The Electoral Consequences of Perceptual Ambiguity in Europe

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**** VERY PRELIMINARY VERSION****

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Introduction:

Party policy ambiguity is considered as a potential threat to representative democracy by limiting the ability of voters to make reasoned choices in elections (van der Brug, 1997; Dahlberg, 2009). Reasoned choice requires voters to reflect their policy preferences in the elections by voting for the parties that will best represent those interests. As a result, it requires voters to understand which party will better represent his/her interests and vote for that party in the election. There is an extensive literature examining the capabilities of voters as individuals to follow politics and make reasoned choices. Overall, the general conclusion in this literature appears that voters lack full information but still capable of making reasoned choices with relatively little information (see, e.g., Adams, 2001; Downs, 1957; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998).

The problem arises if there is not clear information available for voters to get informed. When parties do not represent clear policies to voters and when voters as a result cannot pick the right party for their interests in the elections the mandate theory fails. Voters are more likely to make unreasoned choices, and election results are less likely to reflect the preferences of voters. In turn, the party in office may wrongly assume that they have the correct mandate. The representative democracy fails when the party in office follows policies that it wrongly thinks are shared by voters.

The question then is why parties cannot inform citizens so that voters have a shared understanding of party policies. Why do parties do not clarify their positions? I argue that while shared perceptions of party policies are essential for the functioning of representative democracy, political parties have incentives to increase perceptual ambiguity about their policy positions. That is, political parties strategically want to present policies that would
increase ambiguity about their policy positions in the eyes of voters. In this paper, I show with
data from seven West European countries over a thirty-year period that political parties have
more electoral success when voters do not agree where the party is located on the left-right
scale, that is, when perceptual ambiguity is high.

There are several implications of this paper for representative democracy as I laid out
above, and for our understanding of party strategies. This paper contributes to the existing
literature on party policy ambiguity by showing that ambiguity affects election results (see,
e.g., Shepsle, 1972; Page, 1976; and more recently, Aragones and Postlewaite, 2002;
Callendar and Wilson, 2008; Laslier, 2006). This paper, however, is the first to my knowledge
that tests this argument empirically in a comparative context with multi-party parliamentary
democracies. In addition, while there is conflicting evidence for whether ambiguity helps or
hurts parties in the American context, I argue and show with empirical evidence that
ambiguity helps parties in multi-party systems where parties have limited opportunities for
and more risks associated with change.

**Existing Literature**

Scholars have been interested in understanding parties’ policy strategies and the
consequences of these strategies for election outcomes for decades. However, the focus
largely has been on examining how the positions of parties and changes in these positions
affect their election performance. Hence, Downs showed that in a two-party system with
single-peaked voter preferences, that is, when the density of voter preferences increases first
to the modal preference and then decline, political parties should locate at the median voter
position. Rabinowitz and MacDonald’s directional model (1989) and Grofman’s discounting
model (1985), on the other hand, showed that voters may prefer voting for more extreme parties with the hope that the implemented policy will be closer to their desired policy position. In more recent empirical comparative work, Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) showed that moderating party positions have rewarding consequences for political parties with a lag, and Bawn and Somer-Topcu (2012) presented evidence that governing parties gain votes by presenting more extreme positions while opposition parties should present more moderate positions for electoral gain. Yet, party policy location is only one aspect of strategic party position taking. How clearly this position is presented and how much ambiguity surrounds this position are equally important questions for elections.

Downs (1957) was among the first to acknowledge the electoral implications of ambiguity for political parties. Talking about two-party systems with single-peaked voter preferences he stated that party policy ambiguity “increases the number of voters to whom a party may appeal” (p. 136). Electoral prospects of ambiguity, therefore, should encourage candidates to become more ambiguous in the eyes of voters. Fifteen years later, Shepsle (1972) showed with his spatial model that parties benefit from ambiguity if and when voters are risk-acceptant. A candidate that presents a lottery of policy positions containing the median position can defeat a party with a clear position if the voters are willing to take the risk of voting for a more ambiguous candidate. This is followed by Page (1976) who argued with his “Emphasis Allocation Theory” that candidates should avoid talking about divisive issues in order not to risk their standing in elections.

Formal models following these seminal work examined specific conditions under which ambiguity can benefit political parties. Hence, uncertainty about the median voter’s position (Glazer, 1990), the intensity of voters’ preferences (Aragones and Postlewaite, 2002),
context-dependent voting (Callander and Wilson, 2008), and the extent to which voters like the candidates (Jensen, 2009) have been showed to mediate the effects of ambiguity on election results.

Empirical work examining the consequences of ambiguity has largely focused on uncertainty at the individual level, and mainly examined candidate ambiguity in the US context. Following Enelow and Hinich’s work (1981), Bartels (1986) assumed that voters perceive issue positions of candidates with some degree of uncertainty, and showed that individuals do not like uncertainty. This finding is echoed by Alvarez in his coauthored and solo work in the 1990s (Alvarez and Franklin, 1994; Alvarez, 1997), as well as by Norpoth and Buchanan (1992). In a more recent work, on the other hand, Tomz and von Houweling (2009) show with experimental data that ambiguity “does not repel and may, in fact, attract voters” (p. 83).

When the research questions are about how individual level characteristics affect voter uncertainty and how this individual-level uncertainty affects vote choice a focus on individual level is appropriate. However, the extent of how uncertain a single voter does not tell us much about how voters overall are ambiguous about party positions. Voters individually may be fully certain for where they locate a particular party while in the aggregate there may be a large variation for where voters perceive the party on the scale. Similarly, none of the voters individually may be certain where a particular party is located but at the aggregate the perceptions of party policy may have a narrow distribution. In this research I am interested in understanding the consequences of aggregate party ambiguity for election results, and not in how individual level uncertainty affects individual level vote choice.
The only work, to my knowledge, that examines the consequences of aggregate-level party ambiguity is by Campbell (1983). Using the standard deviations of party positions as perceived by voters to measure party ambiguity Campbell shows that ambiguity does not have a discernible impact on elections results, and the effect varies with the distribution of public opinion and with issue salience.

Overall, then, while the existing formal models present results for under which conditions ambiguity can win, the empirical results in the US context paint a rather negative picture of ambiguity for political parties when the focus is largely on the individual level uncertainty, and the only aggregate level work (Campbell, 1983) does not reach to a more favorable conclusion. But do parties benefit from aggregate ambiguity in multi-party parliamentary democracies? This question has largely been left unanswered in the literature.

**Consequences of Ambiguity in Multi-Party Democracies:**

The Downsian model predicts in a two-party case that the party that is located at the median-voter position wins the election, and hence, both parties are encouraged to converge to the median-voter position. In multi-party elections, where more than two parties compete, the same median voter theorem logic would encourage vote-seeking parties to moderate their positions as long as the voter-distribution is single-peaked (Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009). To see this, consider Figure 1, which illustrates elections with three parties, A, B, and C. The voter distribution is single-peaked and voters vote for the most proximate party. We can clearly see in Figure 1a and 1b that both party A and C can increase their vote shares by unilaterally moving toward the median voter position. Figure 1b shows that by moving toward the median position, party A would gain voters that are located between \((A+B)/2\) and
[(A’+B)/2] (the red-striped area). Hence we can conclude that political parties can gain votes by moderating their positions even in multi-party elections.¹

Figure 1: Three-party Election

While moderation helps parties increase their vote shares, political parties generally do not have complete freedom to shift their positions away from their preferred position. I argue

¹ A necessary (but not sufficient) condition for parties to gain by moderation in multi-party elections is that the voter preferences are single-peaked. Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) present evidence with survey data that this assumption to a large extend holds in European democracies where the left-right preferences of voters are approximately single-peaked.

² Political parties compete in free and fair elections to increase their political power. Some parties are primarily office-seeking (e.g., the Dutch Labour Party in 1981 and in 1989); and some parties are primarily policy-seeking (e.g., the German Greens in the 1980s). However I argue that both objectives are predicated on winning sufficient electoral support, and hence, the assumption in this paper is that political parties seek votes in elections.
therefore that ambiguity is a better strategy for political parties than shifting positions to the median voter position, and this is especially true in multi-party systems. To see why we can first list the reasons for why policy shifts are costly for political parties more generally in to- and multi-party systems.

First, party activists and members may react negatively to a shift away from their ideal policy position. This resistance against change may lead to organizational conflict that would weaken the party in the eyes of voters. Party may also start losing financial contributions, as the lobbyists would be dissatisfied with the new position. Similarly, party supporters with strong policy preferences might be dissatisfied with the new position. They may see this party shift as a desperate attempt to win votes. The party may be considered as flipflopping and lose votes as dissatisfied voters decide to abstain. The dissatisfaction within the party organization and among the party supporters would weaken the party by depicting a divided party image and by alienating the party supporters.

While these problems would be commonly seen in both two-party and multi-party systems, they are likely to have more significant consequences in multi-party systems. In a two-party system the dissatisfied voters and party activists would not have a better choice than their own party. Both abstention and weakened party organization would help the other party politically more distant from their own party to win the elections. The costs of abstaining and defecting are higher in a two-party system. As a result, the parties may have an easier time to shift their positions without losing much.

The threat, on the other hand, is higher in a multi-party system. A new party that would present the policy preferences of dissatisfied party activists and alienated supporters has a chance to survive and succeed in elections in a multi-party system. Hence, the
dissatisfied party activists can split their own group and form a new party. Similarly, a new party may emerge with a new organization that would attract the dissatisfied party supporters. Instead of abstaining, these alienated voters would shift their votes to the new party, which has a chance to win seats in the parliament and put policy pressure on other parties.

To conclude, political parties may face significant challenges against moderation especially in multi-party systems. I argue that instead of fully moving to the median voter position and threatening its stance in elections a party can retain its votes and even win more votes if it presents a wider distribution of policy choices, that is, if it presents an ambiguous policy stance.

Figure 2 shows that if party A keeps its average policy position intact but extends its appeal to additional voters by making its policy position ambiguous, it can not only keep its voters and activists but it can also push the cut-point toward party B (to the [(A’+B)/2] position) and win additional votes.

**Figure 2: Party Ambiguity**

In Figure 2, if voters who are closer to party B in the original scenario (Figure 1a above), that is those on the party B side of the cutpoint [(A+B)/2] from Figure 1, think that party A is closer them, they would change their votes to party A. As Figure 1b shows, the party could gain all those voters on the party B-side of the original cutpoint by presenting the
same policy as party B, that is, by moderating its position. However, the risks of losing the original supporters and the possibility of a new party emerging on the left and squeezing party A in between should encourage parties to extend their appeal by increasing their perceptual ambiguity.

As an additional example, we can see how an ambiguous position increases party vote shares with the following example. Figure 3 presents three potential positions for party A and the cutpoints for these positions.

**Figure 3: Alternative Scenarios**

![Graph showing voter density and cutpoints](image)

Hence if a party is perceived to be at the left extreme position, at A’’, the cutpoint is at (A’’+B)/2; if it takes its original position from Figure 1 above, at A, the cutpoint is at (A+B)/2; and if it takes an almost identical position with party B as in Figure 1b, at A’, the cutpoint is at (A’+B)/2. Let us call all the voters on the left of the first cutpoint, (A’’+B)/2 as voters X, those between (A’’+B)/2 and (A+B)/2 as voters Y, and between cutpoints (A+B)/2 and (A’+B)/2 as voters Z. Let us also assume that all voters vote for the closest party except that if the party is more than one group of voters away from them those group of voters would abstain. Hence, voters X would abstain if the party takes a position on the right of cutpoint (A+B)/2.
It is clear with these assumptions that if the party wants to win the votes of Z, who would originally vote for party B when the party had the position at A, the party needs to ensure that voters Z perceive the party at A’. On the other hand, taking a clear A’ position would alienate voters X and encourage them to abstain, which may encourage party splits or a new party emerging to present those alienated voters. The party needs to be perceived either at A’ or A to retain those voters, neither of which would attract voters Z to change their votes to party A. As this example makes clear, median position (A’) would be attractive to parties if they could retain their supporters. However, given the risk of losing its own supporters and activists, a party that want to increase its voters need to present an ambiguous position.

I note that while I have worked on party A for this example, it can also been seen that ambiguity would work similarly for party B and party C. In a multi-party system where the risks of new parties emerging or parties splitting are high for all parties the best strategy to keep the supporters and party organization attached to the party and to gain additional votes is ambiguity.²

Hence, the hypothesis is as follows:

\textit{H1: Political parties gain more votes as the perceptual ambiguity about their position increases.}

This hypothesis is also consistent with the catch-all party thesis of Kirchheimer. According to Kirchheimer (1966) a new party-type, “catch-all party,” emerged in Europe

² Political parties compete in free and fair elections to increase their political power. Some parties are primarily office-seeking (e.g., the Dutch Labour Party in 1981 and in 1989); and some parties are primarily policy-seeking (e.g., the German Greens in the 1980s). However I argue that both objectives are predicated on winning sufficient electoral support, and hence, the assumption in this paper is that political parties seek votes in elections.
following the end of World War II. One of the main characteristics of this new type of party was its willingness to appeal to a broader electorate by adopting a wide platform. While this type of party also has additional characteristics such as less emphasis on getting new members and more emphasis on a centrist ideology, which are not directly tested in this paper, if we find empirical support for the hypothesis, this would also indicate that Kirchheimer might be correct and the catch-all party strategy may in fact work for vote-seeking political parties.

Research Design:

To test the hypothesis I collected electoral and survey data in seven West European countries. Data availability sets its own limits, and therefore, the final set of countries includes: Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. The unit of analysis is a party, and the data are organized as party-year-country panels. Table 1 lists the countries and the time periods for which I have survey data available to measure changes in respondents’ perceptions of parties’ Left-Right positions.

Table 1: The list of countries and election periods covered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Elections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>1983-2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>1994-2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1980-2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>1981-2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>1977-2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1986-2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>1979-2006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main constraint is the availability of National Election Studies for multiple elections to measure change in perceptions.
Perceptual ambiguity, the main independent variable to test the hypothesis, is coded using election survey data. I collected all national election surveys in the countries above for the respective time-periods. The question I used to measure “perceptual uncertainty” asks respondents to locate each political party in their country on a left-right scale. I use the perceptual ambiguity measure developed by van der Eijk (2001). van der Eijk proposed his measure for ordered rating scales, such as the left-right scale of election surveys. Using the distribution of voters’ placements of parties (the frequencies for each category) on the 1-10 point scale this measure is bound between -1 and +1, where higher numbers indicate more agreement. On the one extreme, if half of the respondents put party X at the most leftist position on the scale and the other half put it at the most rightist position the perceptual ambiguity score for party X would be -1, which is the highest possible ambiguity score. On the other hand, if all voters locate party X at the same location on the scale the agreement score would be +1. This would mean that there is no ambiguity about the party’s position. If there is a uniform distribution across the range of values the perceptual ambiguity score would be 0.

van der Eijk (2001) shows 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 with 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

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4 The surveys in different countries asked respondents to locate political parties on a left-right scale that may range from 0 to 11, 0 to 10, 1 to 10 etc. To have a comparable measure across surveys I transformed all the scales and all the respondents’ answers to a 1-10 left-right scale.
sides of the extreme position. This ordered rating scale measure overcomes this potential bias in the measure of perceptual ambiguity (see van der Eijk, 2001 for more details).  

While the potential range for the perceptual ambiguity scores is between -1 and +1, the values in my data range between 0.31 and 0.84. The Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) in Spain has the highest ambiguity about its position in the 2000 election, followed closely by the Conservative Party in Britain in the 1997 election. Voters, on the other hand, perceived the position of the Left Party in Sweden in the 1982 election with the lowest disagreement. Some other cases with an ambiguity score as low as 0.8 are the Moderate Party of Sweden in 1985 and the Left Party of Germany in 2005.  

The focus is on the left-right scale for theoretical and technical reasons. Downs (1957) stated that party competition takes place along a left-right dimension and that voters mainly gather information about parties on that dimension. Fifty years later, political commentators, scholars, and parties themselves still mostly use the left-right dimension to describe policy positions. While the particular meaning attached to the left-right politics and particular issues that define the left-right scale may have changed over time, research has shown the

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5 I replicated the results using the raw standard deviation measure of perceptual ambiguity. The results are substantively very similar although the coefficient is significant only at the 0.1 level with a one-tailed test.

6 While my interest in this paper is to examine how change in perceptual ambiguity affects party vote shares it is also interesting to examine whether particular parties have higher or lower ambiguity more generally. One may argue, for instance, that niche parties, that is, parties that advocate certain specific policies, such as environmental protection, immigration, or regional autonomy, more than the general left-right issues, may have higher ambiguity about their left-right positions. Aldrich et al. (2009), for instance, show that voters’ perceptions of political parties on a Left-Right scale are less accurate for these niche parties. Similarly, one may argue that political parties in office have less ambiguity about their left-right positions given the emphasis in the media about governing parties’ positions (Clark and Leiter, forthcoming). To test these arguments I ran a regression using the ambiguity scores as the dependent variable, and examined whether the governing party status, the niche party status, the party family as left or right (compared to center parties), and the vote share of the party in the last election affect the level of perceptual ambiguity. None of the coefficients reached to the conventional statistical levels.
persistence of left-right politics in European democracies (Budge, et al. 2001; Klingemann, et al. 2006; van der Brug 1999). Beyond this prevalence of the left-right ideological dimension in European democracies there is also a technical 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 as commonly asked as the left-right scale. In addition, while the questions and the scales are likely to differ when respondents are asked to locate parties on a more specific issue scale (such as European integration or immigration) the question wording and the range of left-right scale are largely consistent across surveys and countries.

Because I am interested in how the change in perceptual ambiguity affects party vote shares, i.e., whether increased perceptual ambiguity have a positive electoral effect on party vote shares as the hypothesis states, I calculated the change in perceptual ambiguity scores. Negative values of this change variable indicate an increase in perceptual ambiguity, while positive values mean a decrease. The dependent variable is the change in vote share of political parties. I use the Comparative Manifesto Project data to code the vote shares of parties and then calculated the change in vote shares from election t-1 to election t to create the dependent variable.

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7 An argument for the persistence of left-right does not ignore the fact that additional issues arise and influence elections. Yet, several scholars have shown that these new issues eventually fold onto the enduring left-right dimension (Hooghe, et al. 2002; van der Eijk and Niemoeller 1983). They may change the meaning of the left-right but do not undermine its relevance for understanding party positions.
8 The focus in this paper is on perceived ambiguity of party positions and not on strategic ambiguity as presented by political parties themselves. The natural focus is on voters’ perceptions since we are interested in understanding how party ambiguity affects election results. Because it is the voters who vote in the elections we need to examine how their perceptions affect the results. Whether the parties in fact can affect these perceptions is a very interesting and related question but not the focus of this paper.
In addition to the perceptual ambiguity variable the model also includes three more variables. First, I included a variable for party positional shift to control for party moves. Above I stated that moderating the party position has significant risks for political parties in multi-party systems. I have argued that because of these potential risks a better strategy for political parties is to have ambiguous positions.

To check whether moderation works and especially compared to an ambiguous policy strategy I created a variable that codes the extent of party movement toward the mean-voter position. To measure mean-voter position I used the survey question that asks the respondents to locate *themselves* on the left-right scale. The mean voter position hence is the average self-position of the respondents. I then coded the *party moderation* variable 1 if the party’s perceived average position between election t-1 and election t moved toward this mean-voter position, and -1 if it moved away from the mean-voter position. Finally, I multiplied this variable with the absolute perceived policy change. Hence is a party moved two points on the 10-point left-right scale toward the mean-voter position the *party moderation* variable is coded +2, and if it moved 2-points away, the variable is coded as -2.

I also included party vote share at time t-1 into the model. This variable controls for the possibility that vote change of parties (the dependent variable) may be different for parties with higher or lower vote shares. Finally, the model also includes the governing party status dummy variable. Mackie and Rose (1983) found that the vote share of governing parties is twice as likely to decrease, relative to the last election, than to increase. By adding this dummy variable for governing parties in the longest government between elections t-1 and t we can control for this potential decrease of vote shares for governing parties.\(^9\) Finally, I

\(^9\) See Appendix I for summary statistics of the variables.
include party fixed effects into the model because there are many party-level differences that affect their vote gains/losses that we cannot effectively control for with other variables. These party dummies are necessary to isolate within party-effects.

The analyses encompass 264 shifts in perceptual ambiguity and changes in vote shares in 46 elections and across 47 parties in seven European party systems. These data should be regarded as time-series cross-sectional data. Estimating a simple regression on the pooled data can lead to erroneous conclusions if there are unobserved differences between parties (Hsiao 2003) and serially-correlated errors (Beck and Katz 1995). However, the Lagrange multiplier test fails to reject the null hypothesis of no serial correlation. As a result, the models do not include the lagged dependent variable. To control for contemporaneous correlation I estimated the models using election clusters.

Results:

Table 2 presents the results for the hypothesis. To the extent that changes in vote shares respond to the changes in perceptual ambiguity as hypothesized, we would expect negative and statistically significant coefficient estimates on the \[\Delta \text{Ambiguity} \,(t) \] variable. This negative effect would indicate that parties gain votes as perceptual ambiguity increases (as the agreement score I use following van der Eijk’s method becomes smaller). The coefficient estimate for the perceptual ambiguity variable reported in column 1 supports the

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10 While there is no serial correlation problem in the data as indicated by the Lagrange multiplier test, one might argue that I need to include the lagged dependent variable for theoretical reasons. More specifically, one can argue that the change in vote shares between t-1 and t can be explained by the change between t-2 and t-1. That is, 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. While there is not a strong theoretical expectation for why this should be the case I ran the models including the lagged dependent variable. As expected, the lagged dependent variable was never statistically significant, and the substantive effects of the independent variables were very similar, and even in some instances stronger.
hypothesis. This coefficient (-7.36) implies that, ceteris paribus, if a party is perceived more ambiguous (as agreement scores decline) its vote share increases (p-value: 0.04).

Substantively, this effect indicates that if perceptions change from 1 (where all the respondents locate the party in the same position) to 0 agreement score (where there is a uniform distribution of perceived party positions) the party increases its vote share by 7.36%. Using the values in the current data we can see that if the change in perceived position is -0.24 (a change toward a less agreed party position, which is the minimum value in our data) the party is expected to increase its vote share by about 4% compared to a scenario where the change in perception is +0.3 (a change toward a more agreed position, which is the maximum in our data). Given that the mean (absolute) vote change in the data is 3.3%, this is a quite substantive effect for political parties.

Table 2: Main Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Main Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ΔAmbiguity (t)</td>
<td>-7.362**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.556)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Moderation</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.431)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote Share (t-1)</td>
<td>-0.521***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.089)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In government</td>
<td>-2.019**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1: in govt, 0: in opp)</td>
<td>(0.856)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>9.217***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.356)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/ R²</td>
<td>264/ 0.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The dependent variable is the change in vote shares. The numbers in parentheses are the election-clustered standard errors. The model also includes political party fixed effects, which are not reported.
While there is substantive and significant effect of perceived ambiguity on election results policy moderation does not help parties. The effect of policy moderation is not different from 0. This also supports my argument that political parties are better off in multi-party systems if they are perceived to be ambiguous instead of moderating their positions. The other control variables show that as the original vote share of the party at time t-1 increases parties lose votes. Governing party dummy variables supports Mackie and Rose’s thesis that governing parties in European countries lose votes in upcoming elections.

In additional analyses, I tested the sensitivity of the results for different groups of voters. In the model above the perceived ambiguity score was calculated using all respondents’ perceptions. In additional models I calculated perceived ambiguity for party supporters and for politically interested respondents. One may argue that party supporters and highly interested respondents may dislike ambiguity given their commitment to their party, policy preferences for their own party, and their interest in politics. However, the results are largely consistent across models. There are no significant differences between different groups of voters. Finally, I also tested for potential country-level effects by dropping one country at a time and running the model on the remaining countries. The results stayed robust across these models.

**Discussion and Future Work:**

Moderating the party position toward the median voter position may be the winning strategy for political parties under some strong assumptions about voters, parties, and party systems. However, the risks of losing the existing supporters with this policy shift are higher in multi-party systems. Faced with the potential threats the best strategy for political parties in
multi-party parliamentary systems is being ambiguous. If perceived ambiguity is high they can keep their existing voters and also gain additional votes. Using survey and electoral data from seven West European democracies over a thirty year period I showed that increasing ambiguity help parties gain votes in elections.

But why then political parties do not increase their ambiguity in the eyes of voters even more? As I stated above the ambiguity scores in my data range from around 0.3 to 0.8 while the measure can take values anywhere between -1 and +1. If political parties benefit from ambiguity why do we not see much higher levels of ambiguity? Answering this question is important to better understand the link between voters and parties.

Another interesting question is whether there are other consequences of ambiguity for political parties beyond electoral gain. In multi-party systems elections are important but equally important are government formations. One can examine whether more ambiguous parties have more or less chances to become coalition partners in West European democracies.
Appendix I: Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St. Dev</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DV: ΔVote Share</strong></td>
<td>-0.104</td>
<td>4.401</td>
<td>-13.87</td>
<td>12.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ΔAmbiguity (t)</strong></td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>-0.240</td>
<td>0.300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party Moderation</strong></td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>0.454</td>
<td>-2.125</td>
<td>2.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vote Share (t-1)</strong></td>
<td>16.716</td>
<td>13.678</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>48.789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In government</strong></td>
<td>0.322</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1: in govt, 0: in opp)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References:


