

# And Yet It Moves: The Effect of Election Platforms on Party Policy Images

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the effect of parties' election statements on voter perceptions of party policy positions. It reveals robust evidence that campaign policy announcements do influence party images: As a result of the campaign, party policy brands shift in the direction of the platform. Hence, it challenges the conclusion in Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu that voters do not adjust their perception of parties' positions to campaign statements. This article makes a key contribution to our understanding of elections, as it provides empirical evidence that election campaigns are useful for voters to identify changes in parties' policy preferences. It also opens avenues for further research that the results in Adams et al. had discouraged from, such as analyses of the factors that explain *variation* in the relevance of campaign statements.

## Keywords

party policy images, party manifestos, election campaigns, left–right, Western Europe, spatial models of party competition

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## Introduction

Can political parties use their campaign statements to influence election outcomes? Spatial models of elections typically assume that electoral outcomes depend on the distribution of voter policy preferences and voters' expectations about the policy that each party would implement if elected for office. Hence, as long as voter preferences remain constant, changes in election results are driven by shifts in voter perceptions of party positions. According to this approach, campaign platforms constitute the main tool that parties have to induce voters to revise their perception of parties' policy preferences. Indeed, spatial models commonly assume that the policy voters expect from a party equates the policy announced in its campaign platform. Yet the decisive theoretical role given to election platforms contrasts with the limited empirical knowledge we have about their actual relevance for election outcomes.

This article addresses this imbalance by estimating the effect of campaign statements on voter policy expectations. It provides robust empirical evidence that election platforms induce (small) changes in voter perceptions of party positions. As a result of the campaign, the perceived party left–right position shifts in the direction of the election platform. Even though the magnitude of this shift is limited, it may be decisive for electoral outcomes. Therefore, campaign declarations constitute an effective tool that parties can use to reposition in the policy space and thereby attempt to improve their election prospects.

The empirical evidence that I recover calls into question the conclusion reached in an influential paper written by Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu (2011). These authors found no empirical association between changes in the content of party manifestos and shifts in party policy reputations. They thus concluded that election platforms do not lead voters to update their perceptions of party policy positions.<sup>1</sup> I show that the disconnect between elite discourse and voter reactions that these authors find is actually an artifact of the empirical model that they use.

The empirical analyses in this article contribute to our understanding of the role of election campaigns, showing that voters make use of party election statements to infer the policy position of political parties. Voters can therefore identify changes in party policy stances, adjust their party evaluations and eventually their voting choice. This article thus addresses the troubling questions about mass–elite linkages that Adams et al. raised. Their result that voters do not respond to shifts in party positions had alarming implications for the dynamic policy representation between voters and parties. My article

offers a more reassuring conclusion: Voters learn about parties' policy offerings from election campaigns and therefore these contribute to the capacity of voters to select politicians.

My findings are especially relevant for opposition parties. To a larger extent than incumbents, opposition parties rely on policy *declarations* to signal a change in their policy position. Being out of office, they do not have (as much) access to those *actions* that have been shown to have an effect on party reputations, like implemented policies, legislation passed, or the decision to enter a coalition government (Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013; Grynaviski, 2010; Woon & Pope, 2008). The empirical evidence that I report shows that campaign policy declarations are an effective tool to signal a move in the policy space. More generally, this article argues that campaigns are not *cheap-talk*, and therefore we are not in the setting modeled by Kalandrakis (2009) and Kalandrakis and Spirling (2012), where parties in opposition cannot credibly communicate to voters that their policy preferences have shifted and whose only chance of regaining office is to wait until the incumbent party implements an unpopular policy.

Another relevant implication of this article is that it reconciles two bodies of the empirical literature on party competition. The lack of correlation between platforms and voter evaluations of party positions that Adams et al. reported is puzzling given the growing evidence that parties behave *as if* platforms were consequential for voter policy expectations.<sup>2</sup> By showing that platforms do have an impact on party policy images, the findings of this article solve this puzzle: Our knowledge about the determinants of parties' campaign statements is now consistent with the evidence regarding their effectiveness.

The conclusion of this article also opens avenues for new research that the results in Adams et al. (2011) had previously discouraged. According to these authors, while voter evaluations of parties are relevant for election outcomes, party declarations are not consequential for voter evaluations. Hence, their conclusion suggests refocusing the center of attention away from election platforms into other sources of information that voters may rely on to form beliefs about party positions. Yet the evidence that I report reactivates the prospects for further research on the role of campaign statements. Indeed, while this article estimates the *overall* effect of campaign statements, substantial research remains to be done about the factors that explain *variation* in the effectiveness of election platforms to signal shifts in party positions. To give some examples, it may be argued that both the position of election statements and contextual factors condition the magnitude of the impact of campaign declarations. In fact, in a current project, I examine whether extreme platforms are more informative for voters than centrist ones (Fernandez-Vazquez, 2013). Another intriguing question is whether, after a change in a

party's leadership, voters are more willing to use the election platform to revise their evaluation of the party's policy position. These projects lie beyond the scope of this article, however.

The empirical strategy that I follow is similar to the one employed by Adams et al. (2011). Focusing on West-European party systems during the period 1971-2010, I build a party-level longitudinal data set with information on voters' perceptions of party left-right positions and the content of parties' campaign statements and party policy reputations. I measure voter perceptions as the average left-right position attributed to a party by survey respondents in national post-election studies. I employ the Manifesto Project codings of party election manifestos as *proxies* for the left-right emphasis of party campaign statements. The main difference between this study and Adams et al. (2011) lies in the choice of empirical model. A more detailed discussion of the differences between both models is presented below.

The pattern of empirical results that I report is not sensitive to several robustness checks. I replicate the analysis restricting the attention to the subsample of parties in opposition in order to minimize the risk of endogeneity bias. Voters may obtain information about party policy preferences from sources other than campaign declarations. These alternative signals about parties may act as unobserved confounders in the relationship between platforms and voter perceptions. According to the extant literature, however, these alternative sources of information about parties refer for the most part to incumbent *actions*. Therefore, focusing the analysis on parties that are out of office palliates the omitted variable bias problem. Besides this sensitivity analysis, the online supplementary materials to this article report the results of estimating the model using alternative scalings of manifesto data as well as different estimators. In all cases, the substantive conclusion is the same: Following an election campaign, voter perceptions of party policy positions shift in the direction of the campaign platform.<sup>3</sup>

This article is organized as follows. The next section summarizes what we know about the determinants and consequences of party platform choice and provides an overview of recent studies that have analyzed the impact of party actions on party policy brands. It is followed by a discussion of the empirical model that I estimate and a justification of its merits relative to those in previous studies. A description of the data sources is also provided. The ensuing sections present the empirical findings of the study. Finally, I summarize the contribution of this article and suggest some avenues for further research. The appendix to this article provides a technical discussion of the differences between my empirical model and the one estimated in Adams et al. (2011) and reports the list of the party-year observations included in the empirical analyses.

## Theory

In recent years, a growing body of empirical evidence has analyzed the electoral strategies followed by political parties, with a focus on multiparty systems. Explicitly or implicitly, these studies have adopted the logic of spatial models of party competition. The goal has been to assess whether parties' dynamic choices of election platform support the comparative statics predictions that emanate from these models. On the whole, the conclusion that emerges is that party strategic behavior in elections is consistent with the predictions of spatial models of elections.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, it has been shown that changes in the competitive environment, like shifts in public preferences (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2004, 2006; Ezrow, de Vries, Steenbergen, & Edwards, 2011), past election results (Somer-Topcu, 2009), or rival parties' spatial movements (Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009), lead to shifts in party campaign positions that are in line with theoretical expectations.

We thus have evidence that parties adjust their election platforms in response to the incentives identified by spatial models. They behave *as if* these policy declarations were consequential for voter perceptions of where parties stand. Yet Adams et al. (2011) report that there is no evidence that campaign platforms alter parties' policy images. Interestingly, follow-up work to Adams et al. (2011) has shown that voter perceptions of party positions shift in parallel with changes in expert evaluations of party policy preferences (Adams, Ezrow, & Somer-Topcu, 2012), suggesting that voters do learn about changes in party policy stances.

Indeed, election platforms are not the only factor that may explain the evolution of parties' policy images. Certain party actions might provide voters with hints that the policy position of a party has changed. Policies implemented from office are perhaps the most informative signal about party positions. While campaign announcements may be accused of mere "posturing," the product of opportunism or, more generally, *cheap-talk*, government decisions generate public policy outcomes with specific winners and losers. Unfortunately, there is no systematic analysis of the relationship between government policy output and incumbent party policy image. This absence is likely due to the lack of comparable data on the overall spatial position of implemented policies.<sup>5</sup>

The composition of government coalitions may also be a source of information about parties' policy preferences. A robust finding in the literature on government formation is that the policy position of potential coalition partners is a relevant predictor of the cabinet that ultimately emerges. All else equal, parties tend to prefer parties with closer policy profiles as cabinet bedfellows (Martin & Stevenson, 2001).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the choice of coalition

partners may be a signal of a party's policy inclinations. Indeed, Fortunato and Stevenson (2013) have shown that decisions to form a coalition lead voters to reevaluate their perceptions of parties' policy images: The perceived left-right policy distance between two parties decreases once these parties agree to unite forces into a coalition government.

Parties' legislative behavior is also responsible for changes in party policy images. Focusing on the U.S. House of Representatives, Grynaviski (2010) provides evidence that the distance between the Democratic and Republican policy images is responsive to the legislative record that members of each party keep in Congress. These perceived policy positions, in turn, have consequences for the electoral prospects of congressional candidates (Woon & Pope, 2008). Even though no similar study has been done in Western European systems, the finding in Carey (2009) that parliamentary systems witness high levels of within-party legislative voting unity could be interpreted to mean that the signal provided by roll-call voting is strong in most countries of this region.

The picture that emerges from this set of results is that party actions may inform voters about the policy preferences of political parties. It could be argued that this finding helps address the intriguing results in Adams et al. (2011) by showing that, even if not to their policy declarations, party policy images are at least responsive to some aspects of party *behavior*. However, this argument has one limitation. The range of party actions that have been shown to influence party policy images belong to the toolbox of incumbent parties, but not so much to that of parties in opposition.<sup>7</sup> By definition, parties that are out of office cannot signal their policy position through the policies that are implemented or through the choice of coalition partners. Admittedly, parties in opposition can build a legislative record. However, whenever the incumbent enjoys a parliamentary majority—be it single-party or coalition-based—the voting pattern of opposition parties may be considered as *cheap-talk* because their votes may often fail to be consequential in public policy terms.

The paradox is thus unresolved. On the one hand, parties use their campaign declarations to reposition in the policy space. On the other, there is no evidence of the mediating mechanism: changes in election manifestos are seemingly unrelated to the evolution of party policy images. As I discuss below, the empirical results of this article, by showing that campaign platforms contribute to shape policy images, provide the missing piece of this jigsaw puzzle.

## The Model

To evaluate the effect of party campaign statements on voter perceptions, I model the post-election party policy image as the result of two factors, the

election platform and the information voters already had about the party, summarized in the pre-campaign party reputation. Specifically, I define a party's policy brand after an election as a convex combination of the platform and the policy image before the campaign. The equation that I estimate in the empirical analyses is the following:

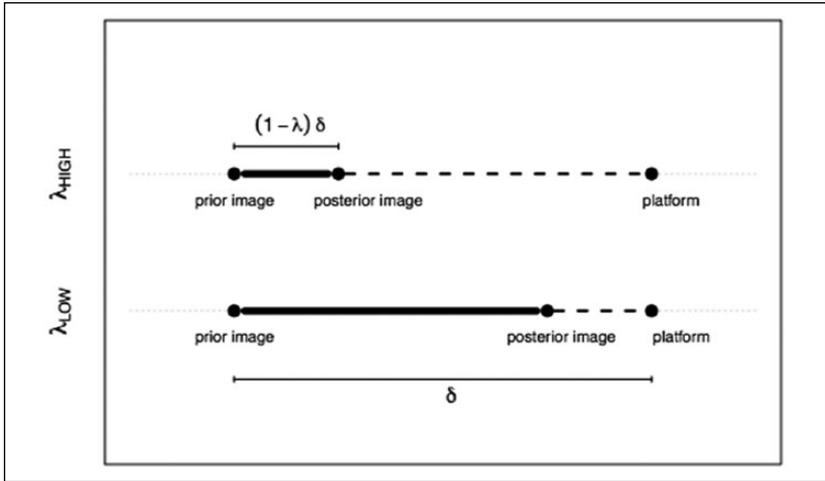
$$policy\_image_t = \lambda policy\_image_{t-1} + (1 - \lambda) platform_t. \quad (1)$$

A party's policy image after an election (*policy\_image<sub>t</sub>*) is thus defined as a weighted average of the policy brand before the campaign season, *policy\_image<sub>t-1</sub>*, and the position stated in the election platform (*platform<sub>t</sub>*), where the relative weight of each factor is determined by the  $\lambda$  parameter. Substantively, this model implies that the post-election policy image lies between the initial party brand and the policy stance the party ran on in the campaign. The precise position depends on the value of the  $\lambda$  parameter. The lower it is, the closer the final perceived position to the platform. Hence,  $\lambda$  measures the persistence in policy images over time. Its complement,  $(1 - \lambda)$ , describes the election platform contribution to the policy brand.

In other words,  $(1 - \lambda)$  defines the weight of the campaign declaration relative to the degree of continuity in party reputations over time. This model therefore assumes that  $\lambda$  is bounded between 0 and 1. Given this assumption, by construction  $(1 - \lambda)$  also takes a value between 0 and 1 and their sum must equal 1. In the empirical analyses, both the coefficient for the initial reputation and the election platform will be estimated with and without such constraint, which allows to test whether this assumption holds.

Even though Equation 1 takes variables in levels, this approach allows evaluating how much policy images change as a result of party repositioning. Following the election policy declaration, the policy brand shifts in the direction of the stated policy position in a proportion equal to  $(1 - \lambda)$ . In other words, the absolute change in a party's perceived position is equal to  $(1 - \lambda)$  times the distance between the initial policy image and the stated position. Therefore, the coefficient for *platform* denotes the magnitude, in proportion, of the change in policy image.

Figure 1 provides an illustration by considering two possible scenarios, one with a strong continuity in party brands,  $\lambda_{\text{HIGH}}$ , and another with a weaker one,  $\lambda_{\text{LOW}}$ . Fixing the initial party brand and the campaign position, it compares the resulting post-election policy image: with a high value of  $\lambda$ , the induced party policy brand remains close to the initial perceived position. For a low  $\lambda$ , instead, the party brand almost fully adjusts to the new campaign position.



**Figure 1.** The shift in left–right policy image as a function of  $\lambda$ .

*Prior image* and *posterior image* denote the pre- and post-campaign policy brands, respectively.  $\delta$  represents the distance between the pre-campaign policy image and the election announcement. The shift induced by the campaign platform is equal to  $(1 - \lambda)\delta$ .

The empirical analyses below will determine whether election platforms are able to pull party policy images toward them. A positive and statistically significant coefficient for  $platform_t$  will provide evidence that party brands are responsive to campaign declarations. The larger the coefficient is, the stronger the impact. The empirical results will thus reveal how effective campaign statements are at inducing a spatial reconfiguration of party positions.

The empirical model that I adopt in this article diverges from the one employed in Adams et al. (2011). While Equation 1 defines a model in *levels*—the current party policy image as a function of the campaign declaration and the prior image—Adams et al. estimate a model in *first-differences*. They analyze whether *shifts* in election platforms lead to *adjustments* in voter perceptions of party positions. Their estimation approach, effectively gauging the influence of party repositioning on changes in party policy brands, yields results that are easy to interpret. However appealing, their strategy is not well suited to study the stable party systems of Western Europe, where parties are quite consistent in their policy offerings, belong to policy-based party families and, in most cases, have a long history of presence in the political arena. In such a setting, voters have had a chance to develop quite clear notions of what each party stands for before observing the election platform. Thus, changes in parties' policy images are likely to only occur in the margin. These

small changes may be decisive for election outcomes, but they render inadequate a first-differences approach. The consistency over time in both election platforms and voter perceptions ensures that these variables, measured in one-period changes, contain very little substantive variation. In fact, in Adams et al.'s (2011) data, the correlation coefficient between the current policy image and its one-period lag is as high as .98, while that for manifesto content is .82. Therefore, with a model in first-differences, it is unlikely to find a statistically significant relationship between platforms and policy images, even if such an association exists.

By estimating a model in levels rather than in first-differences, my approach does away with the problem of lack of variation in the main variables of the model. It also has the advantage of parsimony: I model party policy images as a function of two factors: memory and new information. The latter is conveyed by the election platform, while the former is captured by the perceived position before the campaign, which summarizes the previous experiences with the party. In fact, the model in Equation 1 is nested within that in Adams et al. (2011), which includes further lags of both main predictors. Parsimony does *not* come at the expense of lower explanatory power, however: As described in the appendix, an *F* test indicates that the additional assumptions that I introduce are not restrictive.

Beyond pragmatic considerations, modeling perceptions as the result of memory and new information reflects the nature of the empirical problem at hand: that of estimating how voters incorporate the content of the election platform into their belief about the party's policy position. In fact, defining evaluations as a mixture of new and past information is common in the political science literature. It is present in those studies that use Bayesian updating to model the dynamics of political attitudes, such as party identification (Achen, 2002), perceptions of incumbent performance (Bartels, 2002), or candidate evaluations (Bartels, 1993). Indeed, under quite general conditions, Bayes' rule implies that the current best guess about an uncertain event is a weighted average of the prior knowledge and the new information. Bayesian updating models are nested within Kalman filters, a type of dynamic process that has also been used to understand voter attitude changes (Gerber & Green, 1998).<sup>8</sup> At the aggregate level, public opinion trends have also been approached as a process that combines memory and current events (Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson, 2002).<sup>9</sup> Within the field of electoral competition, Enelow and Munger (1993) propose a formal model of elections in which voter policy expectations from each candidate are a weighted average of the previous and the current policy stance. The existing experimental evidence lends support to this assumption: In a study of voter reactions to changes in candidates' policy stances, Tomz and Van Houweling (2012) show that the

policy respondents expect from candidates is located somewhere in between the initial position and the current one.

Given the growing evidence that parties behave *as if* campaign declarations had an effect on policy brands, I expect the data to show that policy announcements bring about changes in party brands. Due to the stability of Western European party systems, this impact is likely to be limited, however. This expectation diverges from the conclusion in Adams et al. (2011), which is substantively equivalent to finding that the coefficient for  $platform_i$  is equal to zero and that parameter for  $policy\_image_i$  is equal to one. The reason why I expect different results in this study does not rest on a different choice of data. As described in the next section, the data that I use are an extension of the data set originally used in Adams et al. and the results are robust to restricting the estimation to the subset of cases considered by these authors. The point that I wish to make is that the cause of their null finding is no other than their choice of empirical strategy.

## Data

To estimate the parameters in Equation 1, I have constructed a time-series cross-sectional data set with indicators of party policy images and election platform positions for Western European parties during the period 1971-2010.

To measure post-campaign left-right party policy images, I use survey data coming from country-specific election studies conducted immediately after a parliamentary election. The perceived party position is captured by the average left-right location attributed to the party. The vast majority of these surveys use a 0-10 left-right scale. Whenever this was not the case, I have rescaled the data so that it became equivalent.<sup>10</sup> The source of most election surveys is the *European Voter Database* (EVD), a collection of Western European national election studies.<sup>11</sup> I have expanded the database to include recent elections that were not part of the original data.<sup>12</sup> In addition, I have incorporated a series of Spanish election surveys between 1986 and 2008. Table 1 summarizes the countries and time periods that these election studies cover.

I use the Manifesto Project's *rile* index, which measures the left-right tone of party manifestos, as indicator of the policy position of campaign platforms.<sup>13</sup> Election manifestos are written policy statements released by political parties in the run up to the election. Granted, the vast majority of voters do not read these documents. Therefore, these codings should be understood as *proxies* for the policy-relevant information that voters received during a campaign. Indeed, the qualitative evidence reported in Adams et al. (2011)

**Table 1.** Countries and Time Periods Included in the Empirical Analyses.

Country	Time period	Number of elections	Number of parties
Sweden	1979-2006	9	7
The Netherlands	1971-2006	12	4
Norway	1977-2001	7	7
Germany	1976-2009	10	5
Great Britain	1983-2010	7	3
Denmark	1994-2007	5	9
Spain	1986-2008	7	3

indicates that these documents inform the policy content of the campaign messages that parties broadcast to the general public.

The *rile* index is elaborated by the Manifesto Project following the division of the text into “quasi-sentences” and their coding into different issue categories, some of which are considered as defining either a left or a right ideology. The left–right tone of the manifesto is estimated by subtracting the percentage of left-leaning quasi-sentences from right-leaning ones. Specifically, *rile* is defined as

$$rile = \frac{r - l}{r + l + n} \cdot 100,$$

where *r* indicates the number of mentions to right categories, *l* is the number of left quasi-sentences and *n* designates the number of mentions to neutral categories. A detailed description of the elaboration of the indicator can be found in Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, and Budge (2006, chap. 1). The indicator ranges from –100 (only left quasi-sentences) to 100 (only right quasi-sentences).<sup>14</sup> I have rescaled the *rile* estimates so that they take values in the 0-10 interval, the same scale as the survey-based perceived party positions.

The Manifesto Project is unique in the scope of its data collection effort. It provides time-series estimates on the policy content of election manifestos for a large number of countries. It currently covers 55 countries since the first democratic elections held after 1945. Unsurprisingly, these data have been very vastly used in the literature (Benoit, Laver, & Mikhaylov, 2009). This is particularly the case of the *rile* index. Indeed, *rile* is the workhorse of the studies that have analyzed party spatial election strategies, including those cited in the “Theory” section.

The supplementary materials to this article include several robustness checks that address some of the criticism directed toward the original Manifesto Project codings. In all cases, the substantive findings of this article

are robust to using alternative estimation strategies that address these criticisms. In terms of its validity, the original *rile* index is suspect of being biased to the center because it includes the number of neutral quasi-sentences in computing the percentage of left and right mentions (Kim & Fording, 1998; Lowe, Benoit, Mikhaylov, & Laver, 2011). Given a fixed number of mentions to left and right categories, an increase in neutral text units pushes *rile* toward zero, suggesting a shift in party position toward the center, even though the number of mentions to left and right issues has remained constant. Indeed, the presence of a centrist bias seems to be confirmed by the contrast between the theoretical range of *rile*,  $-100$  to  $100$ , and the fact that, empirically, *rile* spans only from about  $-50$  to  $50$ . Both Kim and Fording (1998) and Lowe et al. (2011) have proposed alternative scalings of the Manifesto Project codings that address the alleged centrist bias in the *rile* index. Replicating the empirical analyses using these alternative scalings, however, does not alter the substantive conclusion. A second line of criticism has been that the Manifesto Project data are prone to measurement error and therefore the analyses using *rile* as a predictor variable are subject to attenuation bias. Benoit et al. (2009) describe the sources of error and propose using a simulation-extrapolation technique (*simex*) to correct for this bias.<sup>15</sup> As shown in the supplementary materials, my findings are also robust to estimating the empirical model using simulation-extrapolation.

Notice that an assumption embedded in the empirical model in Equation 1 is that data on voter perceptions and party messages refer to the same underlying policy axis. Even though both the survey items and the Manifesto Project data explicitly address left-right positions, they may not be measuring exactly the same latent dimension (Benoit & Laver, 2005). Unfortunately, this assumption cannot be tested with the available data. In any case, the possibility that the manifesto data and voter perceptions are measuring different dimensions goes against finding a relationship between them. This is not particularly problematic, because it would imply that my result that party platforms induce shifts in voter perceptions is actually a conservative estimate.

I have obtained data on the incumbency status of political parties to replicate the analyses restricting the focus to the subsample of parties that are in opposition at each time point. The purpose is to address the endogeneity concerns that might arise when estimating the effect of incumbent party platforms. Opposition parties are defined as those that have not participated in any cabinet during the period between the previous and the current election. To give an example of the coding protocol, the Swedish Conservative party (*Moderaterna*) is not considered to be in opposition in the 1982 election, even though at that precise time it did not form part of the government. The

**Table 2.** Summary Statistics of the Variables in the Models.

Name	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum	<i>n</i>
Party perceived position	5	2.2	0.7	9	272
Platform position (rile rescaled)	4.7	1.1	2.6	8	281
Platform position (Kim & Fording rescaled)	4.3	2.1	0	10	281
Platform position (Lowe, Benoit, Mikhaylov, & Laver rescaled)	4.8	1.5	1.4	9.6	281
Estimated <i>SE</i> in rile (Benoit, Laver, & Mikhaylov)	0.2	0.1	0.04	0.6	281
Estimated <i>SE</i> in logit scale (Lowe et al.)	0.3	0.2	0.07	1.1	281
In opposition	0.4	0.5	0	1	302

reason is that it had participated in the cabinet for some time since the last election, concretely between 1979 and 1981. Data on the partisan composition of cabinets come from two sources, the *Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive* (Müller, Strom, & Bergman, 2012) and the *Parties, Governments, and Legislatures* data set (Cusack, Fuchs, & Müller, 2007).

In sum, the data used in the empirical section are composed of party-level longitudinal information about campaign left–right positions and policy images. These party attributes are measured around the time of elections: before the campaign in the case of manifestos and after the election for the policy brand. Hence, the data set includes as many data points for each party as elections have been held during the time frame of the study. In terms of the comparability between this study and Adams et al. (2011), apart from the divergence in the empirical model, the choice of data sources is identical: party manifestos as measure of the left–right content of campaign platforms and average post-election left–right survey placement as party policy images. Indeed, the data set used here represents an extension in scope, both longitudinal and cross-sectional (due to the inclusion of Spain), of the data in Adams et al. As shown below, results are unaffected if analyses are restricted to the subsample of cases included in their 2011 study. Table 2 provides the summary statistics of the data.

### Main Results

Table 3 presents the results of estimating the parameters in Equation 1. In all models, the post-campaign policy image is regressed on the manifesto left–right position and the prior policy brand, indicated by the perceived position

**Table 3.** Main Results.

	OLS	Cluster SE	Linear constraint	Adams, Ezrow, and Somer- Topcu (2011) subset
Prior policy image	0.92** (0.02)	0.92** (0.02)	0.93** (0.02)	0.88** (0.04)
Platform position	0.14** (0.05)	0.14** (0.04)	0.07** (0.02)	0.15* (0.07)
Intercept	-0.24 (0.14)	-0.24 (0.13)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.11 (0.19)
R <sup>2</sup>	.97	.97		.96
RMSE	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
n	219	219	219	97

Robust SE in parentheses, except for model with panel-clustered errors (39 clusters). Linear constraint: *Prior policy image* + *platform position* = 1. OLS = ordinary least squares; RMSE = root mean square error. Significance levels: \*5% and \*\*1%.

at the end of the previous election. To give an example, in the case of British parties the prior policy image in 2010 is captured by the perceived policy position right after the 2005 election. The first column reports ordinary least squares (OLS) estimates with heteroskedasticity robust standard errors. Because of the possible presence of party-specific patterns of error correlation, the model in column 2 estimates standard errors clustered at the party level. Column 3 imposes the linear constraint that the coefficients of *prior policy image* and *platform position* sum to 1, thereby reflecting the assumption in Equation 1 that current policy images are a weighted average of the pre-campaign image and the election platform. The last column replicates the first model restricting the attention to the subsample analyzed in Adams et al. (2011), with the explicit goal of ensuring that results do not hinge on the additional observations I have incorporated in this article.

Empirical estimates are not substantially affected by different distributional assumptions of the error term. Estimating cluster robust standard errors at the party level leaves results substantially unaffected. Given the risk that, in the presence of a low number of groups (<50 as in this case), cluster robust errors might downwardly bias the uncertainty of parameter estimates (Angrist & Pischke, 2008, chap. 8), I do not estimate this type of error in later models. Finally, confining the analysis to the observations present in Adams et al.'s article leads to almost identical results to those with the full sample.<sup>16</sup>

The substantive conclusion that emerges from all models is that the election platform contributes to explain a party's post-election policy image. The coefficient for *platform position* is positive and statistically distinguishable from zero, suggesting that campaign statements have an effect on party policy brands. These results support the assumption that parties' current left-right policy images are a weighted average of an initial policy brand and the platform position. As expected, both the coefficients for *prior policy image*

and *platform position* lie between 0 and 1 and their sum, 1.06, is close and statistically undistinguishable from 1.<sup>17</sup> In fact, as the model in column 4 shows, imposing the linear constraint does not lead to a major change in results. The coefficient estimates thus uphold the modeling assumption that a party's perceived position after an election lies in between the initial policy image and the position stated in the campaign.

These results show that campaign declarations induce changes in parties' perceived left–right positions. The results of the *linear constraint* model are the most appropriate to generate predictions of where a party policy brand will be located following the election. These estimates specify that the post-campaign policy image moves in the direction of the election platform and the expected magnitude of this shift is equal to 7% of the distance between the initial perceived position and the campaign statement. Take a party perceived to be located at 4 on a 0 to 10 left–right scale, which announces that its policy in office will be strictly centrist, a 5 on the scale. These estimates indicate that the party brand will become 4.07 after the election. Certainly, a movement of this nature is small, but in competitive multiparty systems such repositioning may be decisive for election outcomes. Notice, moreover, that the new perceived position becomes the initial one in the next election. Assuming that the party chooses the same campaign platform, the left–right policy image will become 4.14. Hence, even if the one-election effect is limited, a party that is perseverant enough to cumulate several policy declarations that try to pull the party policy image in the same direction may achieve larger spatial shifts.

The slow changes in party policy images are evidence, in any case, of a large degree of persistence in party left–right policy images. In other words, the memory of past experiences with the party weighs heavily in current party policy brands. This comes as no surprise: The cases selected for this study belong to stable party systems, where parties have long and consistent policy records and belong to ideologically based party families. In such a context, it is likely that voters are quite certain about the left–right preferences of the different political parties and therefore do not significantly revise their perception of where the party stands during the campaign.

## Parties in Opposition

The model in Equation 1 estimates the effect of the campaign declaration on the post-election policy image *controlling for* the pre-campaign party brand. In the empirical analyses, I approximate the pre-campaign party image using the survey-based perceived party position measured immediately after the *previous* election, thus implicitly assuming that the party's image has

remained constant between the last election and the moment the election manifesto is released.

Yet, campaign policy declarations are not the only source of information about party preferences that voters may count on. The orientation of the policies implemented in office, the composition of coalition governments, or the legislative voting record provide voters with signals about the left–right position of a party. Therefore, a party policy image may have changed between an election and the beginning of the next. Most importantly, the policy content of campaign declarations is likely to be *correlated*, either positively or negatively, with the policy orientation of the other sources of information. For instance, an incumbent party whose policy brand has moved as a result of the policies implemented in office is likely to choose a campaign position that reacts to this shift: If the change in party image brings about an increase in support, the party is likely to choose a platform in line with that shift. If, on the contrary, the evolution of the party brand is negative, the party may attempt to use its election manifesto to compensate for it. In either case, the association between the content of election platforms and other determinants of party perceived positions constitutes a threat to identification.

To tackle this potential endogeneity concern, I replicate the empirical analyses using the subsample of parties that, in each election, are in opposition. According to the existing literature, the type of party behavior that influences party policy images belongs to the realm of strategies available to incumbent parties, but not so much to parties in opposition. Therefore, by narrowing the focus to parties that are out of office, the risk of endogeneity bias is significantly reduced. Precisely, the coding protocol for what qualifies as a party in opposition attempts to fully exploit this advantage: The only parties that are considered as being in opposition are those that have not made part of the cabinet at any time during the parliamentary term. This ensures that the parties included in the analyses have not had access to the incumbent actions that may affect party policy brands.

The results for the subsample of parties in opposition, as reported in Table 4, are almost identical to those for the full sample: Despite a substantial persistence in party left–right images, campaign policy statements are able to shift party perceived positions. Therefore, we can conclude that the empirical findings obtained for the full sample are not being driven by the confounding effect of actions in office.

## Conclusion

According to standard spatial models of party competition, without a change in voter preferences, the factor that explains shifts in electoral outcomes is

**Table 4.** Results Restricting the Analysis to Subsample of Parties in Opposition.

	OLS	Cluster SE	Linear constraint	Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu (2011) subset
Prior policy image	0.90** (0.03)	0.90** (0.03)	0.94** (0.02)	0.86** (0.05)
Platform position	0.18** (0.06)	0.18** (0.06)	0.06** (0.02)	0.23* (0.11)
Intercept	-0.42* (0.17)	-0.42* (0.17)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.39 (0.25)
R <sup>2</sup>	.97	.97		.97
RMSE	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
n	137	137	137	62

Robust SE are in parentheses, except for model with panel-clustered errors (38 clusters). Linear constraint: *Prior policy image + platform position* = 1. OLS = ordinary least squares; RMSE = root mean square error. Significance levels: \*5% and \*\*1%.

parties’ choice of election platform. The canonical version of these models assumes that voters take campaign declarations at face value, and therefore voter policy expectations equate the policy parties announce in the run up to the election. Yet, despite the theoretical relevance attributed to campaign platforms, we still have a limited knowledge of their actual effect on voter perceptions of party positions.

The goal of this article has been precisely to analyze whether a party’s campaign stance leads voters to update their perception of the party’s policy position. Focusing on Western European parties over the period 1971–2010, I estimate whether the left–right content of manifestos—understood as a *proxy* for party campaign messages—leads to changes in voter perceptions, measured as the average survey-based position given to the party.

I offer robust evidence that campaign statements have an effect on voter perceptions of party left–right positions: As a result of the campaign, party policy images move in the direction of the election platform. This shift is small relative to the distance between the campaign position and the initial perceived image, but such small spatial movements may be decisive for election outcomes. This finding cannot be attributed to the confounding impact of actions in office: Substantially identical results emerge in the analyses restricted to parties in opposition. As I report in the supplementary materials to this article, this result is also robust to different scalings of manifesto data as well as to several alternative statistical assumptions.

This article makes a key contribution to our understanding of the role of election campaigns. It shows that voters use campaign messages to infer the position of political parties. Voters “listen” to party campaign messages. It thus provides a reassuring conclusion about the dynamics of policy representation by showing that parties can effectively use their campaign declarations to signal a change in their policy preference: Changes in party policy stances

lead voters to adjust their perception of parties' policy preferences and eventually to change their voting choice. Overall, campaigns are relevant for mass-elite policy linkages: They provide voters with information about party policy preferences, thereby contributing to the adverse selection role of democratic elections.

The findings that I report are particularly relevant for parties in opposition. We have increasing evidence that party *actions* have a bearing on party policy brands through implemented policies (Lupu, 2012), the selection of coalition partners (Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013), or the legislative voting record (Grynaviski, 2010). What was unclear is whether parties that are out of office, which have a limited access to these strategies and therefore rely on their *declarations*, can effectively reposition in the policy space. The conclusion that emerges from my empirical analyses suggests that parties in opposition can successfully use their campaign statements to induce (small) changes in their policy brand.

The conclusion of this article diverges significantly from the previous empirical analyses of this question (Adams et al., 2011). These authors find no correlation between changes in manifestos' left-right tone and party policy images, which leads them to conclude that there is a disconnect between elite discourse and mass attitudes. In this article, I show that their results stem from an empirical strategy that is not best suited to the nature of the data. Adams et al. model the effect of shifts in manifesto content on changes in party left-right images. Despite the intuitive appeal of this choice, it is not the most appropriate to study the stable party systems of Western Europe, where parties are quite consistent in their choice of platforms and therefore the magnitude of one-period changes in both party images and campaign positions is quite small. As a result, in a model in first-differences, the main covariates of the model lack enough variation, which renders the task of identifying empirical patterns extremely difficult, even if these patterns do exist. The approach that I take circumvents this problem by modeling party left-right images as a weighted average of the election platform and the pre-campaign policy brand. The main implication is that the post-election party policy image lies somewhere in between the pre-campaign policy brand and the position announced in the campaign. Beyond pragmatic considerations, this approach naturally reflects the empirical phenomenon under study, namely, how voters blend the new information conveyed by policy declarations with their prior knowledge of the party's position.

The empirical results provided here solve the puzzle arising in Adams et al. (2011). On the one hand, a growing number of studies have shown that parties adapt their policy offerings to changes in their competitive environment and that these platforms induce changes in electoral outcomes. On the

other hand, Adams et al. argue that voter perceptions of party positions do not adjust to changes in the policies parties run on. These authors thus suggest that the causal link between campaign platforms and election results is *not* at play. By providing evidence of the mediating role of policy images in the link between campaign platforms and election outcomes, this article reconciles two bodies of empirical research. Thanks to the findings obtained in this article, our understanding of the empirical dynamics of party competition is now fully consistent: Parties respond to environmental incentives by adapting their election platforms to the new context. Such campaign declarations contribute to reshape party policy brands, which then bring about a change in electoral support.

The conclusion that I offer opens avenues for further research, both into factors that could explain variation in the effect of campaign platforms and into the individual level determinants of changes in policy expectations. The goal of this study has been to estimate an *average* effect of campaign statements. It may be the case, however, that party-level factors and election-specific events modulate the magnitude of the effect of platforms on party policy images. To give an example, the role of party leaders has been frequently emphasized in case studies of party change (Share, 1999). Two testable propositions that arise from this literature is that the standing of the leader in public opinion and the length of her tenure as party chairperson influence the chances the party has to change its policy image. Future work could set out to empirically address these questions.

The effectiveness of party election announcements could also vary as a function of the *direction* of the spatial movement. When observing a campaign statement, voters need to determine whether the policy declaration signals a change in party preferences or instead constitutes an example of opportunism. An analysis of which type of policy switches are more effective warrants an article of its own. Indeed, it may require a game-theoretic analysis that accounts for the incentives parties have to misrepresent their preferences and for how voters, anticipating this, decide whether to revise their expectations or not. This is precisely the research question that I address in Fernandez-Vazquez (2013).

I have analyzed the dynamics of party policy images from a macro perspective. The empirical models have estimated the impact of campaign public stances on the average left–right position attributed to a party. Aggregate patterns, however, are the result of a collection of processes occurring at the individual level. Indeed, the finding that party images move slightly in the direction of the election platform is consistent with different profiles of individual reactions to party campaign messages. It could be that, during the campaign, all voters undergo a minor revision of their perception of party

preferences. Alternatively, the same pattern would arise if a minority of voters fully updates their beliefs while the rest fail to do so. Why some voters may revise their expectations while others do not is an interesting and theoretically relevant question, but it lies beyond the scope of this article and is therefore deferred to future research.

For now, we can conclude on the optimistic note that party election statements do matter. While the estimated effect may be small, the findings of this article have addressed some of the troubling questions about the role of campaigns that the work of Adams et al. (2011) had posed. Indeed, I have shown that the high degree of persistence in party brands does not fully dampen the effect of campaign declarations. Hence, to borrow a phrase allegedly pronounced by Galileo during his trial, we may say about party policy images: *Eppur si muove!* (and yet it moves).

## Appendix

### Comparison of Empirical Models

The equation that Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu (2011) estimate reads as follows:

$$\Delta policy\_image_t = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \Delta platform_t + \gamma_2 \Delta platform_{t-1} + \gamma_3 \Delta policy\_image_{t-1}. \quad (2)$$

**Table A1.** *F* Tests of the Restrictions Included in My Model Relative to That in Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu (2011).

Data	Statistic	<i>p</i> value
Full sample	$F(3, 22) = 1.82$	.17
Subsample in Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu (2011)	$F(3, 12) = 1.16$	.37

In words,  $\Delta policy\_image_t$  represents the shift in party policy image while  $\Delta platform_t$  captures the corresponding change in the campaign left–right position.  $\Delta policy\_image_{t-1}$  and  $\Delta platform_{t-1}$  indicate their respective lagged values. This equation therefore models how current and past campaign repositioning induce shifts in party policy brands, once we control for the previous change in the policy image. As noted in the model section, the high stability over time in both party images and manifesto positions leaves very little variation in these variables when measured in one-period changes.

A direct transformation of the first-differences equation into levels fails to solve these estimation issues due to a non-negligible multicollinearity in the covariates of the model. Adams et al. (2011) equation, expressed in levels, becomes

$$\Delta policy\_image_t = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 platform_t + (\gamma_2 - \gamma_1) platform_{t-1} - \gamma_2 platform_{t-2} + (1 + \gamma_3) policy\_image_{t-1} - \gamma_3 policy\_image_{t-2}. \tag{3}$$

Even though this equation does away with the problem of low variation, the high correlation between current and lagged values of the predictors generates a problem of multicollinearity, which defeats the purpose of estimating the separate effect of each of them. In contrast, the model that I have estimated is the following (Equation 1):

$$policy\_image_t = \lambda policy\_image_{t-1} + (1 - \lambda) platform_t.$$

A comparison with Equation 1 reveals that my model is nested within that in Adams et al. (2011): It implicitly assumes that the coefficients for *platform*<sub>t-1</sub>, *platform*<sub>t-2</sub>, and *policy\_image*<sub>t-2</sub> are jointly equal to zero. I have tested whether these restrictions come at the cost of a loss of fit, both in the full sample and in the subsample considered in Adams et al. (2011). In both cases, the estimates in Table A1 indicate that the simplifying assumptions are *not* too restrictive.

In sum, by specifying current party images as a weighted average of the pre-campaign policy brand and the campaign position, this approach solves both the problem of lack of variation in first-differenced variables and the multicollinearity issue without incurring in a loss of predictive power.

### Parties and Elections Included in the Analyses

**Table A2.** List of Parties and Elections Included in the Data Set.

Party name	Elections
Great Britain	
Conservative Party	1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, <b>2001, 2005, 2010</b>
Labor Party	<b>1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010</b>
Liberal Democrats	<b>1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010</b>
Denmark	
Christian Democrats	1994, <b>1998, 2001, 2005, 2007</b>
Conservative Party	1994, <b>1998, 2001, 2005, 2007</b>
Liberal Party	1994, <b>1998, 2001, 2005, 2007</b>
People's Party	<b>1998, 2001, 2005, 2007</b>
Progress Party	<b>1994, 1998</b>

(continued)

**Table A2. (continued)**

Party name	Elections
Radical Liberal Party	1994, 1998, 2001, <b>2005, 2007</b>
Red Green Coalition	<b>1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007</b>
Social Democratic Party	1994, 1998, 2001, <b>2005, 2007</b>
Germany	
Socialist Party	<b>1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007</b>
Christian Democrats	<b>1976, 1983, 1987, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2005, 2009</b>
Green Party	<b>1983, 1987, 1990, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2009</b>
Left Party	<b>1990, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2009</b>
Liberal Party	1976, 1983, 1987, 1990, 1994, 1998, <b>2002, 2005, 2009</b>
Social Democrats	1976, 1983, <b>1987, 1990, 1998, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2009</b>
The Netherlands	
Christian Democrats	1981, 1982, 1986, 1989, 1994, <b>1998, 2002, 2003, 2006</b>
Democrats 66	<b>1971, 1972, 1981, 1982, 1986, 1989, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006</b>
Labor Party	<b>1971, 1972, 1981, 1982, 1986, 1989, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006</b>
Liberal Party	1971, 1972, 1981, <b>1982, 1986, 1989, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006</b>
Norway	
Christian Democratic Party	<b>1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001</b>
Conservative Party	<b>1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001</b>
Labor Party	1977, 1981, <b>1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001</b>
Liberal Party	<b>1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001</b>
Progress Party	<b>1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001</b>
Socialist Party	<b>1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001</b>
Sweden	
Center Party	1979, 1982, <b>1985, 1988, 1991, 1998, 2002, 2006</b>
Christian Democrats	1982, <b>1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006</b>
Green Party	<b>1988, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006</b>
Moderate Party	1979, 1982, <b>1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006</b>
Social Democrats	<b>1979, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006</b>
Left Party	<b>1979, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006</b>
Liberal Party	1979, 1982, <b>1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006</b>
Spain	
Conservative Party	<b>1986, 1989, 1993, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008</b>
Left Party	<b>1986, 1989, 1993, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008</b>
Socialist Party	1986, 1989, 1993, 1996, <b>2000, 2004, 2008</b>

Years in which the party is in opposition are in bold.

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### **Notes**

1. A similar conclusion emerges in their study of voter reactions to party stances in the European integration issue (Adams, Ezrow, & Somer-Topcu, 2012).
2. Adams (2012) provides a review of these empirical studies.
3. These supplementary materials may be found in my website: <http://pablofernandezvazquez.com>
4. For a more detailed discussion of this literature, see Adams (2012).
5. Evidence has emerged in “small  $N$ ” studies. Focusing on the evolution of Latin American party systems, Lupu (2012) offers a study of several Venezuelan and Argentinean mainstream parties, showing that the pro-market policy switches that these parties engaged in during the 1980s and 1990s, which contradicted their policy images, brought about a dilution of their policy brand and subsequently a collapse of their electoral support.
6. As Laver (1998) puts it, “Most early models of government formation saw the making and breaking of governments as competition over the allocation of rewards in office . . . In contrast, nearly all recent theoretical accounts are based on the assumption of policy seeking” (p. 6).
7. Adams (2012) makes this point clearly: “According to this perspective, it is difficult for parties to dramatically change their policy images when they are outside the government, because opposition parties are largely limited to criticizing government policy and to outlining their alternative policy agenda. But as these opposition strategies involve words, not deeds, they may not move citizens’ perceptions of opposition parties’ policy positions” (p. 413).
8. Beck (1989) provides a useful description of Kalman filter processes and discusses some applications, like the modeling of Presidential approval.
9. As Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (1998) put it, “Macropartisanship incorporates not only the political and economic news of the present but also the accumulation of news from the past” (p. 910).
10. A 1-10 scale is present in a few surveys. In such cases, I have mapped the extreme values into 0 and 10, and applied the function  $\text{newscale} = (\text{oldscale} - 1) \cdot (10 / 9)$  to the intermediate values.

11. For further information about this database, please refer to the following website: <http://www.gesis.org/en/services/data-analysis/survey-data/international-election-studies/the-european-voter-project/>
12. These include the election studies of Sweden (2002, 2006), the Netherlands (2002, 2003, and 2006), Denmark (2001, 2005, and 2007), Great Britain (2001, 2005, and 2010), Norway (2001), and Germany (2002, 2005, and 2009).
13. The data are maintained by Volkens et al. (2013).
14. Originally, the *rile* estimate was not aimed at measuring the left–right position of the manifesto but at capturing the salience of right issues versus those on the left. As Laver (2001) has discussed, however, this relative emphasis measure may also be approached as an estimate of the left–right position. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases, the *rile* index has been used in empirical applications as a measure of platform position.
15. Their article offers a good discussion of this technique.
16. These results do not seem to be driven by country-level unobserved heterogeneity. Estimating country fixed effects does not alter the results: Indeed the *F* test that all country-specific intercepts are equal to zero yields a *p* value of .96.
17. An *F* test does not reject the null that the sum of both coefficients is equal to 1 at conventional levels of significance.

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