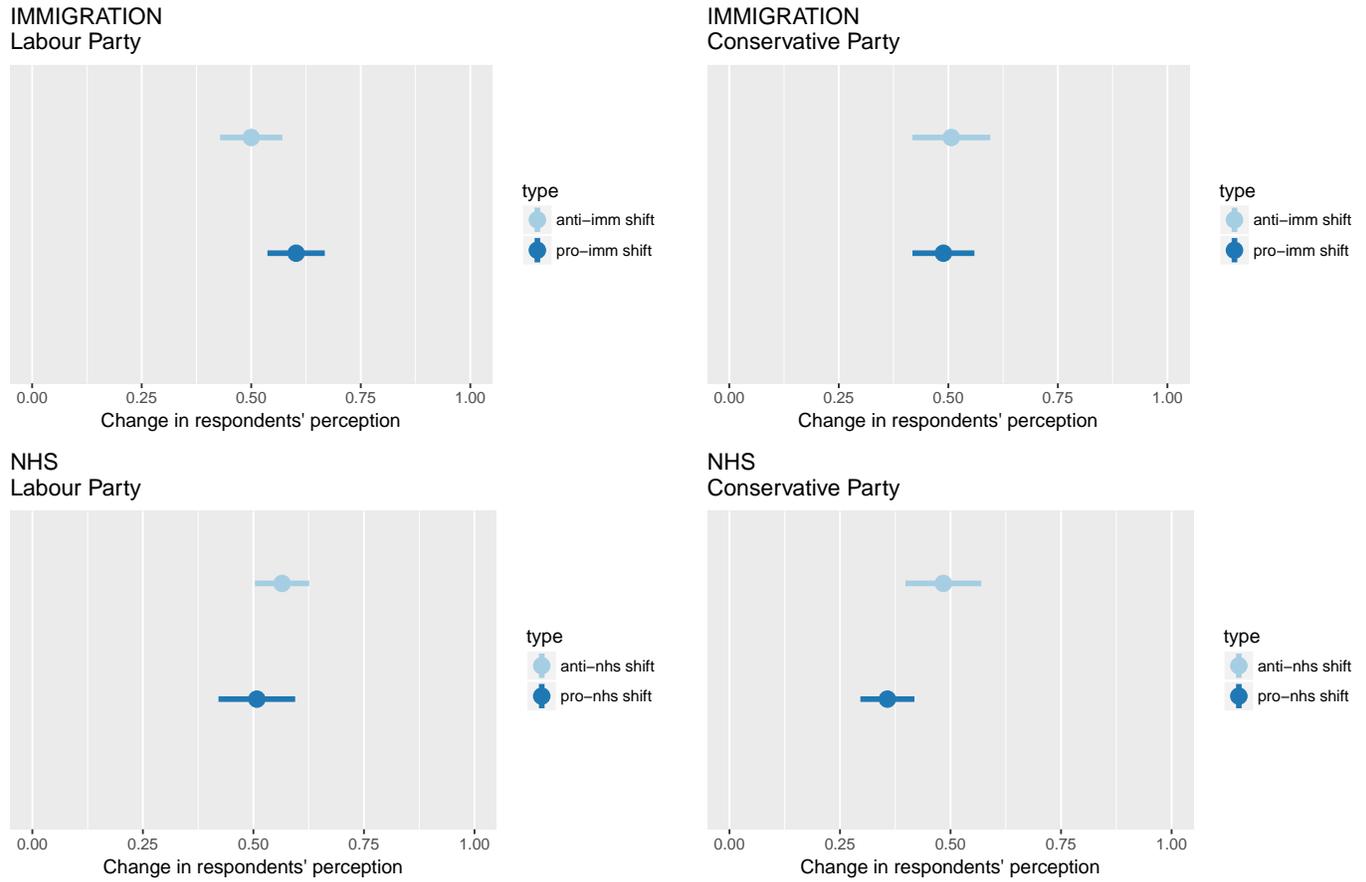
To support this conclusion, [Figure 6](#) presents the differences in the impact of party rhetoric as a function of the *direction* of the policy shift. These plotted effects are the result of estimating a regression model interacting *Shift in position* with a dummy indicating the

direction of the policy shift. These estimates provide additional evidence that voter skepticism towards vote-seeking party statements is deeper for parties that have stronger electoral incentives to change their issue reputation. The difference in the impact of pro-immigration and anti-immigration statements is not statistically significant for the Conservative party, whose brand is already in tune with voter views (see top right pane in figure 6). For the Labour Party, in contrast, who is seen as too soft on immigration, taking anti-immigration stances has a weaker effect on voter opinions on where the party stands than making pro-immigration statements (see top left pane in figure 6). Similarly, on the National Health Service, the pro-NHS Conservative statement is more heavily discounted than the anti-NHS one, making it more difficult for the Conservatives to convince voters that they support the NHS. At the same, such there is no clear difference in the impact of pro-NHS and anti-NHS Labour statements. This pattern illustrates how voter discounting of party statements makes it difficult for political parties to develop issue reputations more in tune with public preferences. As section A.2 in the [Online Appendix](#) shows, moreover, such pattern of skepticism towards messages that can yield electoral gains is not driven by respondents' partisan identifications.

Discussion

Spatial models of electoral competition represent one of the most prolific and well-known subfields in political science. Their main goal is to identify the policy position that political actors should take in order to achieve their goals, be it office, policy or otherwise ([Downs, 1957](#); [Wittman, 1973](#); [Müller and Strom, 1999](#); [Roemer, 2001](#)). The success of the spatial analysis of elections has indeed permeated media and popular accounts of candidate and party strategies during campaigns. This paper makes an important contribution to this spatial competition literature. It shows that adopting the “optimal” issue stance may not be

Figure 6: Effect of manipulation statements as a function of the direction of the policy shift. Immigration flows and funding for the NHS. Labour and Conservative parties.



NOTES: Graphs in the top row refer to shifts in perceptions of where parties stand on immigration, and those in the bottom refer to the NHS. The left column reports data for the Labour Party, and the right one for the Conservatives.

sufficient to achieve the goal. For policy shifts to have an effect on electoral outcomes, voters must change their opinions of where the party stands on the issue, and the evidence in this paper suggests precisely that voters may discount party issue statements, particularly those that can help the party obtain more votes. Hence, even if a party decides to redefine its image on an issue to attract wider electoral support and reshapes its policy rhetoric accordingly, it may face the skepticism of voters who are reluctant to believe that the party has actually changed its policy preferences.

The theoretical explanation that I propose states that citizens are aware that a party's policy proposals can be a strategic tool to attract voter support. A party may publicly defend policies that help it get elected even if it does not intend to follow through on them. Hence, making policy statements that can attract voter support need not be a credible signal of what the party actually intends to do in office. As a consequence, voters may not take party issue stances at face value. Specifically, this argument predicts that issue statements that can be electorally beneficial will be more heavily discounted by voters than unpopular policy promises. The survey experiment that I have administered to British adults, in which respondents are exposed to Labour and Conservative Party messages on immigration or the National Health Service, provides support for the argument. Making anti-immigration or pro-NHS statements, the most popular policy alternatives, tends to have a smaller influence on respondents' perceptions of where the party stands. This pattern is clearer for the party that has the strongest vote-seeking incentives to shift positions on each issue: the Labour Party on immigration and the Conservative Party on the National Health Service.

This evidence can help explain one of the main characteristics of issue ownership, its stability over time (Petrocik, 1996; Bélanger, 2003). According to recent research, the most important factor that explains why a party "owns" an issue is the fact that its perceived position reflects the views of most voters (Therriault, 2015). Hence, if voters discount policy rhetoric that could be electorally profitable, the party that holds the advantage on the issue can benefit from the fact that competitor parties will have a hard time credibly matching that same policy position. In the British context, that can help explain the long-standing issue ownership advantage of the Labour Party vis-à-vis the National Health Service.

This paper also has implications for the literature on political pandering, which explores the conditions under which a candidate or incumbent will adopt policies that are popular even if she does not think they are the appropriate ones (Canes-Wrone, Herron and Shotts, 2001; McGraw, Lodge and Jones, 2002; Che, Dessein and Kartik, 2013). Indeed, if voters

discount popular policy promises as less credible, pandering becomes a less attractive strategy for politicians. Therefore, the evidence in this paper identifies a mechanism that can limit the effectiveness of political pandering. This mechanism could help explain why pandering is less common than it could otherwise be (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000).

Also related to this paper is the work of Tomz and Van Houweling on the consequences of candidate flip-flopping, which shows that shifting positions on an issue negatively affects the candidate's valence (Tomz and Van Houweling, 2012a). The rationale for this effect is that citizens tend to consider candidates who change positions to be less principled than those who hold consistent views. According to my argument, voters discount policy stances that are likely to respond to strategic electoral motivations. Extrapolating this logic to party valence, campaigning on popular policies may signal to voters that what the party advocates is not based on well-rooted principles, but on short-term vote-seeking calculations. Hence, a natural extension of this paper would be to test whether taking policy stances that can be electorally profitable has negative consequences for the party's valence. This would help explain why politicians may openly boast about their willingness to defend unpopular policies. This also suggest an important arena of political competition between parties and candidates, that of defining whether the motivation of a politician to make a policy statement is sincere or strategic.

This paper could be complemented by future work that analyzes whether the magnitude of discounting depends on individual characteristics like age, education, or political sophistication. Future research could also test how contextual factors modulate the level of discounting of electorally-motivated issue positions. In line with the logic of my claim, it could be argued that voters' differential discounting of popular stances should be stronger when both party brands and the distribution of public preferences on the issue are well known, as this makes it easier for citizens to anticipate which policy shifts can yield electoral gains. As a mirror image, it could be tested whether discounting is weaker for issues that

are less relevant for citizens' voting decisions. This paper thus opens the way for further research on the consequences of policy rhetoric for public opinion.

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Online Appendix

A.1 Comparing CrowdFlower Respondents with a Representative Sample

Table A1 compares the demographic composition of the CrowdFlower convenience samples in the immigration and NHS surveys against a representative cross-section of the British electorate. The representative sample that I use as benchmark comes from the 2010 British Election Study (BES).²² The descriptive statistics in the table show that both CrowdFlower samples are on average younger, more educated, and more ethnically diverse than the British population as a whole. Female respondents are, however, underrepresented in the CrowdFlower samples. This is consistent with the online labor market type of recruitment into the survey, as [Berinsky, Huber and Lenz \(2012\)](#) and [Paolacci and Chandler \(2014\)](#) show with regard to Amazon MTurk workers.

I use this comparison to compute weights for the CrowdFlower observations and thus replicate the empirical model using a weighted CrowdFlower sample that mimics the distribution in the population. As described in **Table VII** in the main text, results remain unchanged in this robustness test, which suggest that the pattern I find can be extrapolated to the British population.

Table A1: Comparing the demographic characteristics of the CrowdFlower contributors against a representative sample of British voters.

	CF sample Immigration	CF sample NHS	2010 British Election Study
GENDER			
female	0.46	0.48	0.52

Continued on next page

²²Specifically, the reference I use is the (weighted) 2010 BES internet panel pre-election wave. For more information, see <http://bes2009-10.org/bes-data.php> [last accessed July 19th 2016].

	CF sample Immigration	CF sample NHS	2010 British Election Study
AGE			
18 to 25	0.30	0.25	0.11
25 to 35	0.29	0.33	0.17
35 to 45	0.20	0.21	0.18
45 to 55	0.15	0.13	0.18
55 to 65	0.04	0.06	0.23
over 65	0.02	0.01	0.12
EDUCATION			
15 or younger	0.03	0.03	0.13
16	0.11	0.16	0.23
17	0.07	0.06	0.09
18	0.18	0.21	0.13
19 or older	0.61	0.54	0.42
MARITAL STATUS			
married	0.29	0.29	0.51
living partner	0.16	0.20	0.15
separated	0.01	0.01	0.02
divorced	0.04	0.04	0.07
widowed	0.01	0.02	0.03
single	0.48	0.44	0.22
RACE			
white	0.86	0.85	0.95
mixed	0.04	0.03	0.01
Asian/Asian British	0.05	0.06	0.02
black/black British	0.03	0.03	0.01
other	0.02	0.02	0.01
REGION			
East Anglia	0.10	0.09	0.07
East Midlands	0.07	0.08	0.07
Greater London	0.16	0.12	0.12
North	0.04	0.03	0.05
North West	0.12	0.12	0.11
Northern Ireland	0.01	0.02	0.00
Scotland	0.10	0.11	0.09
South East	0.14	0.13	0.17
South West	0.07	0.07	0.09
Wales	0.06	0.03	0.05
West Midlands	0.06	0.09	0.09
Yorkshire and Humber	0.07	0.09	0.09

NOTES: Each cell represents the proportion of observations in each category. The 2010 British Election Study (BES) data refers to the pre-campaign wave of the BES Campaign Internet Panel Survey.

A.2 The Role of Partisanship

It has been shown that an individual’s partisan identification can bias her perceptions of political events and facts (Bartels, 2002). It has also been argued that the processing and acceptance of persuasive political communication depends on whether it is consistent with the individual’s political predispositions (Zaller, 1992). Hence, partisanship could affect the credibility that a respondent attributes to a party’s message and modulate the magnitude of discounting of party rhetoric. To check whether the findings in this paper are robust to partisanship differences among respondents, I estimate whether co-partisanship between the respondent and the party that delivers the message matters for the effect of the statement on the respondent’s perception.

The results in Table A2 indicate that co-partisanship does not have a clear influence on discounting of party rhetoric. The evidence in table A2 is the result of estimating an empirical model that interacts a co-partisanship dummy indicator with each term in the main equation in this paper (Equation 1):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{update} = & \beta_1 \text{ shift in position} + \beta_2 \text{ shift in position} X \text{ co-partisan} \\ & + \beta_3 \text{ shift in position} X \text{ popular direction} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{ shift in position} X \text{ popular direction} X \text{ co-partisan} + \varepsilon \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Just like in Equation 1, *Update* indicates the change in the respondents perception of where the party stands after observing the party’s statement. *Shift in position* denotes the perceived shift in the party’s policy stance, defined as the difference between the party’s initial issue reputation and the position conveyed in the issue message. *Popular direction* is a dummy variable that indicates whether the shift captured in *Shift in position* is in the direction of the policy alternative that most voters espouse. Lastly, *Co-partisan* is an indicator that the author of the message is the party that the respondent identifies with.

In this framework, β_1 and $\beta_1 + \beta_3$ indicate the effect of unpopular and popular statements, respectively, among respondents that are not co-partisans. Then β_2 and β_4 denote how co-partisanship modifies the effect of unpopular and popular messages, respectively.

According to [Table A2](#), the effect of party messages among non-co-partisans conforms to the theoretical argument. Messages that have a higher chance of being motivated by electoral incentives generate smaller changes in voter opinions than those espousing unpopular positions. This is shown by the negative sign of the interaction coefficient *shift X popular direction* in all models. Such discounting is larger and statistically significant in scenarios where the party faces stronger pressures to rebrand: the Labour Party on immigration and the Conservatives on the NHS. Co-partisanship, on the other hand, seems to play no clear role in respondents’ opinions. The modifying effect of being a co-partisan on the propensity to change the opinion of where the party stands, captured by the *shift X co-partisan* and *shift X popular direction X co-partisan* coefficients is never statistically distinguishable from zero, and the sign of the point estimates is not consistent across parties or issues. Hence, it appears that respondents’ partisan affiliations are not driving factor behind the pattern of discounting reported in the main text.

A.3 Robustness Check: Adding Demographic and Attitudinal Controls

[Table A3](#) reports the results of estimating the regression model in [Equation 1](#) but adding several attitudinal and demographic indicators as control variables. Therefore, the benchmark of comparison is the model without control variables reported in [Table VI](#). As can be seen, including covariates like education, party identification, age, or gender does not affect the empirical pattern observed in the main text: respondents discount statements that es-

Table A2: Partisanship as conditioning variable. Top pane: regulation of immigration flows. Bottom pane: government funding of the National Health Service.

IMMIGRATION				
	CONSERVATIVE		LABOUR	
shift	0.52 *	0.55 *	0.52 *	0.59 *
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.05)
shift \times co-partisan	-0.05	-0.07	0.11	-0.02
	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.06)	(0.10)
shift \times popular direction		-0.06		-0.17 *
		(0.07)		(0.07)
shift \times popular direction \times co-partisan		0.01		0.18
		(0.17)		(0.13)
R^2	0.43	0.47	0.52	0.52
N	427	298	427	312

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE				
	CONSERVATIVE		LABOUR	
shift	0.41 *	0.52 *	0.61 *	0.63 *
	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.03)	(0.04)
shift \times co-partisan	0.01	-0.02	-0.08	-0.13
	(0.07)	(0.11)	(0.06)	(0.07)
shift \times popular direction		-0.17 *		-0.07
		(0.07)		(0.07)
shift \times popular direction \times co-partisan		-0.06		0.22
		(0.17)		(0.17)
R^2	0.40	0.42	0.56	0.58
N	379	263	379	272

NOTE: Dependent variable: Update in respondents placements of the Conservative and Labour parties, respectively. *Shift* denotes the difference between the placement of the manipulation statement and the pre-treatment placement of the party. *Popular direction* indicates that the party statement represents a shift in the direction that most voters espouse. Finally, *Co-partisan* identifies respondents who share partisan affiliation with the political party in question, Labour or Conservative. OLS standard errors in parentheses. p-values: * < 5%

pouse the most popular position on the issue. This is particularly the case for Labour on immigration and for the Conservative Party on the NHS.

Table A3: Replication of the analysis reported in [Table VI](#) but adding demographic and attitudinal control variables. Top pane: regulation of immigration flows. Bottom pane: government funding of the National Health Service.

IMMIGRATION				
	CONSERVATIVE		LABOUR	
shift in position	0.5 *	0.5 *	0.6 *	0.62 *
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.05)
shift in position X popular direction		-0.07		-0.15 *
		(0.08)		(0.05)
CONTROLS	YES	YES	YES	YES
R^2	0.45	0.51	0.56	0.57
N	454	317	454	328
NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE				
	CONSERVATIVE		LABOUR	
shift in position	0.4 *	0.5 *	0.56 *	0.57 *
	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.03)	(0.05)
shift in position X popular direction		-0.19 *		-0.01
		(0.09)		(0.1)
CONTROLS	YES	YES	YES	YES
R^2	0.42	0.45	0.56	0.59
N	398	279	398	288

NOTES. Included as control variables are: Age, Gender, Education, Party Identification. The dependent variable is the update in respondents' placements of the Conservative and Labour parties. *Shift in position* denotes the difference between the placement of the manipulation statement and the pre-treatment placement of the party. *Popular direction* indicates that the party statement represents a shift in the direction that most voters espouse. OLS standard errors in parentheses. p-values: * < 5%

A.4 Alternative Empirical Model

This section presents an alternative test of the theoretical argument, one in which all predictors in the empirical model are measured using survey items placed *before* the treatment. The model in the main text ([Equation 1](#)), in contrast, relies on two indicators that are measured post-treatment: the respondent's interpretation of the party statement and her

belief about the issue position that most voters favor. To address the potential endogeneity in these indicators (Montgomery, Nyhan and Torres, 2016), here I evaluate the argument with a model that only uses items measured before the treatment, i.e. the respondent’s prior perception and the treatment group that she is assigned to:

$$|update| = \beta_1 max_potential_update + \beta_2 max_potential_update X anti-immigration-treatment + \varepsilon \quad (3)$$

The outcome variable $|update|$ indicates the change in the respondent’s perception of where the party stands on the issue, expressed in absolute magnitude. $max_potential_update$ refers to the maximum potential change in the respondent’s perception that the statement could produce, also measured in absolute magnitude. For a respondent that places the party initially at position 3 on immigration and is then exposed to a pro-immigration statement, this variable equals 7, i.e. the absolute difference between the most pro-immigration position —10— and the initial perception. Instead, if the same respondent is given an anti-immigration statement, this variable takes the value of 3, i.e. the distance between 0 —the most anti-immigration position— and the prior. Lastly, $anti-immigration-treatment$ is a dummy variable that indicates whether the respondent has been exposed to an anti-immigration statement or not.

The equation in this alternative approach models the effect of the treatment as a proportion of the maximum possible change in opinions. Specifically, the proportion of the update is captured by β_1 when the respondent is exposed to a pro-immigration message and by $\beta_1 + \beta_2$ if the statement is anti-immigration. Since anti-immigration statements are more likely to be electorally motivated, the theoretical argument predicts that β_2 will be negative. The same expectation holds regarding updates about the position on the National Health Service: in this case the equation substitutes the indicator $pro-NHS-treatment$ for

anti-immigration-treatment and since pro-NHS statements are also more likely to be vote-seeking, β_2 should also be negative. Note also that, by defining the treatment effect as a proportion of the maximum potential update, this model also explicitly takes into account ceiling and floor effects: it assumes that the same party statement will produce changes in perceptions of different magnitudes depending on the respondent’s initial opinion.

Table A4 presents the regression results of estimating Equation 3 for both immigration —top pane— and the NHS —bottom pane—. These results show that party statements espousing unpopular positions produce a change in respondents perceptions roughly equal to one third of the maximum potential update, as captured by the *max potential update* coefficients. Crucially, there is also evidence that messages that are likely to be electorally motivated have a smaller impact on opinions. The interaction coefficient is negative for both parties vis-a-vis immigration policy, suggesting that anti-immigration stances are more heavily discounted by voters, and this difference is larger and statistically significant for Labour, the party that faces the strongest incentives to develop a tough-on-immigration reputation. Results for NHS policy are also in line with the argument, although the evidence is weaker. For the Labour party, the interaction coefficient is not statistically different from zero. For the Conservatives, the party that is most pressured to change its perceived position on this issue, the interaction is negative and therefore the point estimate for the effect of pro-NHS statements is smaller than for anti-NHS messages, but such difference does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance (two-tailed p-value of 0.1).

Figure A1 provides an intuitive representation of the regression results. It plots the marginal effect of issue statements for each issue and each party. As can be seen, pro-immigration stances tend to generate larger shifts, and the difference is statistically significant for Labour. The estimated impact of Conservative anti-NHS messages is also higher than that of pro-NHS ones, although in this case the difference is not statistically distinguishable from zero. The null hypothesis cannot be rejected for Labour NHS-related assertions

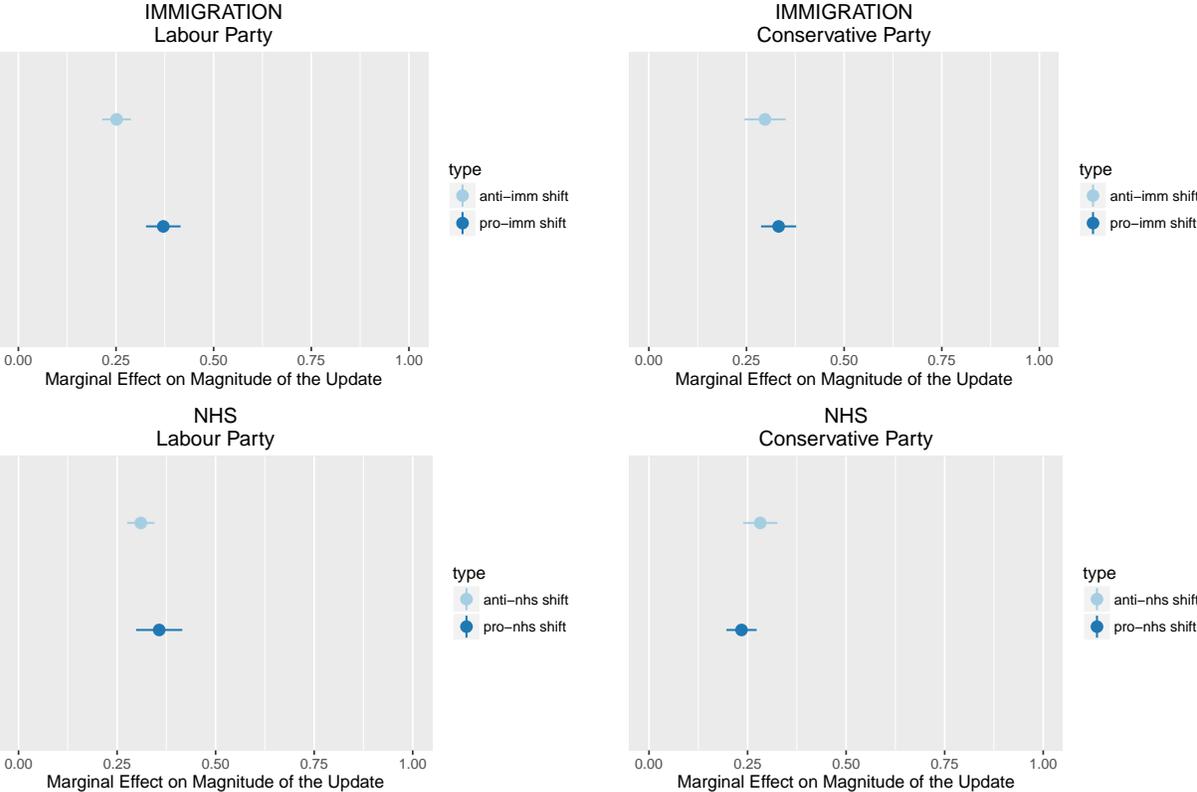
either. Taken together, these results by and large replicate the pattern discussed in the main text: party rhetoric adopting popular issue stances tends to be less consequential for voters' opinions of where a party stands. As a consequence, we can conclude that the neither the use of post-treatment survey items nor the presence ceiling and floor effects explain the pattern of updating reported in the main text.

Table A4: The effect of party statements on changes in perceptions of party positions. Top pane: regulation of immigration flows. Bottom pane: government funding of the National Health Service.

IMMIGRATION		
	CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR
max potential update	0.33 * (0.02)	0.37 * (0.02)
max potential update X anti-immigration treatment	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.12 * (0.03)
R^2	0.42	0.5
N	457	457
NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE		
	CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR
max potential update	0.28 * (0.02)	0.31 * (0.02)
max potential update X pro-NHS treatment	-0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)
R^2	0.43	0.53
N	408	408

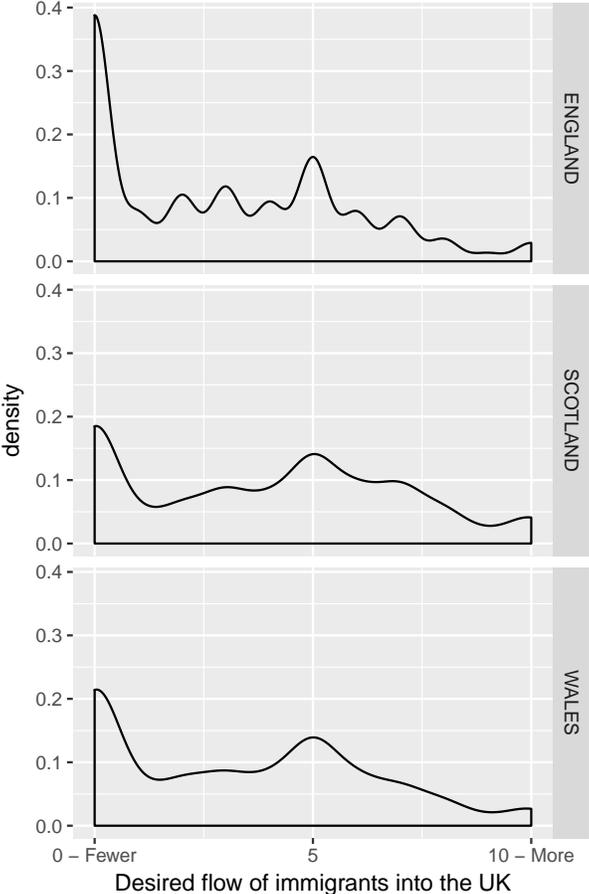
NOTE: Dependent variable: change in perceptions before and after the respondent is exposed to a party issue statement, expressed in absolute magnitude. OLS standard errors in parentheses. p-values: * < 5% † < 10%

Figure A1: The effect of party statements on the changes in respondents' opinions, expressed in absolute magnitude. Marginal effects and 95% confidence intervals. Immigration flows and investment in the National Health Service, Conservative and Labour parties.



A.5 Public Opinion on Immigration: Further Details

Figure A2: Public opinion on immigration flows into the UK, by country in Great Britain.



NOTES: The data source is the British Election Study Internet Panel, wave 7. Kernel Density Plot.

A.6 Appearance of Questionnaire Items in the Survey Experiment

Figure A3: Questionnaire item capturing respondents' pre-treatment perceptions of where parties stand on the issue. Example: Conservative Party on the issue of government regulation of immigration flows.

What do you think the **Conservative Party** would do on immigration? Use the same 0 to 10 scale below, where:

0 means that they would close borders for new immigrants

10 means that they would open borders for new immigrants

0 CLOSE BORDERS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 OPEN BORDERS
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Figure A4: Manipulation check. Respondents are asked to evaluate the meaning of the party statement and place it on the immigration issue scale.

Let's look again at this statement recently made by a prominent politician:

"The number of migrants we are seeing is far higher than our local authorities, our schools and our hospitals can cope with. So many people, so fast, is placing real burdens on our public services."

What do you think this statement means? Use the 0-10 scale below, where

0 means that the government should close borders for new immigrants and

10 means that the government should open borders for new immigrants

0 CLOSE BORDERS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 OPEN BORDERS
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NOTES: Example of manipulation check for a Conservative Party statement reflecting an anti-immigration stance.

Figure A5: Opinion about the position that most British citizens espouse. Immigration flows. Screenshot.

Irrespective of your own opinion on the issue of **immigration**, what do you think is **the view that most British citizens espouse?**

(a) that government should **restrict entry** of new immigrants.

(b) that government should **ease entry** of new immigrants

(a) restrict entry new immigrants

Don't know

(b) ease entry new immigrants