

Moderate Now, Win Votes Later: The Electoral Consequences of Parties' Policy Shifts in 25 Postwar Democracies

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A central tenet of spatial modeling and political representation studies is that, to the extent that citizens vote prospectively, they evaluate the policies that political parties are currently proposing. Yet research on issue evolution and macropartisanship suggests that significant time periods often elapse before voters update their perceptions of parties' policy positions. We report cross-national, time-series analyses on the relationship between parties' policy programs and election outcomes in 25 postwar democracies, which suggest that parties' policy promises exert lagged effects on their electoral support: namely, parties gain votes at the current election when they moderated their policies at the previous election. By contrast, we find only weak and inconsistent evidence that parties' support responds to their current policy programs. Our findings have important implications for spatial modeling and for studies on political representation.

Several recent studies conclude that significant time lags may intervene before political elites adjust their policies in response to shifts in the public's policy preferences and voting behavior. In particular, Budge (1994), Fowler (2005), and Somer-Topcu (2009) present evidence that politicians adjust their policy promises at the *current* election in response to the outcome of the *previous* election, while Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) identify time lags before politicians adjust their policies in response to public opinion shifts. In this paper we reverse the perspective offered in these studies, to ask whether there are time lags in *voters'* responses to *political parties'* policy promises. Specifically, we evaluate whether parties' electoral support at the current election reflects the policies they announce at the current election, as we would expect if voters quickly update their perceptions of the parties' policy programs, or whether, alternatively, party support reflects the policies parties advocated at the *previous* election, as would occur if voters lag in updating their perceptions of the parties' positions.

Our study, which encompasses 25 postwar party systems, supports the proposition that parties' current

electoral support responds to their policy programs at the *previous* election: specifically, we find consistent evidence of a *lagged policy moderation benefit*, namely that when parties moderated their Left-Right positions at the previous election—i.e., when left-wing parties shifted to the right, or when right-wing parties shifted to the left—then their vote support increases at the current election; similarly, we find that parties that shifted towards more radical positions at the previous election tend to lose votes at the current election. By contrast, we find no consistent evidence that parties' support responds to their *current* Left-Right positions. Our estimates on the magnitudes of the electoral effects of parties' policy shifts are in line with those reported in previous studies (Adams et al. 2006; Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Alvarez, Nagler, and Bowler 2000; Alvarez, Nagler, and Willette 2000; Erikson and Romero 1990; Ezrow 2005; Tavits 2007)—namely, these estimates suggest that parties' policy positioning only modestly affects their support. However, in contrast to previous studies, we estimate that these electoral effects primarily reflect the policies that parties presented at the *previous* election.

Our findings are relevant to spatial modeling, to political representation, and to understanding the structure and sequence of issue evolution. Spatial models of elections typically posit that voters evaluate candidates and parties based on their *current* policy positions, and, moreover, spatial modelers are preoccupied with the search for a Nash equilibrium, i.e., a policy configuration such that each party's current policies are optimal contingent on the current strategies of its opponents. Yet if voters' perceptions lag so that they react primarily to parties' *previous* policy programs, then at the time of the current election there may be little that parties can do, in programmatic terms, to improve their electoral prospects in this election. Similarly, studies on political representation outside the United States (e.g., McDonald and Budge 2005; Powell 2000) typically calibrate the electorate's policy preferences (often defined in terms of the median voter's position) against political parties' *current* policy positions. To the extent that voters' perceptions of the parties' policies exhibit substantial time lags, as our results suggest they do, we can expect greater discrepancies between voter preferences and the current policies of the parties they support, and of the governments that form following the election.

Finally, our cross-national finding of lagged electoral effects of parties' policy shifts extend American-based studies on issue evolution and macropartisanship (e.g., Carmines and Stimson 1989; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002) to a comparative context. A key finding from these studies is that substantial time lags often intervene between when American political elites shift their policy positions on salient issues, and when the American electorate registers these policy shifts and reorients its political allegiances. Our cross-national findings on the connections between party policies and election outcomes suggest that time lags are a *general* feature of mass-elite policy linkages in postwar democracies.

Hypotheses on the Electoral Effects of Parties' Policy Shifts

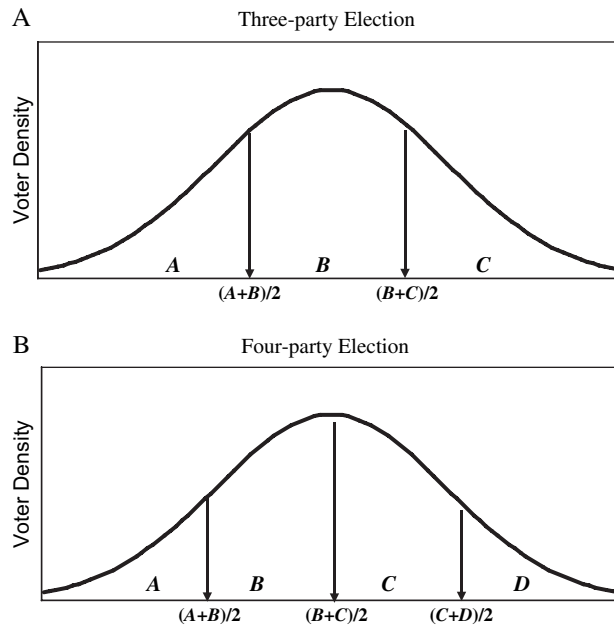
Can parties gain votes by converging towards the center of the distribution of voters' policy preferences? Theoretical analyses based on the standard "Downsian" spatial model of elections (Downs 1957), in which all eligible voters go to the polls and support the most spatially proximate party along a unidimensional policy continuum, suggest that the

answer to this question is *yes*. In the case of two-party elections it is well-known that the Downsian model predicts that vote-seeking parties will converge to the median voter position, and empirical studies on the American two-party system conclude that, *ceteris paribus*, congressional incumbents with moderate legislative voting records tend to outperform those with radical records (e.g., Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002), and that presidential candidates' vote shares increase when they present more centrist platforms (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002).¹

In multiparty elections, i.e., elections involving at least three major parties, the Downsian model again typically predicts that parties gain from policy moderation. In three-party competition, for instance, the left- and right-most parties can gain votes by unilaterally shifting their positions towards that of the center party (Figure 1A). Furthermore, in elections with four or more competitors the parties again typically gain votes from policy moderation provided that the voter distribution is *single-peaked*, i.e., that the density of voters' policy preferences increases up to the modal preference and then declines after that. To see this consider Figure 1B, which illustrates an election involving parties *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D*, who compete for support from an electorate whose distribution of policy preferences is single-peaked. In this case the peripheral parties *A* and *D* can clearly increase their support by unilaterally shifting towards the center, and the "interior" parties *B* and *C* can likewise gain votes from policy moderation. To see this note that as party *B*, for instance, shifts towards the center of the voter distribution it gains marginal votes from voters located near the cut-point $\frac{B+C}{2}$ but loses marginal support from voters located near the cut-point $\frac{A+B}{2}$; and, because the voter distribution is more dense near the cut-point $\frac{B+C}{2}$, which is located near the peak of the voter distribution, Party *B* gains by moderating its position. A similar logic establishes that Party *C* gains votes from policy moderation. More generally, it can be shown that for any number of parties and for most realistic party policy configurations under

¹We note that these findings do not necessarily imply that parties (or candidates) in two-party elections will actually converge to the center of the voter distribution (indeed extensive research on American politics suggests that they do not, see, e.g., Grofman 2004), since parties may be motivated in part by policy objectives (e.g., Wittman 1990), while the party nominees in candidate-centered elections may be selected by primary electorates who hold radical policy preferences relative to the general electorate (e.g., Owen and Grofman 2006).

FIGURE 1 The Electoral Effects of Policy Shifts: Parties Gain from Moderation 1A: Three-party Election 1B: Four-party Election



Notes: In the figures, the lines at the locations $(A+B)/2$, $(B+C)/2$, etc., represent the *cut-points* at which voters are indifferent between the parties A versus B, B versus C, etc. The heights of these lines represent the density of the voter distribution at the cut-point.

the standard Downsian model, a large majority of the parties will gain votes by moderating their policies, provided the voter distribution is single-peaked.² This theoretical result is important because voter surveys suggest that, in most Western democracies, the distributions of citizens' Left-Right positions are indeed approximately single-peaked. Figure 2, which displays the distributions of Eurobarometer respondents' Left-Right self-placements in the fifteen countries that were surveyed in 2002, illustrates this point.

Predictions about the electoral effects of policy moderation—for both two-party and multiparty elections—are considerably more varied when we

survey the numerous extensions to the basic Downsian model that formal theorists have developed.³ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to review these approaches here, we note that empirically based analyses of individual-level election survey data, which incorporate many of the extensions developed by spatial modelers (see footnote 3), project that most non-centrist parties in real world elections would increase their support if they could moderate voters' perceptions of their policies (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Alvarez, Nagler, and Bowler, 2000; Alvarez,

²Specifically, for any configuration in which all n parties occupy distinct policy positions (i.e., where no two parties are "paired" at the same location), then, when the voter distribution is single-peaked, at least $(n-1)$ parties will gain votes by shifting marginally towards the peak of the voter distribution. To see this, note that in this scenario the only party that can possibly lose support from policy moderation is the "interior" party whose supporters lie on both sides of the peak of the voter distribution, and there can be at most one such party. This party will lose votes from policy moderation provided that the cut-point located on the side of the peak away from the party's position is more densely populated than the cut-point on the party's side of the peak; otherwise it will gain votes (as in the scenario illustrated in Figure 1B).

³A partial list of these extensions includes: multiple policy dimensions (e.g., Schofield 1978); endogenous voter turnout (e.g., Callander and Wilson 2007); endogenous provision of campaign resources by party activists (e.g., Schofield and Sened 2006); potential entry by additional parties (e.g., Palfrey 1984); "probabilistic" voting due to unmeasured voter motivations (e.g., Lin, Enelow, and Dorussen 1999); voters' strategic projections about postelection coalition negotiations and discounting of parties' policy promises (e.g., Austen-Smith and Banks 1988); the introduction of nonpolicy based "valence" dimensions of voters' party evaluations (e.g., Groseclose 2001); the influence of partisanship on voters' decisions (e.g., Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005). We note that Grofman (2004) surveys extensions to the two-party Downsian model, while Adams, Merrill, and Grofman (2005) survey extensions to multiparty spatial models.

Nagler, and Willette 2000).⁴ The central reason for this conclusion is that, as illustrated earlier in Figure 2, most real-world electorates feature Left-Right voter distributions that are dense at the center but thin at the periphery. Finally, a cross-national study by Ezrow (2005) on 12 western European party systems—to our knowledge the only aggregate-level, cross-national study on the relationship between party support and voters' perceptions of party positions—reports that parties that were perceived as presenting centrist ideologies (relative to the electorate) tended to receive more support than parties that were perceived as noncentrist. We note that these studies conclude that the aggregate-level electoral effects of party positioning are modest, in that realistic shifts in voters' perceptions of parties' positions typically change parties' expected vote shares by at most two or three percentage points. These studies motivate our first hypothesis:

H1 (The Current Policy Effects Hypothesis): Parties gain (lose) votes at the current election when they moderate (radicalize) their policy positions at the current election, compared to their positions at the previous election.

How Time Mediates the Effects of Parties' Policy Shifts

We emphasize that the empirical studies on multi-party elections cited above analyze the relationship between party support and citizens' *perceptions* of the parties' policy positions, i.e., these studies analyze the electoral effects of parties' *policy images*. This approach is sensible, given that citizens plausibly evaluate parties based on these images. At the same time, a crucial question for strategic party elites is how their policy declarations and their policy behav-

ior in parliament affects their policy images, given that these images are filtered through the (possibly distorting) lens of the media; that media reports fall upon an at times poorly informed and inattentive electorate; and that, moreover, even attentive citizens may rationally weigh both the parties' current *and* their previous policy behavior when forming estimates of the parties' policy images. In this regard, important research on issue evolution and macro-partisanship in the United States (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002) documents significant lags between the periods when party elites' policy behavior changes, and when rank-and-file voters fully register these policy shifts and reorient their political loyalties. In the case of the issue of racial desegregation, for instance, Carmines and Stimson (1989, chap. 7) estimate an approximate four-year lag between changes in partisan elites' voting patterns in the U.S. Senate and shifts in the mass public's perceptions of the parties' positions, while Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002, chap. 7) estimate significant lags in the effects of party platforms on presidential vote share.⁵ The latter set of authors' argument, that American citizens estimate parties' current policy images by weighing the parties' *current* and *past* policy platforms, is worth noting, since it informs our own perspective on this process:

... where the parties stand in the eyes of the electorate will incorporate both the present platform and past platforms. In the end, while the parties are able to use the platforms as a vehicle for altering the image of where they stand, they can alter that image only slowly over time. (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002, 258)

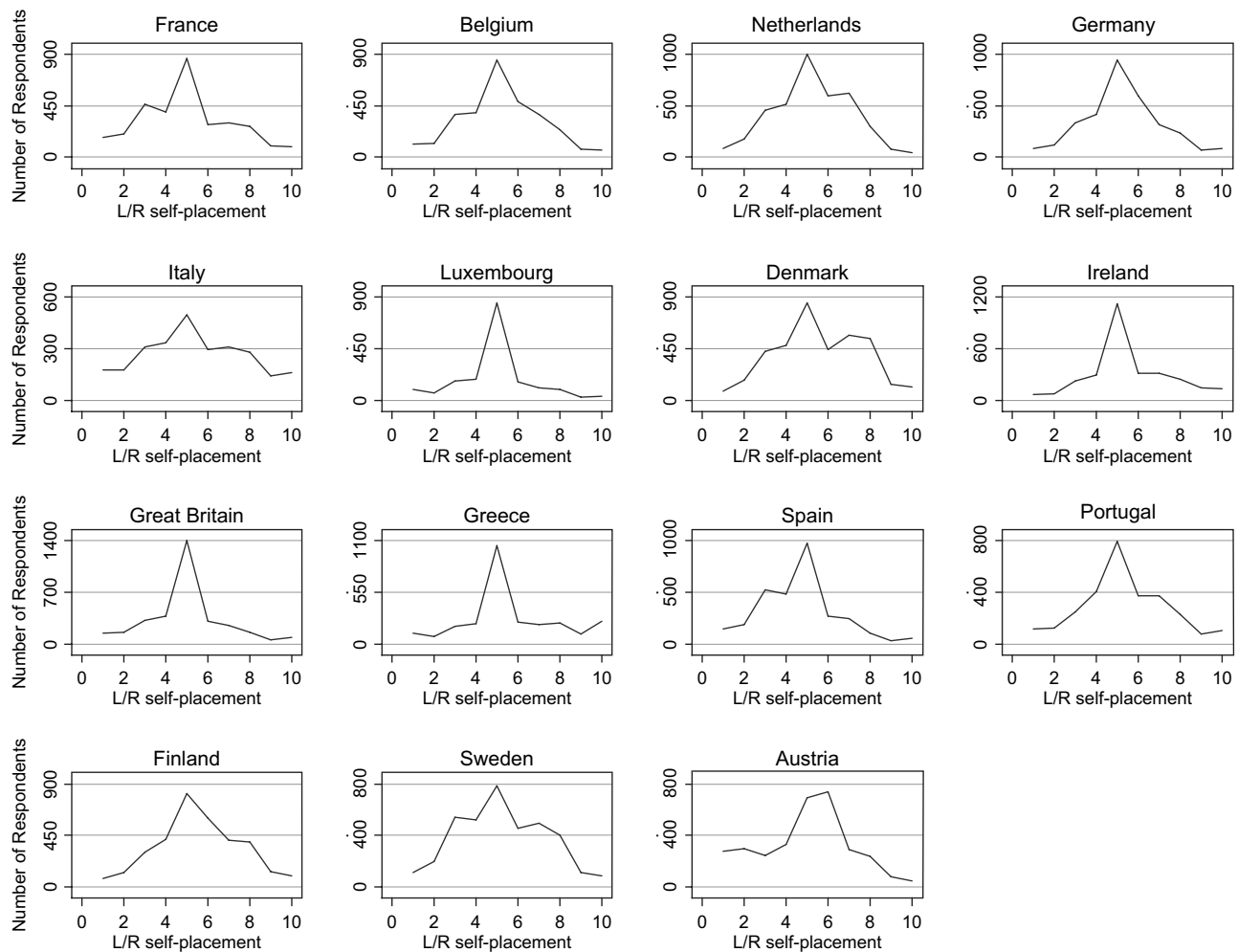
In a similar vein, a study on the Italian party system by Pelizzo (2007)—which is to our knowledge the only extant study on the relationship between European party elites' policy behavior and the evolution of their policy images—documents that Italian voters' perceptions of parties' positions respond only marginally to the party's current policy manifesto and to party MPs' current parliamentary voting behavior, because voters' perceptions are anchored by a strong inertial component that reflects their "historical knowledge" (Pelizzo 2007, 8) of the parties' *previous* policy behavior.

In toto, these studies motivate our second hypothesis, on the possibility of *lagged* electoral effects of parties' policy shifts:

⁴These studies are based on counterfactual computations in which the analysts estimate individual-level voting models on election survey data and then compute the effects on respondents' predicted vote probabilities of varying respondents' perceptions of the parties' policy positions (the analysts then aggregate these probabilities in order to compute the effect on the parties' expected votes). We note that the Adams, Merrill, and Grofman (2005) study explores variations on the basic Downsian model including: the effects of incorporating party identification and valence into the individual-level voting model; voters' strategic projections about postelection coalition negotiations (see pp. 111–16); voters' discounting of parties' policy promises; endogenous voter turnout; multiple policy dimensions. The authors' computations on individual-level survey data from the United States, Britain, France, and Norway suggest that some parties in these systems (notably in Norway) would maximize votes when voters perceive them as presenting distinctly noncentrist positions. However, the authors do not identify any cases where parties were projected to substantially increase their support by shifting to more radical positions, and in most cases they project that parties could increase support by moderating their positions.

⁵Specifically, the authors report empirical analyses (2002, 259) that suggest that in estimating the party's current position, voters attach approximately equal weights to the party's current policy platform and to their previous estimates of the party's position (which are in turn a function of the party's earlier platforms).

FIGURE 2 Left-Right Voter Distributions in 15 European Electorates, for 2002



Notes: The figures represent the frequency distributions of Eurobarometer respondents' self-placements along the 1–10 Left-Right scale, for the 15 countries in which these surveys were administered in 2002. These distributions were compiled using both waves of the 2002 surveys. We note that the distribution for Germany was compiled by combining the West and East German Eurobarometer samples (which were of approximately equal sizes) and then weighting each sample proportionately to the relative populations of the regions in East and West Germany.

H2 (The Lagged Policy Effects Hypothesis): Parties gain (lose) votes at the current election when they have moderated (radicalized) their Left-Right positions at the previous election.

Testing the Hypotheses: Data, Measurement, and Model Specifications

Measuring Parties' Policy Shifts

We require longitudinal, cross-nationally comparable measurements of party policy positions in order to evaluate the Current and Lagged Policy Effects hypotheses. The Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP)

codes the policy programs of parties competing in the elections of more than 20 democracies in the postwar period. Aside from being the only available longitudinal and cross-national estimates of parties' policies, these estimates are plausibly reliable because policy programs provide comprehensive and authoritative statements about the parties' policy priorities at the time of elections. Historically, the heated debates within parties over the content of these public statements testify to their importance, and, furthermore, empirical studies document that parties' published policy programs provide reasonably reliable guides to their future policy behavior (Hofferbert and McDonald 1993; McDonald and Budge 2005, chap. 9). Several previous studies (Adams et al. 2006; Andrews and Money 2006; Meguid 2005, 2008; Tavits 2007)—to

be discussed below—employ the CMP codings of parties' policy programs to analyze the effects of party positioning on electoral support.

The procedures used to map parties' policy positions from their election programs are described in detail in several of the CMP-related publications, so that we only briefly review the process here.⁶ The coders match up quasi-sentences in the policy program with a category of policy (e.g., welfare, defense, law and order, etc.) and take the percentages of each category as a measure of the party's priorities. Based on the mixture of policy priorities, the authors develop an index that measures the overall Left-Right ideology for the program of each party in each election year. The ideological scores range from -100 to $+100$, with higher scores denoting a more right-wing emphasis. We focus on party positioning along the Left-Right dimension, first, because this is arguably the only dimension that transfers across all the party systems included in our analyses (see, e.g., Benoit and Laver 2006, chap. 5; Budge 1994). Second, the Left-Right dimension is certainly the only dimension for which we can make reliable inferences about the direction of parties' policy shifts *relative to the center of the voter distribution*—inferences that are necessary in order to evaluate our hypotheses. Thus if a traditionally leftist party (such as a communist or social-democratic party) shifts to the right along the Left-Right dimension, we can reasonably infer that the party has moderated its position relative to the center of the electorate, and, conversely, that rightward shifts by such parties carry them farther away from the center of the electorate. On this basis we proceed.

The importance of the CMP data is that it allows us to “map” party positions over time in numerous postwar democracies. The CMP measures generally correspond with other measures of party positioning—such as those based upon expert placements, parliamentary voting analyses, and “language-blind” word-scoring techniques—which gives us additional confidence in the longitudinal and cross-national reliability of these estimates (see Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; McDonald and Mendes 2001; Pelizzo 2007). We emphasize again, however, that while these studies support the proposition that the CMP codings constitute reasonably accurate estimates of the party's current announced policy *positions*, there is no necessary connection between these announced positions and the parties' current *policy images* in the electorate, i.e., rank-and-file voters' perceptions of the

party's positions. Our central interest is whether parties' announced policy positions exert any substantive impact on their vote shares, and, if so, whether these effects are immediate or, alternatively, if significant time periods elapse between when parties shift their policies and when voters react to these changes.

Our measure of the dependent variable, party support, is based on the parties' vote shares in national parliamentary elections between 1945 and 2003, as reported on the CD-ROM that is included in Klingemann et al. (2006).

Specification for the Current Policy Effects Hypothesis. We specify a multivariate regression model in order to evaluate the Current Policy Effects Hypothesis (H1), that parties gain (lose) votes in the current election when they moderate (radicalize) their Left-Right positions at the current election. Because we are interested in how parties' vote shares change in response to shifts in their policy programs, our dependent variable is the change in the party's vote share at the current election compared to its vote share at the previous election. We label this variable *vote change* (t).⁷ The crucial independent variable captures the degree to which the party has moderated or radicalized its Left-Right position at the current election (election t), compared to its position at the previous election (election $t-1$), relative to the center of the voter distribution. To construct this variable we interact the party's Left-Right shift at the current election (defined as the difference between the party's Left-Right position at election t and its position at election $t-1$), which we label *party shift* (t), with a *party ideology* variable scored as $+1$ if the party is a left-wing party, -1 if the party is a right-wing party, and zero otherwise.⁸ The resulting variable, [*party shift* (t) \times *party ideology*], is constructed so that a positive value indicates that the party has moderated its

⁷Some studies advocate analyzing party support in multiparty elections using logarithmic transformations of the dependent variable (see, e.g., Tomz, Tucker, and Wittenberg 2002). Below we report supplementary analyses using this approach. However, we initially analyze changes in parties' raw vote shares, because this simplifies interpretation of the model coefficients.

⁸Our coding of the parties as left- or right-wing is based upon the CMP's classification of party “families,” as reported in Appendix 1 in Budge et al. (2001). We code members of the Communist, Social Democratic, and Green party families as left-wing and members of the Conservative, Christian, and Nationalist party families as right-wing. Note that this coding strategy assumes that the median voter position in each country is invariably located to the right of all members of the party system that were classified as left-wing in our analyses and to the left of all parties classified as right-wing. For the Western European parties in our data set, a comparison of the Eurobarometer respondents' Left-Right self-placements with their Left-Right placements of the parties, which were obtained in the 1989 Eurobarometer survey (Survey 31A), supports this assumption.

⁶For a more thorough description of the coding process, see Appendix 2 in Budge et al. (2001).

Left-Right position at the current election compared to its position at the previous election, i.e., the value is positive when left-wing parties shift to the right and when right-wing parties shift leftward, while a negative value denotes that the party has shifted towards a more radical Left-Right position. A positive coefficient estimate on the $[party\ shift(t) \times party\ ideology]$ variable will therefore denote that parties gain votes when they moderate their Left-Right positions, and lose votes when they shift towards more radical positions. We also include the $[party\ shift(t)]$ and $[party\ ideology]$ variables separately, as is standard in models that include interaction variables, and, in line with previous studies on party vote shares we include a lagged version of the dependent variable (e.g., Ezrow 2005; Meguid 2005; Tavits 2007). Finally, because previous studies find that governing parties consistently suffer vote losses (see, e.g., McDonald and Budge 2005, chap. 9; Paldam 1991; Tavits 2007), we include a dummy variable labeled $[governing\ party(t)]$, that denotes whether the party has been a member of the government since the previous election.⁹ Thus our initial specification, labeled the *Current Effects Model*, is:

$$\begin{aligned}
 [vote\ change(t)] = & b_1 + b_2[vote\ change(t-1)] \\
 & + b_3[governing\ party(t)] \\
 & + b_4[party\ shift(t)] \\
 & + b_5[party\ ideology] \\
 & + b_6[party\ shift(t) \\
 & \times party\ ideology], \quad (1)
 \end{aligned}$$

where:

$vote\ change(t)$ = the difference between the focal party's vote share at the current election t and its vote share at the previous election $t-1$.

$vote\ change(t-1)$ = the difference between the focal party's vote share at the previous election $t-1$ and its vote share at the election before that, $t-2$.

$governing\ party(t)$ = 1 if the party was a member of the government at any time since the last election, and zero otherwise.

$party\ shift(t)$ = the change in the focal party's Left-Right position between the current election t and the previous election $t-1$, based on the CMP codings of the party's policy programs.

$party\ ideology$ = +1 if the party is a left-wing party; -1 if the party is a right-wing party; 0 otherwise, based on the CMP classification of the "party family" to which the party belongs (see footnote 8).

⁹We performed additional analyses where we defined governing parties as those that were in government at the time of the current election, which supported substantive conclusions identical to those we report below.

Specification for the Current and Lagged Policy Effects Hypotheses. In order to jointly evaluate the Current Policy Effects Hypothesis (H1) and the Lagged Policy Effects Hypothesis (H2), we incorporate two additional variables into the Current Effects Specification. The crucial additional independent variable, $[party\ shift(t-1) \times party\ ideology]$, captures the degree to which the party moderated or radicalized its Left-Right position at the *previous* election (i.e., election $t-1$) compared to its position at the election before that (election $t-2$). A positive coefficient estimate on this variable will indicate that parties gain votes at the current election when they moderated their Left-Right positions at the previous election, an estimate that would support the Lagged Policy Effects Hypothesis. We also include the $[party\ shift(t-1)]$ variable separately. Thus our second specification, which we label the *Current and Lagged Effects Model*, is:

$$\begin{aligned}
 [vote\ change(t)] = & b_1 + b_2[vote\ change(t-1)] \\
 & + b_3[governing\ party(t)] \\
 & + b_4[party\ shift(t)] \\
 & + b_5[party\ ideology] \\
 & + b_6[party\ shift(t) \\
 & \times party\ ideology] \\
 & + b_7[party\ shift(t-1)] \\
 & + b_8[party\ shift(t-1) \\
 & \times party\ ideology], \quad (2)
 \end{aligned}$$

where:

$party\ shift(t-1)$ = the change in the focal party's Left-Right position between the previous election $t-1$ and the election before that, i.e., election $t-2$, based on the CMP codings of the party's policy programs.

Evaluating the Current and Lagged Policy Effects Hypotheses

Our analysis encompassed 1,649 Left-Right shifts by political parties in the 25 democratic party systems that are included in the CD-ROM that accompanies Klingemann et al. (2006), over the time period beginning with the first post-WWII election in each country and ending in 2003 (the last year for which the CMP data is available). The complete set of parties included in the analyses, along with their party family codings (see footnote 8), is reported in supplementary materials presented in our online appendix. The standard deviation of the Left-Right party shifts in our data set was 18 points along the 200-point CMP Left-Right

scale. Finally, note that pooling our data across countries entails the assumptions that the data is comparable cross-nationally and that the same causal processes operate in each country. The sensitivity analyses we report below support these assumptions.

Our data analyses encompassed every party listed in the CMP data set whose policy program was coded in at least three consecutive elections.¹⁰ In all, these analyses encompassed 338 elections involving 208 parties, each observed over an average of eight elections, and should thus 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 200); fortunately, tests for party-specific effects indicate that this is not a concern for the model we estimate. However, there are other methodological concerns to address. The lagged dependent variable included in our specification helps to address the concern of serially correlated errors (Beck and Katz 1995), and a Lagrange multiplier test fails to reject the null hypothesis of no serial correlation. Another concern is that there may be unobserved, election-specific, factors (such as the entry of a new party into the party system) that influence all existing parties' vote shares in a particular election, and, additionally, the error terms for the parties competing in each election are unlikely to be independent because if one party wins a larger-than-expected vote share then this may imply that other parties contesting the election receive smaller-than-expected vote shares (Adams et al. 2006).¹¹ We address these concerns through the use of robust standard errors clustered by election (Rogers 1993).

Table 1 reports the parameter estimates for our Current Effects Model (column 1) and for the Current and Lagged Effects Model (column 2). Note that for the Current Effects Model the coefficient estimate on the [*party shift* (*t*) × *party ideology*] variable is almost exactly zero, indicating that, in a model that analyzes the effects of parties' *current* shifts only, there is no evidence that party moderation/radicalism influences party support. However matters are different when we incorporate the effects of parties' previous electoral shifts, in the Current and Lagged Effects Model

(column 2). Here the coefficient estimate on the [*party shift* (*t*) × *party ideology*] variable is again small and statistically insignificant, but the coefficient estimate on the [*party shift* (*t*−1) × *party ideology*] variable is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.02$, two-tailed test), which indicates that parties gain votes at the current election when they moderated their policies at the *previous* election. This supports the Lagged Policy Effects Hypothesis (H2).

Substantively, the parameter estimate 0.019 on the [*party shift* (*t*−1) × *party ideology*] variable implies that, *ceteris paribus*, a political party that shifted its position by 18 points along the CMP's −100 to +100 Left-Right scale at the *previous* election (this is the standard deviation of the observed values of the party shifts in our data set) can expect to increase its vote by three- or four-tenths of a percentage point at the *current* election, provided the previous shift was in a moderating direction; conversely, the party is expected to lose about three to four tenths of a percentage point if its previous shift was in a radical direction. This predicted electoral effect is quite modest, an estimate that is therefore in line with the findings of Erikson et al. (2002, chap. 7) and Pelizzo (2007) that parties can alter their policy *images* only slowly over time, notwithstanding their abilities to more quickly shift their announced *positions*. Our results are also consistent with the substantive conclusions reported by Alvarez and Nagler, Ezrow, and Adams and Merrill based on analyses of election survey data, that parties can expect modest electoral gains from moderating their policy images. However in contrast to these survey-based studies, our conclusion comes with an important caveat: namely that time lags intervene between when parties shift their policies and when they reap the electoral gains (or losses) from these shifts.

Finally, among the control variables we find that, as expected, governing parties' vote shares tend to decline, *i.e.*, the coefficient estimate on the [*in government* (*t*)] variable is negative and significant,¹² and also that parties that gained votes at the previous election tend to lose votes at the current election, and

¹⁰We required at least three consecutive party program codings in order to construct the [*party shift* (*t*)] variable and the [*party shift* (*t*−1)] variable that we include in our empirical specifications.

¹¹This "compositional effects" problem is slightly attenuated because some parties that contested the elections in our data set were omitted from our analyses, either because they were small parties whose policy programs were not coded by the CMP, or, alternatively, because the party had contested fewer than three election cycles (see footnote 10). As a result the average aggregate vote share per election received by the parties in our data set was approximately 95%.

¹²Specifically, governing parties' expected vote changes at the current election (independent of these parties' Left-Right shifts and their previous vote gains/losses) are given by the sum of the coefficient on the [*in government* (*t*)] variable, which is near −1.7 for both models, and the estimated intercept which is near +0.4 for both models. Thus for governing parties the expected vote change is approximately $(0.4 - 1.7) = -1.3$ percentage points. For opposition parties, by contrast, the expected vote change (independent of the effects of Left-Right shifts and previous vote gains) is simply given by the intercept, *i.e.*, opposition parties can expect to *gain* approximately 0.4 percentage points in vote share at the current election, compared to the previous election.

TABLE 1 Analyses of the Electoral Effects of Parties' Left-Right Shifts (N=1,649)

	Current Effects	Current and Lagged	Public Opinion
<i>Party shift</i> (<i>t</i>) × <i>Party Ideology</i>	-.003 (.007)	.004 (.008)	.012 (.009)
<i>Party shift</i> (<i>t</i> - 1) × <i>Party Ideology</i>		.019* (.008)	.020* (.008)
<i>Vote change</i> (<i>t</i> - 1)	-.154* (.041)	-.154* (.041)	-.146* (.041)
<i>Party shift</i> (<i>t</i>)	.005 (.006)	.006 (.006)	.004 (.007)
<i>Party shift</i> (<i>t</i> - 1)		.002 (.006)	.000 (.006)
<i>Party Ideology</i>	-.057 (.122)	-.063 (.122)	-.067 (.118)
<i>Governing party</i> (<i>t</i>)	-1.71* (.253)	-1.71* (.253)	-1.68* (.254)
<i>Public opinion shift</i> (<i>t</i>)			.003 (.006)
<i>Public opinion shift</i> (<i>t</i>) × <i>Party Ideology</i>			-0.023* (.010)
<i>Intercept</i>	.430* (.119)	.420* (.119)	.397* (.119)
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.067	.071	.073

* $p \leq .05$, two-tailed tests.

Notes: For these analyses the dependent variable was the change in the party's vote share at the current election, compared to the previous election. See the text for definitions of the independent variables. The specifications used to estimate the parameters of the Current Effects Model and the Current and Lagged Effects Model are given by equations (1) and (2) in the text, respectively. We note that the number of cases in the analyses of the Public Opinion Model (N=1639) differs from those for the other two models (N=1649), because the Comparative manifesto Project data set does not report the Kim-Fording estimates of the median voter position for the most recent elections in Iceland (2003), Japan (2003), and Turkey (2002), which eliminates 10 data points

vice versa (i.e., the coefficient estimate on the [*vote gain* (*t*-1)] variable is negative and significant).

Sensitivity Analyses

Public opinion effects. We performed several tests in order to evaluate the cross-national comparability of our data and model and to control for additional influences on election outcomes. First, we attempted to control for electoral effects relating to shifts in voters' policy preferences, a model motivated by previous research which concludes that public opinion shifts influence party support (see Adams et al. 2006; Bartle, Dellepiane, and Stimson 2007; Erikson et al. 2002; Ezrow 2005). Unfortunately we lack reliable over-time, cross-nationally comparable, survey-based measures of public opinion for most of the countries and time periods in our data set.¹³ We

¹³The only source for survey-based data on voters' Left-Right positions that is available over a substantial time period and that is (arguably) comparable cross-nationally is from the *Eurobarometer surveys*, which have been administered in several Western (and more recently, central) European countries beginning in the mid-1970s (see Ezrow 2005, 2007 and Adams et al. 2004, 2006 for empirical analyses based on these data). We have reestimated our models using this data, and the coefficient estimates on our two key variables, [*party shift* (*t*) × *party ideology*] and [*party shift* (*t*-1) × *party ideology*], are nearly identical to the coefficient estimates we report in Table 1, although these estimates are no longer statistically significant due to the drastic drop in the number of usable cases (from 1,630 to less than 350). These results are available from the authors upon request.

therefore employed as our longitudinal measure of public opinion the Kim-Fording (2001) measure of the median voter's position, which is available for every postwar election in every country in our data set. The Kim-Fording estimates are not ideal for our purposes since they are based on the parties' vote shares in combination with their Left-Right positions, i.e., these estimates of the median voter position are plausibly endogenous to our analysis of how parties' positioning affects their support.¹⁴ However, empirical analyses by McDonald and Budge (2005, 199–202) suggest that the Kim-Fording measure closely tracks survey-based measures of public opinion, such as those based on the Eurobarometer surveys (but see Bartle, Dellepiane, and Stimson 2007).

Column 3 in Table 1 reports results for a *Public Opinion Model*, that is identical to the Current and Lagged Effects Model except that we incorporate two additional variables: [*public opinion shift* (*t*)], defined as the change in the Kim-Fording estimate of the median voter position at the current election *t* compared to the previous election *t*-1 (where positive values denote a rightward shift and negative values a leftward shift), and [*public opinion shift* (*t*) × *party ideology*], which controls for the direction of the

¹⁴See Kim and Fording (2001) for a detailed description of this estimation procedure. The Kim-Fording estimates of the median voter position are included on the CD-ROM that accompanies Klingemann et al. (2006).

public opinion shift *relative* to the focal party.¹⁵ The negative and statistically significant coefficient estimate on this latter variable indicates that, *ceteris paribus*, parties lose votes when public opinion shifts away from their positions, i.e., right-wing parties lose votes when public opinion shifts to the left while leftist parties lose votes when public opinion shifts to the right. Most important for our purposes, the parameter estimates for this model continue to support the Lagged Policy Effects Hypothesis ($p < 0.02$, two-tailed test), and again they do not support the Current Policy Effects Hypothesis.

Country-specific effects. Next, we addressed the possibility that the reliability of the CMP's Left-Right coding procedures vary across countries. Pelizzo (2003), for instance, argues that the CMP's coding procedures do not accurately measure shifts in the Italian parties' Left-Right positions (see also Kitschelt 1994). If our results are driven by measurement errors from a single country, omission of this country's data from our analysis should alter our substantive conclusions. Thus, we reestimated the parameters of the Current and Lagged Effects Model while omitting one country at a time from the pooled data, i.e., we estimated 25 sets of parameters in all. These estimates continue to support our substantive conclusions and to convince us that our results are not driven by measurement error or other factors specific to a single country.¹⁶ As an additional robustness test to ensure that our conclusions were not driven by unmeasured, country-specific, electoral effects, we estimated a model that was identical to the Current and Lagged Effects Model *except* that we included country-specific intercepts. The parameter estimates for this model, which we report in supplementary materials presented in our online appendix, continue to support the Lagged Policy Effects Hypothesis and again they do not support the Current Policy Effects Hypothesis.

Governing versus opposition parties. There are theoretical reasons to expect that the lagged electoral effects of parties' policy shifts that we identify may

differ between opposition parties versus governing parties: namely, to the extent that these lagged effects are due to voters' retrospective evaluations of parties' past policy *behavior* we would expect these effects to be larger for governing parties. This is because governing parties have the opportunity to translate their promises into actual policy outputs, so that, to the extent that the government's policy outputs after the previous election were in line with the governing parties' preelection policy promises, we cannot parse out whether lagged electoral effects on governing parties' policy positions reflect voters' *retrospective* evaluations of these parties' policy behavior or *prospective* evaluations based on these parties' policy images.¹⁷ Opposition parties, by contrast, typically have scant opportunity to influence government policy outputs, so that if we locate statistical associations between these parties' lagged policy shifts and current election outcomes this will support our interpretation that these associations reflect the time lags before voters update their perceptions of the parties' policy images. To evaluate whether the electoral effects of parties' Left-Right shifts differed for governing parties versus opposition parties, we reestimated the parameters of our models separately on the set of all opposition parties and on the set of all governing parties in our data set. The estimates on our key independent variables, [*party shift* (t) \times *party ideology*] and [*party shift* ($t-1$) \times *party ideology*], were in fact larger for opposition parties than they were for governing parties (although the differences between the estimates for these two types of parties were not statistically significant), which supports our interpretation that the lagged electoral effects of parties' policy shifts that we identify reflect prospective voting based on the parties' policy images, as opposed to retrospective evaluations of the parties' previous policy behavior. These analyses are reported in supplementary analyses posted on our web site.

Finally, we performed several additional sensitivity analyses,¹⁸ including: analyses where the dependent variable was the party's actual vote share as opposed to the change in vote share; analyses where the dependent variable was the change in the log of the party's vote share; analyses that incorporated economic variables, namely changes in the unemployment and inflation rates; analyses that controlled for the number of parties contesting the election; analyses that assessed the statistical effects of possible

¹⁵We note that the number of cases in the analyses of the Public Opinion Model ($N=1639$) differs from those for the other two models ($N=1649$), because the Comparative manifesto Project data set does not report the Kim-Fording estimates of the median voter position for the most recent elections in Iceland (2003), Japan (2003), and Turkey (2002), which eliminates 10 data points.

¹⁶For all 25 sets of parameter estimates on the Current and Lagged Effects Model, the estimated coefficient on the [*party shift* ($t-1$) \times *party ideology*] variable was positive and statistically significant at the .05 level. By contrast the estimated coefficient on the [*party shift* (t) \times *party ideology*] variable was not statistically significant in any of the analyses.

¹⁷We thank an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

¹⁸We thank two anonymous referees for suggesting several of the supplementary analyses that we summarize in this paragraph.

errors in the CMP-based measures of parties' Left-Right shifts; analyses on the party systems in our data set that previous studies have identified as revolving primarily around issues that map onto the Left-Right dimension. All of these analyses, which are reported in supplementary materials posted on our web site, supported substantive conclusions that are identical to the findings we report above.

In toto, our empirical analyses consistently support the Lagged Policy Effects Hypothesis that parties gain (lose) votes at the current election when they moderated their policies at the *previous* election. Our estimates suggest that, on average, the electoral effects of parties' previous policy shifts are modest, a conclusion that squares with the research of Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) and Pelizzo (2007), that in most cases parties can only moderate their policy images slowly over time. By contrast, we find no statistically significant evidence in support of the Current Policy Effects Hypothesis that parties benefit at the current election from moderating their policies at this election. This result lends support to the findings of Carmines and Stimson, Erikson et al., and others, that significant time lags often intervene before voters update their perceptions of parties' policy images. It also implies that empirical analyses that focus exclusively on the electoral effects of parties' current moderating/radicalizing policy shifts may miss the lion's share of the electoral effects of these shifts, since these effects do not manifest themselves until the next election.

Implications of Our Findings for Voters and Parties

Our finding that parties' policy shifts exert lagged effects on their support raises questions about the microlevel processes that underpin this pattern. In particular, do these lagged effects arise primarily because voters are slow to update their perceptions in response to parties' new policy pronouncements, or, alternatively, do these lags indicate that the parties themselves lag in publicizing the new elements in their policy manifestos?¹⁹ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address this issue, we note that there is extensive empirical research that argues that large segments of the mass public are at times inattentive to and uninformed about political issues (e.g., Converse 1964; Zaller 1992), results that suggest that the lagged effects we have uncovered are due to

voters, not parties. On a related point, we note that a separate strand of empirical research suggests reasons why even the subconstituency of voters that immediately register the parties' new policy pronouncements may lag in updating their beliefs: specifically, this research documents *assimilation/contrast* effects in voters' perceptions of parties' policies, namely voters' tendencies to align their current perceptions of the parties' positions with their preexisting political loyalties (see, e.g., Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005, chap. 10; Gerber and Green 1999). Thus voters' tendencies to discount new information that is inconsistent with their current political beliefs/loyalties may contribute to the lagged effects that we report here.

The above considerations notwithstanding, we hesitate to completely "blame the voters" for the lagged electoral effects we have uncovered, first, because our observations of party competition suggest that the parties—and the news media—bear some responsibility for this pattern, second because we are not convinced that lagged electoral effects are a bad thing! With respect to the first point, we note that parties' new policy pronouncements often provoke rival party elites to publicly deride the focal party's new initiatives as being "opportunistic," "pandering," "insincere," unrealistic," and so on.²⁰ At the same time, members of the news media can be expected to weigh in with commentary about whether the focal party's new policy initiatives represent a "tactical" change in strategy as opposed to a fundamental change in policy direction, whether the policy shift is likely to be permanent or whether it merely represents a temporary victory for one of the party's factions, and so on. Thus as rank-and-file voters attempt to estimate a party's current policy position they must sift through this ongoing policy "dialogue" consisting of the focal party's current policy pronouncements, the counterclaims of rival elites, the media's commentary, and so on. While we are unaware of extant research that parses out how these various factors interact to shape voters' perceptions of parties' current policy positions, we suspect that this welter of (at times) confusing and contradictory information contributes to the time lags that intervene before voters react to the new elements in parties' policy programs.

The considerations discussed above lead into our second point, that the time lags we have uncovered, between when parties announce new policies and when voters register their reactions at the polls, are not necessarily undesirable. For the contradictory,

¹⁹We thank an anonymous referee for raising this question.

²⁰Margit Tavits' (2007) distinction between "principled" and "pragmatic" policy shifts, discussed below, appears relevant here.

confusing political dialogue that attentive voters register embodies, in our opinion, a central fact of political life: namely, that the “new policy directions” that parties announce are at times illusory and short-lived! At times these new directions last only as long as the currently dominant party faction maintains its ascendancy; or until the party leadership discerns an alternative “newer direction” that they project will be more electorally advantageous; or until the party achieves governing status and decides that it is not feasible to translate many of its policy promises into actual policy outputs (see, e.g., Stokes 2001). Given these facts of political life, politically attentive citizens might reasonably adopt a “wait and see” attitude in response to parties’ promises of a new policy direction, resolving to reserve judgment until they can determine whether or not the party’s new promises embody a permanent shift in policy orientation. However, the extent to which the time lags we have uncovered reflect these types of considered judgments by politically attentive citizens, as opposed to the inattention of politically uninvolved voters, remains a task for future research.

Finally, our finding that parties’ policy moderation/radicalization exerts lagged electoral effects raises the question: What can parties do to influence their support at the *current* election? In this regard, we emphasize that our findings *do not* imply that party elites lack strategic options in pursuit of their electoral objectives at the current election. First, there is extensive research documenting that elections turn in large part on party elites’ images with respect to dimensions of evaluation such as competence, integrity, and unity (see Clark forthcoming; Stokes 1992). There is nothing in our findings to suggest that party elites cannot burnish their images in the current election with respect to these types of issues, thereby enhancing their party’s electoral appeal. Second, as noted above political parties engage in a ongoing effort to frame not only their own policy images but also those of their opponents, i.e., they endeavor to cast their opponents’ policy strategies in the most unfavorable light possible, which at times involves convincing voters that their rivals’ policy promises are insincere, or that these rivals possess “hidden policy agendas” that differ radically from their public pronouncements. Our research does not examine the electoral effects of this form of policy competition. Third, we emphasize that our exclusive focus on the electoral effects of parties’ Left-Right shifts leaves open many additional avenues for research. As discussed above we limited our analyses to the overarching Left-Right dimension because this allowed us

to make reliable inferences about the direction of party shifts, relative to the center of the voter distribution. However, important studies by Meguid (2005, 2008) and Tavits (2007)—studies that do not analyze the directions of parties’ policy shifts relative to voters—demonstrate that party shifts on issues outside the overarching Left-Right dimension can exert electoral effects at the *current* election: specifically, Meguid shows that mainstream parties’ positioning on issues such as immigration and the environment influences electoral support for niche parties (such as green and radical right parties), while Tavits demonstrates significant electoral effects of parties’ shifts on “pragmatic” versus “principled” policy dimensions. These findings suggest that the length of time that elapses before parties’ policy behavior influences election outcomes varies with the dimension of political debate, a hypothesis that we hope to explore in future research. Finally, there may be systematic differences across national electorates (and across the media coverage of politics in these electorates) that influence both the magnitude and the timing of the electoral effects associated with parties’ policy shifts.²¹

Conclusion and Discussion

From an empirical perspective, we have shown that an important feature of issue evolution and macro-partisanship in the United States, namely the time lags that frequently intervene before voters react to politicians’ policy shifts, appears to be a *general feature* of mass-elite policy linkages in postwar democracies. This finding supports the perspective that Carmines and Stimson advanced when they first proposed their model of issue evolution, in the context of racial issues in the United States:

We wish to explain, in general, how issue alignments and realignments are driven by mass response to the behavior of participants in national political institutions. Our empirical manifestation of issue evolution is race, but the theory should be equally applicable to other issues, past and future . . . So too should it be applicable to other nations. Its assumptions about institutional cues and mass response are not specific to the American political context. (Carmines and Stimson 1986, 915)

From a theoretical perspective, our findings are relevant to the long-standing debate over how party elites trade off (possibly conflicting) objectives, such

²¹Note, however, that our statistical analyses support the conclusion that our key findings are not driven by unmeasured factors that vary across countries, such as differences in national electorates or the media.

as the goals of implementing desired policies versus maximizing votes versus gaining membership in the governing coalition (see, e.g., the essays in Muller and Strom 1999). On one hand, our finding that parties gain votes via policy moderation suggests that most parties do *not* present vote-maximizing positions (i.e., their support would increase if they moderated their policies), which implies that parties are not pure vote maximizers. On the other hand, our conclusion that parties' Left-Right positions exert only modest, lagged, effects on their support suggests that the trade-offs party elites confront, between announcing their sincere policy beliefs on Left-Right issues versus gaining votes, are not unduly severe. While we support this interpretation up to a point, we caution that our estimates of the *average* electoral effects of parties' Left-Right shifts may obscure considerable variation in individual cases, i.e., it is possible that on occasion a party's ideological shift generates large vote gains (or losses). A consideration of the British Labour Party's electoral setbacks under the radical leadership of Michael Foote, and its success under the moderate Tony Blair, support this interpretation. In this regard, we strongly suspect that a crucial variable that mediates the electoral effects of parties' policy shifts is the *political skill* of the party leaders who lead these shifts. In the case of "New Labour" under Tony Blair, for instance, the fact that Blair presided over the moderation of British Labour's policies may have been less important than the fact that Blair notably succeeded in maintaining unity in the Labour ranks while implementing these policy changes (King 1998). Likewise, British Labour's shift to the left under Michael Foote in the early 1980s may not have greatly damaged the party's electoral prospects per se; however, this shift was coupled with uncertain leadership from Foote, and these two factors jointly contributed to a disastrous splintering of the party leadership, which wrecked Labour's prospects in the 1983 General Election (see Crewe and Harrop 1986).²²

²²As an additional caveat, we emphasize that our estimates of the electoral effects of parties' Left-Right shifts apply given the *actual* configuration of the parties' positions in the party systems under review, which typically include a mixture of centrist and non-centrist parties. If, for instance, all the parties in a given system shifted to the center of the voter distribution except for a single, noncentrist, focal party, then this focal party would plausibly not gain additional support by shifting its own position towards the "crowded" center of the policy space. We emphasize that this caveat does not undermine our empirical results since none of the multiparty systems in our study resembled this hypothetical policy configuration; however, this examples suggest that the reader should be cautious in extrapolating our conclusions to other party systems (such as those in newly emerging democracies) that may feature dramatically different party configurations.

The above comments notwithstanding, our analyses suggest that, on average, parties' electoral gains from policy moderation (and their losses from policy radicalism) are modest, and, furthermore, these gains tend to lag behind the time period when the party actually moderated its positions. This suggests that short-term focused parties have little reason to moderate their policies in pursuit of votes, since any electoral gains from policy moderation may not arrive until later. We feel this finding is important and that scholars and political commentators might bear this pattern in mind whenever they are tempted to analyze election results in terms of the "policy mandates" that voters have supposedly conferred on the winning party or parties! By contrast, our findings suggest that party elites with longer time horizons may be motivated to moderate their policies in pursuit of future electoral gains—and thus, that parties' policy strategies may turn in part on how much importance their leaders attach to achieving their electoral objectives at the current election as opposed to future time periods. We suspect that party leaders' willingness to look past the current election depends in large part on whether they project that they can maintain their leadership position into future elections (see Andrews and Jackman forthcoming); alternatively, some scholars have suggested that different types of parties (i.e., left versus right, or niche versus mainstream) may have systematically different time horizons (see, e.g., Adams, Haupt, and Stoll forthcoming; Przeworski and Sprague 1986). The lagged electoral effects that we identify suggest that scholars might profitably investigate the implications of this "time horizons" variable in future research.

At the same time, our conclusion that realistic changes in party positioning exert only marginal effects on party support does *not* imply that these effects are trivial, for as Stimson argues in his analysis of American politics, political change happens primarily at the margins:

The beginning point is understanding that politics happens at the margin. Political change occurs when a percent of two of the public changes opinion or changes sides. That's all it takes. The mass can remain a combination of the committed and the inert, neither of which moves in response to much of anything, while just a very few are sensitive to the changing signals of governance. (Stimson 2004, 158)

Finally, we emphasize again that we have traced the macrolevel associations between parties' Left-Right shifts and election outcomes, without empirically examining the microlevel processes that underpin these findings (see, e.g., Hellwig 2008). Thus, while our perspective is informed by models of issue evolution

and macropartisanship—models that posit that political elites' policy shifts influence voters' perceptions of parties' policy images—we have not parsed out these microlevel patterns here.

In this paper we have traced the relationship between parties' Left-Right shifts and changes in their electoral support, in 25 postwar party systems. Our findings suggest that, on average, parties modestly increase their support when they moderate their Left-Right positions. However, we find that this effect is mediated by a crucial variable: namely, the passage of time.

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