

# Everything to Everyone: The Electoral Consequences of Broad Policy Appeals in Europe

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## Abstract

Parties often tailor their campaign message differently to different groups of voters with the goal of appealing to a broader electorate with diverse preferences and thereby winning their votes. I argue that the strategy helps a party win votes if it can convince diverse groups of voters that the party is ideologically closer to their preferred positions. Using election data from nine Western European democracies, I first show that parties gain votes when they appeal broadly. Analysis of individual-level survey data suggests that voters perceive broadly-appealing parties as ideologically closer to their own positions, a finding that identifies a plausible mechanism behind the aggregate positive effect of this strategy on party election performance. These findings not only help explain the behavior of some European parties, but they may also offer a potential recipe for electoral success in multi-party democracies.

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# **Everything to Everyone: The Electoral Consequences of Broad Policy Appeals in Europe**

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## **Abstract:**

Parties often tailor their campaign message differently to different groups of voters with the goal of appealing to a broader electorate with diverse preferences and thereby winning their votes. I argue that the strategy helps a party win votes if it can convince diverse groups of voters that the party is ideologically closer to their preferred positions. Using election data from nine Western European democracies, I first show that parties gain votes when they appeal broadly. Analysis of individual-level survey data suggests that voters perceive broadly-appealing parties as ideologically closer to their own positions, a finding that identifies a plausible mechanism behind the aggregate positive effect of this strategy on party election performance. These findings not only help explain the behavior of some European parties, but they may also offer a potential recipe for electoral success in multi-party democracies.

Political pundits, commentators, and scholars alike expect clarity and consistency from political parties, especially in multiparty systems. While Downs (1957, p. 136) argues that parties in a two-party system should disguise their positions “in a fog of ambiguity” to increase the size of their constituency, he argues that parties in multi-party systems should distinguish themselves ideologically from each other and take clear and differentiated positions to win (pp. 126-27).

Taking clear and consistent positions also has important implications for many normative conceptions of representation and is often thought to be critical for the effective functioning of a representative democracy (Berelson 1952, van der Brug 1997, Dahlberg 2009). When parties do not clearly articulate their positions, or appear consistent, voters arguably have a much harder task when attempting to identify the party that would best represent their interests in office. The failure to take clear and consistent positions during campaigns may also affect the ability of voters to hold governing parties accountable for their policy behavior in office.

Despite the normative appeal of such a party system and the ruminations of Downs noted above, there is increasing evidence that political parties and candidates in multiparty systems rarely take clear and consistent positions and that they instead frequently appeal to different groups of voters with diverse policy preferences, with the goal of expanding their electoral support (e.g., Campbell 1983, Dahlberg 2009, Tomz and van Houweling 2009). Consider, for example, the behavior of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) during the 2013 federal election. The party’s chancellor candidate, Peer Steinbrück, is a very moderate politician, who belongs to the centrist-wing of the party. In choosing Steinbrück as the chancellor candidate, SPD attempted to appeal to centrist Christian democratic (CDU) and liberal (FDP) voters who may be tired of chancellor Merkel and the policies of the CDU-FDP coalition. At the same time that they chose a more moderate candidate for chancellor, however, the party’s election manifesto for the 2013 election contained the more traditional leftist economic and

welfare policy proposals (Hilmer and Merz 2014). We can interpret the actions as suggesting that whereas the manifesto position was aimed to keep the parties' more ideologically leftwing clientele and union members in the party and to win back votes lost to the Left Party, the choice of its chancellor candidate was an attempt to appeal to the center.

Another example of parties attempting to broaden their appeal through various means was evident in the 2010 British Elections. British Conservative Party leader David Cameron was characterized as “‘love bombing’ the Liberal Democrats by stressing the importance of civil liberties” in the 2010 British elections while, at the same time, using a ‘liberal-conservative’ agenda to win back those “well-heeled and increasingly well-educated voters,” who earlier had deserted the Conservative Party for the Labour Party (Bale and Webb 2011, p.45).

If appealing broadly to different subgroups of voters is an openly pursued and common strategy, does it actually help parties electorally? Do parties benefit from clear and consistent positions or do they benefit from taking more adaptable and malleable positions on various issues that may appear to be ideologically inconsistent when viewed as a totality? The evidence on this important question is more anecdotal. Evaluating the aftermath of the German 2009 election, Lees (2012) argues that in order for the Social Democrats (SPD) to regain their lost votes and office, “it is not sufficient just to tack to the left *or* to the center to regain support; it must in effect widen its appeal to the left, the center and to the non-voters” (p. 546). As stated before, the SDP followed this strategy in 2013, and though losing the government to CDU, they managed to increase their vote share from 23% to 25.7%. Similarly, Cameron won the 2010 election and formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, ending thirteen years of Labour rule. While such anecdotal evidences suggest that the strategy may have electoral benefits, a systematic comparative analysis of the consequences of this strategy has been lacking.

I argue that the *broad-appeal strategy* can help parties gain votes, provided they can convince different groups of voters with diverse preferences that the party is now closer to their preferred ideological position. Using voter election surveys from nine Western European countries -- Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden -- I test the electoral consequences of a broad-appeal strategy and demonstrate using aggregate electoral data that parties do indeed gain votes when they broaden their appeal. Moreover, in examining possible individual-level mechanism behind this aggregate effect, I explore whether parties are able to successfully convince diverse groups of voters that the party is ideologically close to them despite making broad appeals. My individual-level findings, using data from the Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems (CSES), reveal that voters do indeed perceive broadly-appealing parties as closer to their own preferred position than they actually are. These findings not only help explain the behavior of some European parties, but they may also offer a potential recipe for electoral success in multi-party democracies.

### **Appealing Broadly: A Recipe for Electoral Success**

Regardless of whether a political party's ultimate goal is winning office or implementing its policies, either as a governing party or as a strong opposition party, parties need votes to achieve their objectives. Scholars have long been interested in the factors that affect the electoral performance of political parties in multi-party democracies. Party performance in office (Mackie and Rose 1983, Powell and Whitten 1993), as well as party valence evaluations (Clark 2009, Clark and Leiter *forthcoming*) have been shown to significantly influence party support. An extensive scholarship also examines how party ideological strategies, particularly party position-taking and shifts in these positions, affect party support (Downs 1957, Adams et al. 2005, Ezrow 2005, Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009, Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012). While taking a clear party position or changing the party's ideological position are policy strategies

that might influence election results, another possible strategy is appealing to a broader electorate. This strategy, which I call the *broad-appeal strategy*, stands in contrast to taking a specific ideological position and aims to broaden the party's constituency by convincing different groups of voters with diverse ideological preferences that the party would best represent their interests in office.<sup>1</sup>

What is the broad-appeal strategy and when should we expect it to work? As was already alluded to above, there are several ways that a party may attempt to broaden their appeal. One potential way of employing the broad-appeal strategy would be to take positions on various issues so as to appeal to the interests of as many voter groups as possible rather than presenting an ideologically coherent party platform. This may involve taking leftish positions on some issues and rightish positions on others. The Danish Liberal Party's strategy of adopting a strong centrist turn on welfare policies while tightening and radicalizing its immigration policy stances before the 2001 elections is a good example of such a strategy. Following the election defeats in the 1990s, the Liberal Party abandoned its neo-liberal rhetoric and instead advocated improved maternity and paternity leaves and increased budgets for hospitals and health care in order to appeal to the traditional centrist and center-left clientele of the Social Democrats. At the same time, they appealed to a more right-wing electorate and to the supporters of more right-wing anti-immigration parties of the Danish People's Party (DF) and Progress Party (FP) by demanding tighter controls and proposing stricter rules for family reunions of immigrants and for access to social security

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<sup>1</sup> Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012) argue that when parties try to be ideologically proximate to both loyal partisans and other voters they find themselves under a "representational strain." The authors do not examine the electoral consequences of this strain but this is the same tension that I argue leads parties to adopt the broad-appeal strategy.

(Andersen 2003). At the end, the strategy helped them win a landslide victory over the dominant Social Democratic Party.<sup>2</sup>

Politicians openly admit that they often aim to appeal to a broad electorate by taking different issue positions. In a personal interview, a party elite from the Christian Democratic Union party in Germany noted:

“On the one hand we have to keep the traditional voters attached to the party, and we have to deliver to them. On the other hand, we have to be attractive for many additional people in this country. (...) If you look at our new, basic program (...) you will see that there are certain issues that are really important to our traditional voters. With other issues we have tried to open up to new voters, talk to or reach new groups of voters. So, it is a job of ensuring permanent balance” (CDU party elite, July, 2008).

Parties can attempt to broaden their appeal in other ways as well. In addition to the example of the SPD in 2013 noted previously, the dual leadership strategy of the German Social Democrats (SPD) in 1998 provides an example of another manner in which a party may attempt to appeal to multiple voter groups simultaneously rather than trying to advocate for a clear and consistent party platform. Leading up to the 1998 elections, the SPD had been out of government since 1982 and it greatly desired to win back the government. Oscar Lafontaine, SPD’s chairman since 1995, was a leftist politician who appealed to

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<sup>2</sup> Another good example is the famous Labour Party strategy under Tony Blair. The Labour strategy was appealing to the “middle England” and Tory voters with stricter immigration policies and neoliberal economic policies, such as low taxes and policies aiming to increase economic growth, while simultaneously pursuing traditional Labour voters with leftist policies, such as minimum wage, family tax credits, and increased social spending.

leftist and core SPD voters (Paterson and Sloam 2010). However, SPD believed that in order to win the election it needed to appeal to dissatisfied FDP and CDU voters at the center. As such, they bucked the German tradition of having the chairman as the chancellor candidate and decided to elect their chancellor candidate Gerhard Schröder, a more moderate politician. Lafontaine and Schröder ran the election campaign together and presented the party “as a fresh, vibrant party which was managing to combine its basic, traditional values of freedom, justice, and solidarity with the demands of a modern industrial service industry and communication society” (Potthoff and Miller 2006, p. 363).

Although the broad-appeal is a common strategy that can take multiple forms, there has never been a systematic, comparative empirical analysis of its electoral consequences.<sup>3</sup> There is certainly work, especially in American politics, examining whether one specific way of appealing broadly, i.e., being ambiguous, helps parties/candidates electorally, but only with mixed findings. Downs (1957) argues that beclouding party policy positions with an ambiguous message helps parties in a two-party system (p. 136), but Shepsle (1972) uses a formal model to demonstrate that parties benefit from being ambiguous when voters are risk-acceptant. Other formal models examine the conditions under which political parties benefit from being ambiguous. Uncertainty about the median voter’s position (Glazer 1990), the intensity and salience of voters’ policy preferences (Aragones and Postlewaite 2002), and context-dependent voting (Callander and Wilson 2008) have all been shown to mediate the electoral effects of ambiguity. Empirical work on the electoral consequences of ambiguity is even more limited. In recent work, Tomz and van Houweling (2009) show that ambiguity may in fact help parties electorally (see also Campbell

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<sup>3</sup> The only exception is Rovny (2012). With a focus on European democracies, he examines the conditions under which parties prefer to blur their issue positions, and one argument he introduces in the paper is that voters react to this strategy in their vote choice. However, his focus is on a slightly different strategy: blurring of specific issue positions.

1983), but these studies are limited to the American two-party system.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, ambiguity in this literature is usually defined as “representing a probability distribution over points in the issue space” (Tomz and van Houweling 2009, see also, e.g., Shepsle 1972, Callander and Wilson 2008). This extant work therefore does not examine the electoral consequences of the *broad-appeal* strategy beyond the consequences of the specific strategy of ambiguity (e.g., it does not examine whether the dual leadership strategy to appeal broadly affects party performance).

I note that the broad-appeal strategy is similar to the Kirchheimer’s catch-all party strategy (1966) in the sense that the goal of the party is to increase vote share. Yet, the two strategies are also different.<sup>5</sup> The catch-all parties of post-World War II were the center-left and center-right mainstream large parties of Europe, and their main strategy consisted of moderating their policy positions toward the center while deemphasizing ideological, class, or denomination-based politics in an attempt to add floating centrist voters to their ranks (the French National Republican Union is one example Kirchheimer discusses)

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<sup>4</sup> Shepsle (1972) argues that ambiguity helps parties only if voters are risk-acceptant (but see Callander and Wilson (2008) who dispute this claim). The results I present provide a different explanation for how the strategy may help parties. I do not examine individual-level uncertainty or make any claims about whether European voters are risk-acceptant but instead focus on the aggregate effects of the broad-appeal strategy. Some voters who perceive the broad-appeal party closer may be fully certain about that position and some others may feel uncertain (Bartels 1996). Without a measure of uncertainty at the individual-level it is not possible to test the effects of uncertainty and attitudes toward risk on party performance. This requires an experimental approach, which is beyond the scope of the current paper.

<sup>5</sup> Among the 248 cases included here, the Pearson correlation between perceived party shifts to the center and changes in perceptual disagreement among voters, which I use to measure the broad-appeal strategy, is 0.38 (see below for the description of these variables).

(Allen 2009). Converging to the center, however, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the broad-appeal strategy. As the SPD's 2013 strategy shows, a party may keep its ideological position close to its base while having a moderate chancellor candidate (or a party may take leftist positions on some salient issues and rightist positions on some others, like the Danish Liberal Party's strategy in 2001).

In fact, moderating the party position (i.e., moving the party's position to the center) may be a riskier strategy if party activists and members react negatively to a moderating policy shift away from their ideal policy positions (Aldrich 1983, 1995; Baron 1994, Karreth et al. 2013). The risks of moderating party positions are particularly high in multi-party systems where there are ideologically close party alternatives and where the likelihood of new party entry into the system is high. Policy change may facilitate new party entry by opening ideological space and these new parties may siphon off voters who are dissatisfied with their own party because of the moderation (Palfrey 1984; Ignazi 1996).

While the benefits to a party of appealing to as many voters as possible is self-evident, it is less clear whether such appeals are successful. The electoral success of a broad-appeal strategy depends on the ability of the party to convince diverse groups of voters that the party represents their policy preferences even though it is making multiple promises to multiple groups. Hence, parties must be able to convince their own supporters that the party is still the same old party they have supported in the past while also attracting new voters with the promise that the party will represent their preferences in office.

It is perhaps not overly demanding to expect party supporters will continue to support their party despite its broad-appeal strategy. According to the projection literature, a core party supporter attempts to eliminate the "cognitive dissonance" she experiences when her party advocates a position with which she does not agree, by projecting her own position onto the party (Heider 1958). But can parties convince "other voters" with a broad-appeal strategy? Hillygus and Shields (2008) show that American presidential candidates do not take positions at the middle but instead aim to convince weak leaners of the other party

who are cross-pressured between their partisan loyalties and policy preferences, by appealing them on specific issues. With empirical evidence from the 2000 and 2004 campaigns they show that the strategy works to convince these cross-pressured voters to change their vote choices. The broad-appeal strategy is similar, and its success depends on appealing to new voters with specific issues, candidates, or manifestos. Whether the strategy works is an empirical question I explore in this paper.

I also note, however, that a broad appeal may fail if voters believe that the party is now further away from them than before. One possible risk of the broad-appeal strategy is that some voters may hear messages that were targeted to a different group of voters, and may perceive the party to be even further than it actually is. Targeted campaigning may fail if word about the strategy gets out (Hersh and Schaffner 2013). It is also possible that voters may perceive these parties as “evasive or spineless” (Campbell 1983, p. 278). Media and rival parties may capitalize on the broad-appeal strategy of the party, depicting the party as flip-flopping or opportunistic (see, e.g., Tomz and van Houweling 2012). These negative campaigning tactics and media framing of party positions may hurt parties’ images and depress their electoral performance (Popkin 1991, Farrell and Schmitt-Beck 2002, Elmelund-Praestekaer 2008). A politician from the Free Democratic Party (FDP) of Germany summarized these risks well during a personal interview:

“We have had this discussion before, and I think that in the end you may lose (if you target the broader public) because your strong supporters (...) won’t accept that you are now soft on that (particular issue) position and they will cut their support. But you won’t gain in the general public as well because they won’t believe you that you really do it from your heart” (FDP elite, July, 2008).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In this paper I examine whether the broad-appeal strategy helps parties electorally in the short-term, that is, in the election immediately following the broad-appeal strategy campaign. However, it is possible that the broad-appeal strategy may fail in the long-term when the party in office fails to deliver its diverse

When the goal of a party is winning more votes by keeping their supporters attached and gaining/stealing new voters, parties have an incentive to try to make appeals to a broader electorate, i.e., move beyond their supporters and appeal both to voters with various, diverse ideological preferences. There are multiple ways for parties to make broad appeals – by taking different positions on particular issues or by choosing their electoral leader and their party platform so as to appeal to different voter groups – but regardless of precisely how and when parties may attempt to broaden their appeal they must be able to persuade different groups of voters that the party is ideologically close to them for it to be successful. In the analysis that follows, I focus on the first-order empirical question of whether there is evidence that parties can benefit electorally from making a broad appeal strategy. Questions related to the circumstances under which different appeals are made are certainly important, but they are only of interest if the benefits of appealing broadly can first be established. As a consequence, I focus on the first order question by first exploring whether there is any evidence that a broad-appeal strategy helps parties using aggregate electoral data before proceeding to test the individual-level evidence regarding whether voters with diverse preferences feel closer to a party that is appealing broadly using survey data.

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campaign promises. There are examples of this long-term failure of the strategy. Oscar Lafontaine, for instance, resigned from the SPD's party chairman position in 1999, less than one year after the 1998 electoral victory, because the party under the Schröder government was moving more and more toward center with its policy proposals. At the same time, Schröder could never achieve the 1998 electoral success again, and continued to lose votes until the 2013 election when a new broad-appeal strategy helped the party recover its vote share to some extent.

## **Empirical Analysis**

Appealing broadly to different electorates with diverse preferences requires parties to adopt various strategies, as alluded to above. Parties may take an ambiguous left-right position by taking both left and right positions on various issues (e.g., Danish Liberals in 2001, German CDU in 2008); they may use their manifestos to appeal to their core voters and their leader and campaign rhetoric to appeal to the median voter (for instance, German SPD in 2013); or they may even have two leaders who have diverse ideological positions (e.g., German SPD in 1998). In the end, their aim is to persuade a diverse group of voters that the party is ideologically closer to their preferences.

Given that there are various possible ways parties can use to broaden their appeal, it is hard, if not impossible, to directly measure the precise strategy. To do so would require a wide-ranging analysis of campaign speeches, ads, party manifestos, election debates, etc. And, even if one were to collect these data, coding the broad-appeal strategy would require strong assumptions regarding how to classify specific speeches and issue positions. In addition, while the term “party strategy” is used to refer to actual party behavior, it is not the actual party positions, but voters’ perceptions of these positions that influence their vote choice and determine the electoral consequences of a party strategy (Adams et al. 2011).

As a result, I use the distributions of voter perceptions, i.e., *perceptual disagreement*, about party left-right positions to measure the existence of a broad-appeal party strategy. Higher levels of perceptual disagreement among voters indicate that voters have diverse understandings of where the party is ideologically located which I attribute to broader party appeals.

I collect survey data in nine Western European countries to measure the extent of citizens’ disagreement about a party’s left-right position. Data availability limits the set of cases to nine.<sup>7</sup> Table 1

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<sup>7</sup> The main constraint is the availability of National Election Studies for multiple consecutive elections in which voters are asked to locate political parties on the left-right scale. Post-Communist European

lists the countries and the time periods for which I have the survey data available to measure changes in respondents' perceptions of parties' left-right positions.

**Table 1: The list of countries and election periods covered**

Countries	Elections
Denmark	1994-2005
Finland	2003-2011
Germany	1983-2009
Iceland	1999-2009
Netherlands	1981-2006
Norway	1985-2009
Portugal	2002-2009
Spain	1986-2008
Sweden	1982-2006

Perceptual disagreement about party positions is coded using the survey question that asks respondents to locate each political party in their country on the left-right scale. I use the “perceptual agreement” measure developed by van der Eijk (2001). Van der Eijk proposes his measure for ordered rating scales, such as the left-right scale of election surveys. Using the distribution of respondents' placements of parties (the frequencies for each category) on the left-right scale, the original measure is bound between -1 and +1, where higher numbers indicate more agreement.<sup>8</sup> I converted the variable so that 1 means full

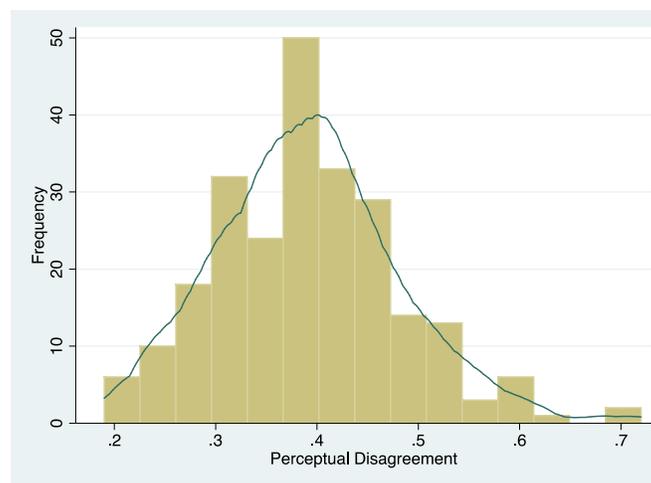
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countries are also excluded because elections, party campaigns, and voter decision-making still work differently in this region compared to Western Europe.

<sup>8</sup> van der Eijk (2001) shows that using standard deviations around party's average perceived position is a more intuitive yet possibly biased measure for agreement (see the *Supplementary Document* and van der Eijk 2001 for details). I also note that the correlation between the disagreement scores and the standard deviations in my data is 0.7.

disagreement about the party position (a uniform distribution of perceptions for party X across the range of values on the left-right scale) and 0 means full agreement (all voters locate party X at the same location). Figure 1 shows the distribution of perceptual disagreement scores in the data. While the lower and upper bounds of the disagreement scale are 0 and 1, respectively, the values in my data of 60 parties across 43 elections in nine Western European countries range between 0.19 (the Swedish Left Party VP in 1985) and 0.72 (Portuguese CDS-PP Alliance in 2009), with a mean of 0.40.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1: The Distribution of Perceptual disagreement Scores**



Notes: The bars show the frequencies of perceptual disagreement scores and the curve is the kernel density curve.

My focus on the left-right scale as opposed to more specific issue dimensions reflects the fact that party competition in Europe still takes place along a left-right dimension (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989, Budge et al. 2001). Beyond the prevalence of the left-right dimension in Europe, there is also a technical

<sup>9</sup> CDS-PP Alliance in Portugal in 2009 and the Basque Nationalist Party in 2000 are outliers, but the results are robust to dropping these cases from the analysis.

reason for this focus. The election surveys I use in this research consistently ask respondents to locate parties on the left-right scale, and there is no other issue dimension that is asked as commonly.<sup>10</sup>

One may argue that perceptual disagreement scores of parties may be artificially high/low due to some party or voter characteristics unrelated to party strategy. Given the lack of data on actual party strategies, we cannot directly test whether the broad-appeal strategy increases voter disagreement. However, we can rule out other potential factors that may artificially increase perceptual disagreement.<sup>11</sup> First, one may argue that disagreement may be artificially high if voters, who locate the party on the left-right scale, do not know where the party is located. However, if voters are not politically informed, we should see similar disagreement scores for various parties in the same election and country. This is not the case in the data. Moreover, the main results from below stay robust across subgroups of voters when we calculate the disagreement scores separately for high and low politically interested voters.

Second, certain party-level characteristics, and not necessarily party broad-appeal strategies, may affect perceptual disagreement scores. Specifically, given my focus on the left-right dimension, political parties that do not compete on this dimension, i.e. single-issue parties, may have artificially high disagreement scores because voters would not be able to locate them correctly on the left-right scale. Governing and large parties (in terms of their vote share) may have lower disagreement scores because of their high visibility, and not because of their strategy. At the same time, one may argue that given that

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<sup>10</sup> The standard left-right perceptions question is as follows: “In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place [PARTY A] on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?” The wording is slightly different in a few surveys but all surveys in this paper ask respondents to locate parties on the left-right scale (except the Norwegian 1981 survey, which asks the respondents to locate the parties on the liberal-conservative scale, and hence is excluded from the data).

<sup>11</sup> These results, and all subsequent robustness checks, are reported in the *Supplementary Document*.

governing parties in multiparty systems work in coalitions and hence adopt ideologically wide-ranging policies due to their coalitional structure, voters may have higher disagreement about their positions. Finally, one may argue that disagreement scores would be artificially smaller for parties at the extremes due to the ceiling effects of the ordered-rating scale (i.e., because the left-right scale cannot take values smaller/higher than certain values). The *Supplementary Document* shows that only the single-issue parties variable has a statistically significant effect on perceptual disagreement.<sup>12</sup> Single-issue parties have higher disagreement scores, possibly not because of an intentional broad-appeal strategy but because voters cannot locate these parties on the left-right scale. As a result, in the analyses below I ran the models first with the full sample and then with single-issue parties omitted.

A final check of the appropriateness of the disagreement measure for the broad-appeal strategy is a close examination of the data. Indeed, we see that the Christian Democratic Party in Germany, for instance, has higher disagreement scores (ranging between 0.4 and 0.6), and the quote from the party elite above in the theory section shows that the party consistently aims to appeal broadly to the German electorate. A more specific example is the Swedish Moderate Party. The party's disagreement scores were consistently low between 1982 and 2002 (e.g., 0.23, 0.21, 0.21 for 1994, 1998, and 2002, respectively), but the disagreement score jumped from 0.21 to 0.3 in 2006 when the new leader Fredrick Reinfeldt decided to appeal to centrist voters with a U-turn in the party's economic policy while keeping a

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<sup>12</sup> I used Comparative Manifesto Project dataset to code the single-issue party variable. Using the twenty-six issues the Project employs to locate parties on the left-right scale, I calculated the percentage of each election manifesto dedicated to these left-right issues. I then coded the single-issue party dummy variable 1 if a party had less than 38.82 percent of their manifesto dedicated to left-right issues (the mean value minus one standard deviation). These parties include many Green and anti-establishment parties.

right-wing stance on the party's energy policy in favor of continued support for nuclear power (Aylott and Bolin 2007).<sup>13</sup>

### ***Analyzing Aggregate Electoral Effects***

Because I am interested in whether parties gain votes as they appeal more broadly, I calculated the change in perceived disagreement scores for the aggregate-level analysis [ $\Delta disagreement_j$ ], where  $j$  is a political party. A positive value for this variable denotes an increase in perceptual disagreement about the party's position between elections  $t-1$  and  $t$ , i.e. a more broad appeal by the party. The dependent variable is the change in vote share of political parties between election  $t-1$  and election  $t$  [ $\Delta vote_j$ ].

Beyond perceptual disagreement, the aggregate model includes six additional variables. As I explained above, ideological moderation has been the focus of extensive scholarly work aimed at explaining parties' election performance (see, e.g., Ezrow 2005, Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009), yet is a risky strategy for parties. To see how moderation fares compared to the broad-appeal strategy I created a variable that codes party movement toward the mean-voter position.<sup>14</sup> To measure mean-voter positions, I calculated the average left-right self-placements of voters from each survey. I then created a variable and coded it 1 if the party's perceived average position between election  $t-1$  and  $t$  moved toward this mean-voter position, and -1 if it moved away. Finally, I multiplied this variable by the absolute perceived party policy change. If a party moved two points on the 10-point left-right scale toward the mean-voter position, for instance, the [ $party\ moderation_j$ ] variable is coded +2, and if it moved 2-points away, the variable is coded as -2.

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<sup>13</sup> Given that the average absolute change in disagreement scores is 0.04, a change of 0.08 in the party's disagreement score is quite substantive.

<sup>14</sup> The results stay robust if I replace the mean voter position with the interpolated median voter position.

I also included a dummy variable that identifies governing party status [*in government*], the GDP per capita growth rate [*GDP growth*], and their interaction [*government x GDP growth*]. Mackie and Rose (1983) show that the vote shares of governing parties are twice as likely to decrease relative to the last election than they are to increase, and the extensive economic voting literature suggests that governing parties are punished for their economic performance (see, e.g., Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000). The model also includes a single-issue party variable for those parties that do not compete on the left-right scale (see footnote 12 for the information on the measurement of the variable). Finally, party fixed effects are included because there are many party-level factors that may affect parties' vote gains/losses that we cannot measure. These unmeasured factors can be related to party competence/valence evaluations (Clark 2009), party leadership, and party organizations (Tavits 2012).

The aggregate analysis encompasses 241 changes in party vote shares in 43 elections, across 60 parties in nine European countries. These data should be regarded as time-series cross-sectional. Estimating a simple regression on the pooled data may lead to erroneous conclusions if there are unobserved differences between elections (Hsiao 2003) and serially-correlated errors (Beck and Katz 1995). The lagged dependent variable (LDV) [*vote change(t-1)<sub>j</sub>*] ensures that the serially-correlated errors are accounted for, and election clusters control for contemporaneous correlation across elections. In addition, LDV is included because a party that lost votes between  $t-2$  and  $t-1$  may be expected to gain votes between  $t-1$  and  $t$ , and vice versa (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009).

### ***Findings for the Aggregate Model***

Table 2 presents the OLS regression results for the effects of changes in perceptual disagreement scores on changes in vote shares. To the extent that parties gain (lose) votes by appealing broadly, we should observe a positive (negative) and statistically significant coefficient estimate on the

[ $\Delta Disagreement_t$ ] variable. The first column presents the results using the full sample. In the second column, I drop single-issue parties, following the finding above that single-issue parties have larger disagreement scores (likely because they do not compete on the left-right scale). The coefficients for the disagreement variables are positive (23.09 and 26.41, respectively) and demonstrate that the broad-appeal strategy helps parties.

**Table 2: The Effect of Broad-Appeal Strategy on Election Results**  
(DV: Change in Party Vote Share)

	All Sample	No Single-Issue Parties
<i><math>\Delta Disagreement (t)</math></i>	23.091* (7.081)	26.411* (8.118)
<i>Party Moderation</i>	-2.443* (0.744)	-2.340* (0.886)
<i>In government</i> (1: in govt, 0: in opp)	-4.205* (1.095)	-4.239* (1.225)
<i>GDP per capita growth (t)</i>	-0.248 (0.141)	-0.308 (0.159)
<i>Government x GDP Growth</i>	0.589 (0.331)	0.523 (0.370)
<i>Single-Issue Party</i>	-0.531 (0.851)	
<i>Vote Change (t-1) LDV</i>	-0.401* (0.073)	-0.391* (0.075)
<i>Constant</i>	1.346* (0.350)	1.591* (0.394)
N/ Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	241/ 0.23	215/ 0.19

Notes: The numbers in parentheses are the election-clustered standard errors. The model also includes political party fixed effects, which are not reported. \* $p < .05$

Substantively, this effect indicates that if the change in perceptual disagreement is 0.16 (i.e., highest disagreement change in the data) compared to -0.16 (i.e., the lowest disagreement change), the

party vote share increases by 7.39% (8.45% in the second model). Given the values of the change in disagreement variable in my data, if the change in disagreement is 0.06 compared to -0.04 (one standard deviation below and above the mean change of 0.01 in the data), the party is expected to increase its vote share by about 2.31% (2.64% in the second model). The mean (absolute) vote change in the data is 3.3%, suggesting that the strategy substantively helps political parties.<sup>15</sup>

While there is a substantive and significant effect of perceptual disagreement on election results, policy moderation does not help parties, and in fact, it hurts them electorally, as expected. The coefficient for *policy moderation*, -2.44, suggests that, controlling for the change in disagreement, a one-point shift toward the center decreases the party vote share by 2.4%. The other control variables show that if the party was in the last government, and especially if the economy was weak, it loses votes, supporting the extensive economic voting literature. The lagged dependent variable is in the expected direction and statistically significant, but the single-issue dummy variable does not have an independent effect on electoral performance.

In additional analyses, I tested the sensitivity of the results by replacing the membership of parties in the last government variable with a measure of parties' membership in the longest serving government in between two elections and by dropping the outlier parties, the Basque Nationalist Party in 2000 and the Portuguese CDS-PP Alliance in 2009, from the analysis. To check for potential country-level effects I

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in the multiparty democracies of Europe even less than 1% vote change may drastically change the political scene. In the 2013 German federal elections, FDP only needed 0.3% more votes to gain seats in the parliament. In addition, a closer look at the Swedish 2006 election confirms the importance of the party strategy for party performance. While the Moderate Party increased its vote share by 11% following a change in their disagreement score of 0.08 and formed the government, the Social Democrats lost 5% of their vote share after their disagreement score decreased by 0.05.

dropped one country at a time and ran the model on the remaining countries (i.e., jackknifing by country). I also checked the robustness of the results by including party extremeness as a control variable, operationalizing the variables using logarithmic transformations of parties' vote shares to account for interdependencies between party vote shares, measuring the disagreement variable using the perceptions of party supporters and not all voters, replicating the models with Tobit analysis, and dropping the lagged dependent variable. None of these alternative specifications affected the main results.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Testing the Individual-Level Mechanism***

I have argued that for the broad-appeal strategy to help parties electorally, parties should successfully target different groups of voters, convincing them the party is close to them ideologically. While the aggregate results indicate that this strategy helps parties electorally, they do not tell us whether parties are successful in persuading a broad set of voters about their ideological stances. I test this individual-level mechanism using the Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems (CSES) data from the same nine countries. The CSES dataset includes nationally representative post-election surveys since the late 1990s, and combines the individual-level survey data with data on systematic characteristics of countries and expert evaluations of political parties.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> These results are available in the *Supplementary Document*.

<sup>17</sup> The election surveys available in the CSES data for the countries under analysis are as follows: Denmark (1998- 2005); Finland (2003-2011); Germany (1998- 2009); Iceland (2003-2009); Netherlands (1998-2006); Norway (2001-2005); Portugal (2002-2009), Spain (1996- 2008); and Sweden (1998-2006). I use the CSES surveys and not the whole set of election surveys I used for the aggregate analysis because the CSES project has comparable question formats across surveys. In addition, the CSES data publish expert locations of political parties, which I use as a proxy measure for *actual* party positions.

The mechanism I test at the individual-level is whether voters perceive political parties as closer to their own left-right position when they appeal to a broader set of voters. The dependent variable measures the absolute distance between the survey respondent's left-right self-placement and his/her placement of each party, [*Perceived Distance<sub>ij</sub>*], where *i* is a voter and *j* is a party. Hence, each survey respondent enters the data as many times as the number of parties in that country. This type of data is called stacked data, where the unit of analysis is a party-voter dyad (van der Brug et al. 2008, Dahlberg 2009) and where individual-party dyads are nested within higher levels of data, such as countries.

As in the aggregate data analysis, I use perceptual disagreements as a proxy for the party strategy. The appropriate test of whether voters perceive parties as more proximate as the parties' disagreement scores increases is not to test the direct effect of disagreement on perceived distances but to examine how perceptual disagreement affects the relationship between actual and perceived distances. That is, if voters perceive a broad-appealing party (i.e., a party with high level of disagreement) closer to their own ideological position compared to the party's actual distance from them, this would support the argument that voters perceive these parties as closer than where they actually are.

To construct this interaction effect between disagreement and actual distance of the party to the voter, I first calculated the absolute distance between each voter's self position on the left-right scale and the actual position of the party, as perceived by political experts [*Actual Distance<sub>ij</sub>*], and then, interacted this actual distance with perceptual disagreement variable.<sup>18</sup> The CSES data include expert perceptions of

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<sup>18</sup> One may argue that the broad-appeal strategy may also affect expert perceptions, and hence their perceptions may not reflect the actual party position. However, if the strategy affects experts and voters similarly, then the actual distance variable underestimates the actual distance. Therefore, the results I report are conservative estimates of how voters perceive broad-appeal parties in comparison to the actual party position. In addition, a more accurate measure of party position is not available. Manifesto data may

party's left-right positions. I use the position of each party as perceived by the CSES experts to measure the actual position of the party.<sup>19</sup> In order to show that voters perceive these broad-appeal parties as closer to their own position, the perceived distance should become smaller compared to the actual distance as perceptual disagreement increases (a negative coefficient for the interaction variable between the *actual distance* and *disagreement* variables).

The dyad-level data I use have a hierarchical structure because the main variables in the stacked data are measured on different levels (i.e., disagreement is measured at the party level while the dependent variable is measured at the individual-party dyadic level). In total, there are six levels in the data, each of which may impose measured and unmeasured effects on the dependent variable (see, Fortunato and Stevenson 2013, for a similar data structure). These six levels are the country-level, survey/election level, party level, respondent level, election-specific party level, and party-specific respondent level. The main independent variables, *disagreement<sub>j</sub>* and *actual distance<sub>ij</sub>*, are measured at the party and the party-specific respondent levels, respectively. I include control variables from different

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be an alternative. However, because broad-appeal strategy is a campaign strategy that goes beyond the manifesto position of the party (see the definition of the German SPD's 1998 and 2013 strategies above) and because of the different scales used in both projects, I report the results with the expert placements.

<sup>19</sup> One problem with the CSES dataset's expert perceptions is that the data often use only one expert's coding (the country expert who is responsible of collecting and sharing the data). To ensure that the results are not driven by a single expert's perceptions, I replicated the models by replacing the expert perceptions from the CSES data with the Chapel Hill expert data. The two experts data correlate at 0.95 and the results continue to support the main findings (see the *Supplementary Document*). However, because Chapel Hill data do not include Iceland or Norway and because the years of the surveys do not match in many instances here I report the results with the CSES data.

levels and election/survey fixed effects to control for election specific factors. In the *Supplementary Document* I explain why each variable is included and how I measure these variables. I use a multilevel model to account for the hierarchical data structure, and run the models while accounting for the unmeasured effects in the party and election-specific-party levels.

### ***Results for the Individual-Level Mechanism***

Do voters perceive broadly appealing parties as more proximate to their own positions than where the parties actually are? Table 3 presents the results for the multi-level model. Column 1 presents the results using data from all respondents. To recap, in order to conclude that voters perceive parties to be closer to their preferred positions compared to parties' actual position as parties follow a broad-appeal strategy (i.e., as perceptual disagreement increases), we should see a negative and statistically significant coefficient on the interaction variable. There is support for the hypothesis. The second column replicates the same model but drops single-issue parties (consistent with the analyses above). These results still show robust effects of disagreement on voter perceptions.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> While I hypothesized and tested the effect of perceptual disagreement on party vote shares at the aggregate level, I do not test whether it affects vote choice. Disagreements should affect perceived distance and motivate *some* voters to change their votes in favor of the party. But not all voters will change their votes. They may have other reasons to vote for a different party (such as party identification or habit), or there may be other parties that they perceive as closer than the broad-appealing party. But some will change their vote choice, and I argue that this group of new voters explains the positive effect of the strategy on aggregate electoral performance.

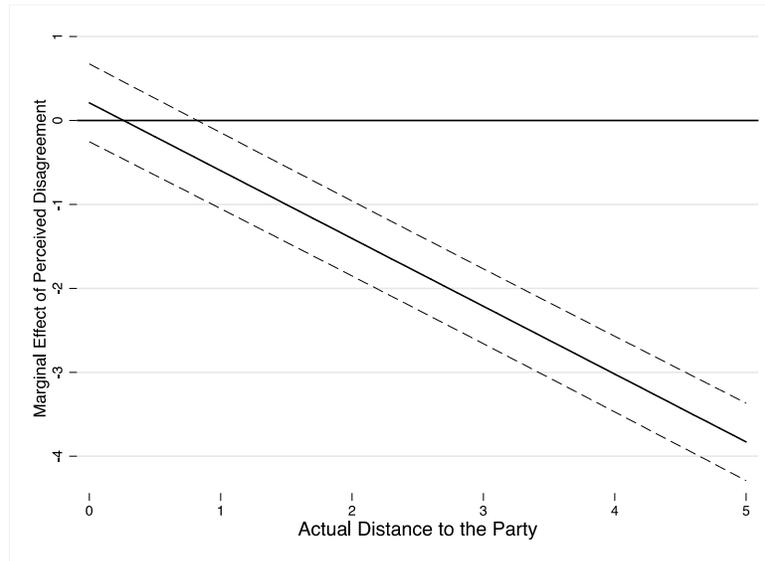
**Table 3: The Analysis of the Individual-Level Mechanism**  
(DV: Absolute distance between self position and perceived party position)

	<b>Model 1</b> <b>All Voters</b>	<b>Model 2</b> <b>No Single-Issue</b> <b>Parties</b>	<b>Model 3</b> <b>Other Voters</b>
<i>Actual Distance</i>	<b>1.149*</b> <b>(0.008)</b>	<b>1.171*</b> <b>(0.009)</b>	<b>1.172*</b> <b>(0.009)</b>
<i>Disagreement</i>	<b>0.210</b> <b>(0.180)</b>	<b>0.257</b> <b>(0.196)</b>	<b>-0.088</b> <b>(0.196)</b>
<i>Disagreement * Actual Distance</i>	<b>-0.808*</b> <b>(0.019)</b>	<b>-0.866*</b> <b>(0.021)</b>	<b>-0.783*</b> <b>(0.021)</b>
<i>Party Supporter</i>	-0.865* (0.012)	-0.840* (0.012)	
<i>Education</i>	0.002 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)	0.004* (0.002)
<i>Single issue party</i>	0.061 (0.033)		0.048 (0.035)
<i>In government</i>	0.144* (0.014)	0.161* (0.015)	0.163* (0.015)
<i>Vote share</i>	0.009* (0.001)	0.007* (0.002)	0.009* (0.002)
<i>Intercept</i>	0.579* (0.166)	0.576* (0.215)	0.579* (0.184)
<i>Random Effect: Party</i>	0.073* (0.024)	0.073* (0.024)	0.093* (0.029)
<i>Random Effect: Party-Elect</i>	0.071* (0.017)	0.064* (0.016)	0.086* (0.020)
<i>Random Effect: Residual</i>	2.658* (0.008)	2.592* (0.008)	2.712* (0.008)
Log Likelihood	-446421.12	-409708.96	-401804.54
N	233,901	216,086	209,399

Notes: The numbers in parentheses are standard errors. The results are based on multi-level analyses with random intercepts for the party and party-election levels of the data. The models also include election/survey fixed effects, which are not reported.  $p < .05$

To better interpret the effects of perceptual disagreement on voter perceptions, I present Figure 2. The figure shows the marginal effect of perceptual disagreement (along with its 99% confidence intervals due to the large number of data-points) for different values of *actual distance* using Column 1 in Table 3.

**Figure 2: The Marginal Effect of Perceived Disagreement on Perceived Distance**



Notes: The solid line is the marginal effect of perceived disagreement on perceived absolute distance. The dashed lines show the 99% confidence intervals. The marginal effect is calculated based on the coefficients from Model 1 in Table 3.

When a voter is at the party's actual position (i.e., at 0 on the x-axis), disagreement does not have a significant effect on her perception. This suggests that parties can still keep their ideologically core supporters attached to the party. The negative marginal effect for disagreement suggests that as disagreement increases voters perceive parties closer to their ideal positions. When the actual distance to the party is 2.5, for instance (the average distance in the data), the marginal effect of perceived disagreement is about -1.8, suggesting that when perceived disagreement changes from 0 to 1, voters who are 2.5 points away from the party perceive the party as only 0.7 point away, on average. Given the disagreement score values in my data, if disagreement changes from 0.2 to 0.6, voters who are 2.5 points away from the party would perceive the party at around 1.8, on average.

These results support the individual-level mechanism outlined above. However, one may argue that the results are driven by party supporters' perceptions. As I stated above, according to the projection

literature, party supporters may perceive a party closer to their position because they identify with the party. However, for the broad-appeal strategy theory to be feasible, the party should be able to convince other voters that the party is ideologically closer to them. If we see consistent effects of disagreement on those respondents who are not the supporters of the party then this would support the argument that parties are successfully convincing other voters that they are representing their interests and ensure that some of those other voters start voting for the party. To ensure that the effect is not due to supporters' projection bias, I ran the model only for those voters who do not identify with the focal party in Column 3 of Table 3.

The results show that the results are robust even when we drop the party's supporters from the analysis. Other respondents, on average, perceive a party's position to be closer as disagreement increases. The interaction coefficient shows that voters who do not support the party still perceive it to be closer to their preferred position as perceptual disagreement increases. These robust results suggest that projection effects on the part of party supporters do not drive these results.

### **Conclusion:**

Parties may be criticized for not taking clear and distinguished positions. However, when political parties aim to increase their vote shares, appealing broadly to attract different groups of voters with diverse preferences may be a winning strategy in the short term. If parties can successfully convince different groups of voters that they are in fact ideologically close to them, they can win the hearts and minds of a broader electorate. Using survey and electoral data from nine Western European democracies, I demonstrated that this strategy helps parties gain votes in elections. The individual-level analysis suggests that voters perceive these parties to be, on average, closer to their own position.

While parties appear to benefit from this strategy as long as they can convince voters that they are a good choice, the findings I present depict a rather depressing story for voters, one that tells us that parties may be able to beguile voters with their strategies. Is V. O. Key right, when he says that “the voice of the people is but an echo” (1966)? The answer to this question requires more detailed research on what affects voter perceptions and how fragile those perceptions are. However, regarding the effects of party strategies on perceptions, we may conclude on a potential positive note. Just because the current data tell us that parties appear to convince voters that they are ideologically close to them does not mean that there are no limits to the effects of this strategy. Parties may in fact be punished for being too vague or ambiguous. If parties exaggerate their broad appeal, the media and rival parties may attack the party and depict it as insincere or opportunistic. This in turn may alienate some voters. I have checked the data for this possible curvilinear effect of the broad-appeal strategy, but because of the limits of the observed data, there does not appear to be an upper threshold. The negative effect may also manifest itself over the long-run if parties continuously adopt the strategy but fail to deliver broadly-appealing policies when in office (see also footnote 6). The question about the limits of this party strategy may require either a formal model with comparative statics or a more qualitative or expanded analysis. Survey questions asking voters to evaluate party strategies would also open new avenues of research.

There almost certainly are other consequences of appealing to different groups of voters that are beyond the scope of this research. As an example, in multi-party systems elections are important, but equally important are government formations. One may argue that parties with broader appeals are more likely to be included into coalition governments, given that their broader stances can be seen as attractive for potential coalition partners.. Additional questions regarding the effects of this strategy on coalition duration, satisfaction with democracy, trust in parties, etc. await scholarly attention.

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## SUPPLEMENTARY DOCUMENT

This document reports additional information and supplementary analyses.

### Descriptive Statistics

Table S1 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables used in the paper.

<b>Table S1: Descriptive Statistics</b>				
	Mean	St. Dev	Min	Max
<i>Aggregate Model (N=248)</i>				
<i>DV: <math>\Delta</math>Vote Share</i>	-0.152	4.605	-13.87	12.17
<i>Disagreement (t)</i>	0.391	0.091	0.190	0.720
<i><math>\Delta</math>Disagreement (t)</i>	0.008	0.052	-0.160	0.160
<i>Party Moderation</i>	0.057	0.366	-1.374	1.158
<i>Single Issue Party</i>	0.109	0.311	0	1
<i>In Government</i>	0.328	0.470	0	1
<i>GDP Per Capita Growth</i>	1.568	2.185	-4.905	4.823
<i>LDV: <math>\Delta</math>Vote Share (t-1)</i>	-0.018	4.605	-13.87	12.17
<i>Micro-Level (N=233,901)</i>				
<i>DV: <math> self-party_i </math></i>	2.741	2.305	0	10
<i>Actual Distance <math> self-party\_expert_i </math></i>	2.534	1.886	0	10
<i>Disagreement</i>	0.416	0.093	0.20	0.72
<i>Education</i>	5.305	1.773	1	8
<i>Party Supporter</i>	0.105	0.306	0	1
<i>Single Issue Party</i>	0.076	0.265	0	1
<i>Party Vote</i>	16.967	12.644	0	46.40
<i>In Government</i>	0.356	0.479	0	1

### **The Measurement Details of the Perceived Disagreement Variable:**

As indicated in the text, I used van der Eijk's (2001) perceived agreement measure as the main independent variable of *perceptual disagreement*. It is coded using the survey question that asks respondents to locate each political party in their country on a left-right scale. Using the frequencies of observations in contiguous categories, van der Eijk calculates an agreement score. More specifically, the measure incorporates information about the number of empty and nonempty contiguous categories with their respective frequencies. Agreement increases as the number of contiguous non-empty categories decreases. The scale ranges from -1 to +1, where -1 refers to a distribution of perceptions such that half of the respondents place party X at the most leftist position on the scale and the other half place it at the most rightist position. The original measure takes the value of 0 when there is a uniform distribution across the range of values on the left-right scale and +1 when there is full agreement (i.e., everybody locates the party at the same position), with values in between.

van der Eijk argues that using standard deviations around the average perceived position of the party is a more intuitive yet possibly biased measure for agreement. More specifically, a perceived distribution centered around an average at the center of the scale may show a lower standard deviation compared to a distribution centered at one of the extremes, even though the distribution in the latter scenario may have a higher peak (smaller variance). This is because the bounded scale makes it impossible to locate the party equally on both sides of the extreme position. van der Eijk's ordered rating scale measure overcomes this potential bias in the measure of perceived disagreement (see van der Eijk 2001 for more technical details).

I converted the variable for the analyses in the text, so that 1 means full disagreement (i.e., a uniform distribution of perceptions for party X across the range of values on the left-right scale) and 0 means full agreement (i.e., all voters locate party X at the same location on the scale). Figure 1 in the text shows the distribution of this *perceptual disagreement* variable in my data of nine European democracies.

### **The Individual-Level Data Structure and the Variables Included:**

The dyad-level data I used for the individual-level analyses have a hierarchical structure, because the main variables in my stacked data are measured on different levels (i.e., perceptual disagreement is measured at the party level, while the dependent variable is measured at the individual-party dyadic level). In total, there are six levels in the data, each of which may impose measured and unmeasured

effects on the dependent variable. Because of space constraints, I could not explain in the text the levels and the variables I include from each. Below are more details on the structure of the data (the details on each level) and on the variables included in the individual-level model.

- 1) *Country level*: these are variables that are fixed within each country but which vary across countries. However, I argue that, at this level, no variable should affect respondent perceptions of party proximity. As such, I do not include any variables from this level. That said, I have replicated the model with country fixed effects (see below Table S7). The results are robust to this alternative specification.
- 2) *Survey or election level*: These are variables that are fixed for all parties and respondents within each survey/election but which vary across elections/surveys. There can be various survey specific factors that may affect perceived distances of voters, such as interview mode or the number of parties respondents are asked to locate on the left-right scale. Hence, I reported the models in the main text including election/survey fixed effects.
- 3) *Party level*: These are variables that are fixed for each party in every country and across all elections but which vary across parties. There can be many factors at this level that can affect voters' perceptions, such as those related to party organizations and valence evaluations. To control for these unmeasured factors, I ran a random-intercept model for this level of the hierarchical data.
- 4) *Respondent level*: These are variables that are fixed for each respondent but which vary across individuals. The only variable I included from this level is that of *education* (an eight category variable ranging from no education to completed undergraduate degree). We may expect educated voters to know more about the true positions of parties, and hence to have less biased perceptions of party positions compared to the actual distances to parties (Dahlberg 2009).<sup>21</sup> Below I also show robust results when I include a political knowledge variable (using the answers to the three information/knowledge questions in the CSES data). Although the results remain robust, we lose a significant number of cases (around 40,000), because the knowledge questions were not asked consistently across the countries and because of a highly variable no-response rate. For this reason, I did not include the CSES-based knowledge variable in the models presented in the text.

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<sup>21</sup> I also ran additional models that include other commonly added respondent-level variables, such as age and gender. Because the results are robust to these additional variables and because I do not have any theoretical reason for how and why gender and age should affect voters' perceptual distances to parties, I present the models without these variables.

- 5) *Election-specific party level*: These are variables that are fixed for a party in an election across respondents but which vary from election to election for the same party. The main independent variable, *disagreement*, is measured at this level. I also control for government membership (measured as a dummy variable and coded 1 for parties that were in government before the upcoming election) and party vote share. Voters may simply be able to learn more about government parties or larger parties due to disproportionate coverage of these parties in the media. The single-issue party dummy variable is also measured at this level. There are other unmeasured factors related to party campaigns, election manifestoes, or party competence evaluations that potentially affect voter perceptions at this level. The random-intercept model I used in the main text to test the individual-level mechanism also included this level to control for its random effects.
- 6) *Party-specific respondent level*: These are variables that are measured at the individual-level but which vary from party to party (and vary for each election and country). The *actual distance* variable I described above is measured at this level. I also included a party identification dummy, which is measured based on the CSES question of with which party the respondent identifies.<sup>22</sup>

To account for this hierarchical data structure, I used a multilevel model. The appropriate modeling strategy for such a data structure accounts for measured and unmeasured factors at each level of the hierarchy. In a simple hierarchical structure, where the interest is on explaining individual-level behavior in multiple elections across countries, this would lead to an analysis of individual-level data while accounting for measured and unmeasured factors at the country and election levels. The party-responder dyad level data I have are built on six levels. To complicate things further, not every level is nested under another level, i.e., some levels are crossed. As an example, the party level (level 3 above) is nested under the country level (level 1) but not under the survey/election level (level 2). Similarly, the election-specific party level (level 5) is nested under the party level (level 3) but not under the respondent level (level 4). Such complications make it more or less impossible to add random intercepts for each level.

Based on the theoretical expectations for each level, which I outlined above, I consider the country and respondent levels (levels 1 and 4) to be the least problematic and the party and election-

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<sup>22</sup> I also note that the results for the main independent variables are robust when I exclude these control variables; that is, the main results I present are not dependent on the inclusion of these control variables in the model. In addition, there is no multicollinearity problem between these variables.

specific party levels (levels 3 and 5) to be the most problematic. In the text, I ran the models with election/survey fixed effects and accounted for the unmeasured effects in the party and election-specific-party levels, i.e., I ran the multi-level model with random intercepts for these two levels. I also replicated the main model below by adding country fixed effects (see Table S7 below).

### **Do Party and Individual Level Factors Affect the Level of Perceptual Disagreement?**

As I explained in detail in the text (pp. 14-15), perceptual disagreement may artificially increase/decrease due to some party or voter characteristics (such as single-issue party status, party extremeness, party size, and government membership at the party level) and political interest at the individual level.

To rule out the alternative that party level factors affect perceptual disagreement scores, I run a model in which the dependent variable is the change in perceptual disagreement score and the independent variables include the government membership dummy, the absolute distance of the party from the mean voter position, a single-issue party dummy coded using information on the left-right emphasis in election manifestos (see footnote 12 for the detailed description), the vote share of the party, and the lagged dependent variable. Table S2 presents the results for this model. As the table shows, only the single-issue dummy variable has a statistically significant effect. As a result, I tested the robustness of the results in the paper by replicating the models with single-issue parties omitted.

**Table S2: The Effects Party Characteristics on Changes in Perceptual Disagreement  
(DV: Change in Perceptual Agreement)**

	Party Characteristics on Disagreement
<i>In Government</i>	0.006 (0.007)
<i>Single Issue Party</i>	0.045* (0.012)
<i>Distance from Mean</i>	0.005 (0.004)
<i>Party Vote Share</i>	0.0001 (0.0002)
$\Delta$ <i>Disagreement (t-1) (LDV)</i>	-0.026 (0.063)
<i>Intercept</i>	-0.013 (0.007)
<i>N/ Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></i>	188 / 0.08

Notes: The numbers in parentheses are election-clustered standard errors. \* $p < .05$

Beyond party level characteristics, one may argue that perceptual disagreement may increase or decrease based on individual level characteristics. Particularly, one may argue that political interest biases the disagreement scores. As political interest among voters decreases, it is more likely that voters' perceptions of party positions will be uninformed and random, artificially increasing the perceptual disagreement scores. However, the analyses presented here show that this is not a problem, at least in the nine countries I analyze. The perceptual disagreement score I used in the paper includes all respondents' perceptions of party positions. To see whether political interest matters, I calculate the perceptual disagreement scores for individuals reporting high and low interest in politics. Based on their answers to a standard question of interest in politics, I separate high interest respondents from low interest respondents, and calculate the perceptual disagreement scores separately for both groups. Columns 1 and 2 in Table S3 show the results using the perceptual disagreement scores for high and low interested respondents, respectively.

As the results show, the main findings from Table 2 in the text remain robust if we only focus on high interested respondents. The results are slightly weaker for low interest respondents but still statistically significant and substantive. These results suggest that the main findings are not driven by the disagreement scores that are artificially high due to voters' political interest.

**Table S3: The Effects of Political Interest (DV: Change in Party Vote Share)**

	High Interested	Low Interested
<i>ΔDisagreement (t)- Interested</i>	14.829* (6.620)	
<i>ΔDisagreement (t)- Not Interested</i>		12.412* (3.754)
<i>Party Moderation</i>	-1.720* (0.678)	-1.658* (0.656)
<i>In government</i> (1: in govt, 0: in opp)	-4.342* (1.081)	-4.309* (1.073)
<i>GDP per capita growth (t)</i>	-0.186 (0.139)	-0.234 (0.139)
<i>Government x GDP Growth</i>	0.555 (0.356)	0.528 (0.335)
<i>Single-Issue Party</i>	-0.373 (0.866)	-0.574 (0.915)
<i>Vote Change (t-1) LDV</i>	-0.369* (0.076)	-0.352* (0.073)
<i>Constant</i>	1.369* (0.316)	1.459* (0.354)
N/ Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	239/ 0.22	239/ 0.24

Notes: The numbers in parentheses are the election-clustered standard errors. The model also includes political party fixed effects, which are not reported. \* $p < .05$

## Sensitivity Checks

### *Aggregate Electoral Data Sensitivity Analyses*

Table S4 shows the sensitivity checks for the aggregate electoral level model presented in Table 2 in the main text of the paper. Column 1 adds the distance from the mean (*extremeness*) variable as a control variable to the main model. Although extremeness does not affect disagreement directly (see above Table S2), one may argue that we need to control in the main model for this variable, in order to ensure that the observed effect of disagreement on changes in vote share is unaffected by extremeness. I find that extremeness does not have a direct effect on the dependent variable, and more importantly, the coefficient for the disagreement variable stays robust.

Column 2 replaces the party moderation variable with an alternative measurement. In the original text, party moderation was calculated using the shift in the party position toward the *mean* voter position. Although it is common to use the mean values in the literature (Adams et al. 2005, Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012, Ezrow 2007), the *median* voter position traditionally has been used to measure public opinion (see, e.g., Downs 1957). Column 2 shows that the results do not change if we replace the moderation to the *mean* voter position variable with the moderation to the *median* voter position.

Column 3 replicates the main model from the paper, replacing the last government membership dummy variable with the membership to the longest-served government dummy variable. In multi-party parliamentary systems, like those under analysis here, it is likely for multiple governments to form and collapse in between two elections. While the model in the paper shows that the last governing parties suffer heavily in the upcoming election, one may argue that those in the longest served government should be held more accountable. However, the results stay robust for longest and last government variables.

In the main model in Table 2 I calculated the perceptual disagreement variable using the perceptions data of all respondents. Column 4 replicates the model by replacing the disagreement variable using only party supporters' perceptions. I note that party supporters' and all respondents' perceptual disagreement scores correlate at 0.63 level. The results also stay robust.

**Table S4: Aggregate Model Sensitivity Checks I (DV: Change in Party Vote Share)**

	Extremeness	Moderation to Median	Longest Government	Party Supporters for Disagreement
<i>ΔDisagreement (t)</i>	23.773* (7.062)	22.865* (7.092)	22.394* (6.873)	11.526* (4.246)
<i>Party Moderation</i>	-2.764* (0.669)	-2.390* (0.752)	-2.404* (0.761)	-1.453 (0.753)
<i>In government</i> (1: in govt, 0: in opp)	-4.170* (1.114)	-4.231* (1.098)	-3.760* (1.090)	-3.710* (1.020)
<i>GDP per capita growth (t)</i>	-0.208 (0.146)	-0.246 (0.141)	-0.250 (0.142)	-0.137 (0.158)
<i>Government x GDP Growth</i>	0.514 (0.339)	0.595 (0.333)	0.605 (0.326)	0.462 (0.338)
<i>Single-Issue Party</i>	-0.613 (0.933)	-0.522 (0.847)	-0.603 (0.875)	0.126 (0.789)
<i>Vote Change (t-1) LDV</i>	-0.392* (0.073)	-0.401* (0.074)	-0.409* (0.072)	-0.396* (0.081)
<i>Extremeness</i>	-0.982 (1.032)			
<i>Constant</i>	2.947 (1.639)	1.344* (0.348)	1.240* (0.355)	1.077* (0.361)
N/ Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	241/ 0.23	241/ 0.23	241/ 0.21	228/ 0.21

Notes: The numbers in parentheses are the election-clustered standard errors. The model also includes political party fixed effects, which are not reported. \* $p < .05$

Table S5 replicates the same aggregate model for additional specifications. Column 1 replicates the main model by dropping the lagged dependent variable (lagged change in vote shares between elections at time  $t-2$  and  $t-1$ ). While there are theoretical reasons to expect that previous vote change will affect current vote change, as I explained in the paper, one may argue that including the LDV unnecessarily reduces the degrees of freedom. The results show that twelve cases are gained when the LDV is dropped. More importantly, the main results stay robust.

Column 2 replicates the main model using a Tobit model (I used OLS regression in the text to test the models). Given that vote change can take only limited values (between -100 and +100), Tobit might be a more appropriate test. Column 2 shows that the results do not change depending on the model used. Column 3 replaces the dependent variable and the two independent variables (i.e., the previous vote share and previous vote change) with their logarithmic transformations. Some methodologists advocate analyzing party support in multiparty elections using logarithmic transformations of parties' vote shares (see, e.g., Tomz, Tucker, and Wittenberg 2002), in order to account for the interdependencies of party vote shares between the parties competing in the same

election and because of the fact that the vote shares of all parties competing the same election must sum to 100%. Accordingly, I calculate the logs of party vote shares in the current and previous elections to generate the logged vote change dependent variable, and implement the same logarithmic transformations for the LDV and the previous vote share variable. Column 3 shows that the results stay robust with these transformations. Finally, Column 4 replicates the model by dropping outlier cases (i.e., the Portuguese CDS-PP Alliance in 2009 and the Spanish Basque Nationalist Party in 2000). The results remain robust.

**Table S5: Aggregate Model Sensitivity Checks I (DV: Change in Party Vote Share)**

	No LDV	Tobit	Logged Votes	No Outliers
<i>ΔDisagreement (t)</i>	18.237* (6.555)	23.091* (6.029)	2.528* (0.673)	23.366* (7.243)
<i>Party Moderation</i>	-1.983* (0.715)	-2.443* (0.633)	-0.262* (0.089)	-2.435* (0.746)
<i>In government</i> (1: in govt, 0: in opp)	-5.115* (1.111)	-4.205* (0.932)	-0.285* (0.069)	-4.251* (1.126)
<i>GDP per capita growth (t)</i>	-0.259 (0.141)	-0.248* (0.120)	-0.021 (0.019)	-0.259 (0.145)
<i>Government x GDP Growth</i>	0.578 (0.341)	0.589* (0.282)	0.034 (0.028)	0.597 (0.334)
<i>Single-Issue Party</i>	-0.840 (0.841)	-0.531 (0.724)	-0.006 (0.100)	-0.636 (0.906)
<i>Vote Change (t-1) LDV</i>		-0.401* (0.062)	-0.353* (0.093)	-0.400* (0.073)
<i>Constant</i>	1.691* (0.341)	0.703 (0.794)	0.129* (0.039)	1.400* (0.379)
N/ Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	253/ 0.08	241/ 0.10	241/ 0.16	239/ 0.23

Notes: The numbers in parentheses are the election-clustered standard errors. The model also includes political party fixed effects, which are not reported. \* $p < .05$

Table S6 shows the coefficient of the change in the disagreement variable for nine separate models, dropping one country at a time. Each model replicates the main model from the text (Column 1 of Table 2) but only reports the disagreement coefficient. These ‘jackknifing’ results show that none of the countries drive the results.

**Table S6: Jackknifing Results (DV: Change in Party Vote Share)**

	Disagreement Coefficient
<i>Dropping Denmark</i> (N=219)	23.132* (7.149)
<i>Dropping Finland</i> (N =234)	23.091* (6.979)
<i>Dropping Germany</i> (N =210)	28.032* (8.664)
<i>Dropping Iceland</i> (N = 229)	23.027* (7.541)
<i>Dropping Netherlands</i> (N =201)	17.796* (7.249)
<i>Dropping Norway</i> (N =199)	24.200* (7.097)
<i>Dropping Portugal</i> (N =232)	23.159* (7.341)
<i>Dropping Spain</i> (N =209)	22.985* (8.258)
<i>Dropping Sweden</i> (N =195)	22.916* (7.811)

Notes: Each coefficient is part of the full model (Column 1 of Table 2), which is replicated, dropping one country at a time. The numbers in parentheses are the election-clustered standard errors. \* $p < .05$

### ***Individual-Level Survey Data Sensitivity Analyses***

Table S7 presents the sensitivity check for the individual-level analysis and replicates Model 1 in Table 3. Column 1 drops the interaction variable between the actual distance and disagreement and shows the direct effect of disagreement on perceived distance, controlling only for actual distance. As expected, disagreement has a negative and substantive effect on perceived distance. However, as I noted in the paper, a more appropriate test of the hypothesis requires the interaction variable, and that is what I report in the main text.

Column 2 replicates the main model by including a political knowledge variable. While I controlled for the level of education in the main model, one may argue that political knowledge (or interest) also affects voters' perceptions. CSES surveys (which I used to test the individual-level models) do not ask respondents about their political interest. However, there are three knowledge questions in the data. Using the answers to these questions, I calculate the total number of correct answers given to these three questions. The knowledge variable therefore ranges between 0 and 3, where higher numbers indicate more knowledge. While the variable has a positive effect on perceived knowledge, adding this

variable to the model does not alter the main findings. In addition, I lose about forty thousand cases when I include this variable, because the knowledge questions are not asked in every election survey. Therefore, I did not report the models with this variable in the main text.

Column 3 replicates the main model with an alternative measurement of the *actual distance* variable. Actual distance in the main text is measured as the absolute distance between the respondent's self position and the perceived party position by the CSES experts. However, one problem with the CSES expert perceptions data is that the data often reflects the perceptions of only one expert, who is responsible for collecting and sharing the data. In this alternative version, I replace the CSES expert data with the Chapel Hill expert data. Chapel Hill expert surveys rely on at least 5 and often around 10 experts to position parties. Nevertheless, the Chapel Hill and CSES expert perceptions correlate at 0.95. As such, the results using the alternative version of the variable stay robust. However, because the Chapel Hill Project excludes Norway and Iceland and because for many other election surveys the CSES and Chapel Hill surveys do not coincide temporarily, I reported the models in the main paper using the actual distance variable measured using the CSES expert positions.

Finally, Column 4 shows the main results with country-fixed effects (to control for any country-specific effects). I reiterate that crossed levels, as well as the number of overall levels, make it practically impossible to run a fully hierarchical model. Given the theoretical expectations laid out in the paper, I based the analyses in Table 3 on a random-intercept model for the party and party-election levels with election/survey fixed effects. In Column 4, I replicate the analysis for an additional specification and include country fixed effects in the model (not shown). As the results show, the relationship between disagreement, actual distance, and perceptual distance stays the same for this alternative specification.

**Table S7: Sensitivity Check for the Individual-Level Models (DV: Absolute Perceptual Distance)**

	Direct Effects	Political Knowledge	Chapel Hill Experts	Country Fixed Effects
<i>Actual Distance</i>	0.815* (0.002)	1.152* (0.010)	1.108* (0.009)	1.132* (0.008)
<i>Disagreement</i>	-1.880* (0.174)	-0.411* (0.195)	0.999* (0.185)	0.412* (0.091)
<b><i>Disagreement * Actual Distance</i></b>		<b>-0.820* (0.022)</b>	<b>-0.612* (0.021)</b>	<b>-0.777* (0.019)</b>
<i>Party Supporter</i>	-0.871* (0.012)	-0.862* (0.013)	-0.847* (0.013)	-0.868* (0.012)
<i>Education</i>	0.002 (0.002)	-0.005* (0.002)	0.012* (0.002)	0.004 (0.002)
<i>Single-Issue party</i>	0.004 (0.033)	0.052 (0.042)	0.201* (0.032)	-0.044 (0.028)
<i>In government</i>	0.177* (0.014)	0.111* (0.015)	0.009 (0.014)	0.201* (0.014)
<i>Vote share</i>	0.010* (0.001)	0.006* (0.002)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)
<i>Political Knowledge</i>		0.052* (0.004)		
<i>Intercept</i>	1.463* (0.172)	0.812* (0.173)	0.285* (0.129)	0.527* (0.133)
<i>Random Effect: Party</i>	0.082* (0.026)	0.070* (0.026)	0.063* (0.017)	0.073* (0.024)
<i>Random Effect: Party-Elect</i>	0.077* (0.018)	0.082* (0.021)	0.017* (0.007)	0.073* (0.017)
<i>Random Effect: Residual</i>	2.677* (0.0078)	2.671* (0.009)	2.607* (0.009)	2.672* (0.008)
Log Likelihood	-447281.2	-364096.87	-340302.32	-447062.6
N	233901	190501	179234	233901

Notes: The numbers in parentheses are standard errors. The results are based on multi-level analyses with random intercepts for the party and party-election levels of the data. The models also include election/survey fixed effects, which are not reported.  $p < .05$