



Oscillations in Perceptual Accuracy: How Well Do People Perceive Parties' Ideological Positions?

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Abstract

While citizens are sufficiently informed about parties' ideological stances during elections, we know little about how the perceptual accuracy of party positions evolves beyond the election campaign period. We argue that, during election campaigns, when political information is more readily available, citizens perceive party positions more accurately, but this perceptual accuracy decreases outside of election time. Leveraging the as-if random variation in interview timing in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems dataset across 21 established democracies and the panel data structure of the British Election Study Internet Panel, we show that perceptual accuracy declines post-election and increases during the pre-electoral campaign period. Additional analyses suggest that these fluctuations in accuracy are primarily due to individuals becoming less informed rather than updating their perceptions in response to new information. These findings have important implications for democratic representation.

Keywords Ideological positions · Party positions · Perceptual accuracy

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Despite concerns about the limited level of political information that citizens hold (Carpini et al. 1996), research examining citizens' information on party positions and its impact on voting behavior has concluded that citizens are sufficiently informed to contribute to the functioning of representative democracy. Specifically, comparative work relying on election surveys suggests that citizens on average are well informed about parties' placements on a left-right dimension and effectively rely on this information when choosing which party to vote for (Dalton et al. 2011; Joesten and Stone 2014). That citizens are generally well informed about parties' ideological positions is also evident from the fact that citizens' perceptions of parties' left-right positions correlate highly with how experts position parties on a left-right scale (Dalton and McAllister 2015) and with parties' campaign rhetoric (Adams et al. 2019; Somer-Topcu et al. 2020). However, the existing positive evidence comes exclusively from surveys conducted during election times. Consequently, we lack insight into whether voters retain this information about parties' ideological stances outside election periods.

In this paper, we argue that studies examining citizens' knowledge of parties' ideological positions close to elections measure ideological knowledge when political information is more abundant and citizens are paying more attention to politics than they usually do (regardless of their latent political interest), leading to higher levels of perceptual accuracy. Such measures, therefore, are not reflective of how ideologically informed citizens are about politics and parties' positions throughout the governing cycle. As time after election passes, people become increasingly less accurate in their perceptions of party positions, and this is not because parties change their positions and voters fail to update with these positions, but because information becomes scarce and voters either lose attention to politics or get less exposure.

Our argument is based on the Zallerian proposition that for citizens to be able to locate parties in an ideological space, they need access to a sufficient amount of information and have a high interest in parties' policy positions (Zaller 1992). Building on the literature studying the effects of media coverage on voter knowledge (see, e.g., Jerit et al. 2006), we expect that the extent to which the media report party policy position information matters for how accurately voters perceive party positions. Given that political information is more abundant and amplified close to election day (Gelman and King 1993), through news, political debates (Benoit et al. 2003; Jennings et al. 2020), infotainment (Ferrín et al. 2019), or campaign ads (Freedman et al. 2004), and because voters are either more interested in acquiring information about party policy positions (Andersen et al. 2005) or are more likely to be exposed to political information regardless of their latent political interest (Freedman et al. 2004), we hypothesize that citizens have more accurate perceptions of parties' left-right ideological positions close to election day. Further from the election, when media coverage of party politics is lower and exposure to information is reduced, citizens' perceptions of parties' ideological positions should be less accurate. Our argument on the importance of the availability of information for holding accurate perceptions of party positions is also consistent with the Bayesian updating theory, which posits that voters update their perceptions when they receive information (Gerber and Green 1998; Hill 2017; Coppock 2023; Bullock 2009).

To examine the temporal dynamics of voters' accuracy of parties' policy positions throughout the governing cycle and to test our argument that citizens are more ideologically informed close to elections, we make use of two distinct data sources, which complement each other in their methodological strengths. First, we use data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) to comparatively test our expectations in 21 established democracies. Following the work of Singh and Thornton (2019) and Hernandez et al. (2021), we assume and verify that the timing of survey taking in the CSES is "as if" randomly distributed. Because CSES surveys are administered post-election, the data allow us to trace citizens' perceptions of parties' ideological positions after election day. We find that citizens' perceptions of parties' left-right positions become less accurate as more time elapses since the election. Second, we use the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) data to examine the evolution of perceptual accuracy before, during, and after the 2015 United Kingdom general election. Focusing on within-individual changes in perceptual accuracy, we show that respondents' accuracy of parties' left-right positions increases as election day approaches, followed by a post-election decline. Across the two datasets, we find strong evidence that perceptual accuracy is higher at election time. Additional analyses suggest these results are generalizable across different parties and respondents.

After establishing the presence of temporal variation in the level of agreement between experts and citizens regarding parties' ideological positions, we test whether this variation is attributable to citizens being less informed outside the election period or to citizens updating their perceptions in response to new information about changing party positions. If people are becoming less informed, this would be consistent with our theory that an information-rich environment is important for citizens' learning. On the other hand, if parties change their positions after the election and voters adjust their perceptions accordingly, this could also explain the declining alignment between people's post-election perceptions of parties and parties' positions during election time. If citizens update their perceptions with information, it would indicate that they are attentive not only during election periods but also in non-electoral periods. Three sets of analyses, that (1) examine respondents' likelihood of indicating they "don't know" a party's ideological position, that (2) leverage plausible variation in 'real' changes in parties' positions following the election, and that (3) examine party policy shifts following elections provide evidence that is consistent with citizens being less informed as time after the election increases rather than them updating their perceptions with new information. We therefore conclude that the decline in accuracy is primarily due to citizens becoming less informed and thinking less in terms of ideology as time passes after the election.

Some might argue that for representative democracy to function well, it suffices that voters make enlightened choices on election day, which they can do if they are informed about parties' positions at the ballot box. However, many of the dynamics that contribute to democratic representation occur outside election periods (Esaiasson and Narud 2013). This is clear from work that shows the impact of non-electoral participation on party behavior and policy outcomes (Wasow 2020), and from work that has studied parties' responsiveness to public opinion and parties' responsiveness to their standing in the polls throughout the governing cycle (Esaiasson and Wlezien 2017; Schumacher and Öhberg 2020). Furthermore, for citizens to be able

to hold parties accountable for their performance in office (e.g., in terms of pledge fulfillment, see Matthieß 2020), or in opposition (Plescia and Kritzinger 2017), they arguably have to maintain attention to politics and stay informed about parties' positions, also outside of the campaign period. If they turn a blind eye to party actions in office and opposition and only use the campaign period to get informed about where parties stand on policy, they risk getting biased information on party behavior due to negative campaigning (Jung and Tavits 2021), message distortion (Sommer-Topcu and Tavits 2023), and media framing (Hetherington 1996). Therefore, our results are concerning because they suggest many citizens tune out of politics outside of election campaigns. Furthermore, that this happens for left-right positions in particular speaks volumes about the limited political awareness of citizens. The left-right dimension is presumably an 'easy' heuristic that helps citizens make sense of politics (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). But even for this dimension, citizens do not appear to have strongly held attitudes. This also has consequences for the literature on party politics, which theorizes that parties face punishment when they change their ideological positions (Nasr 2024; Nasr and Hoes 2024) or that parties win votes when they move closer to where citizens are (Ferland and Dassonneville 2021).

Our paper is structured as follows. We begin by empirically demonstrating over-time variation in citizens' perceptions of parties' ideological positions. To do so, we present two studies in sequence, using the comparative data from the CSES surveys, and the BESIP data. Having established that citizens' perceptions of party positions align more closely with experts' estimates when the election is near, we examine the heterogeneity of this finding by party family, partisanship, and political interest. Our analyses reveal that accuracy declines similarly for both mainstream and niche parties. Moreover, while the decrease in accuracy is evident across all groups, it is more pronounced among partisans and individuals with high political interest. Next, we turn to the question of whether this pattern reflects variation in citizens' knowledge about party positions or is a result of continuous updating to real and changing information. We conclude with a summary of our main results and a discussion of the implications of our findings, highlighting the importance of citizens maintaining a certain level of engagement with and information about party politics—also outside of the campaign period.

How does Accuracy Change Over Time?

Prior research has generated important insights into the conditions under which voters accurately perceive parties' positions – whether on the left-right ideological positions of parties or specific issues, such as European integration (Adams et al. 2014, 2016). A growing literature has inquired how specific information inputs from political parties, such as manifestos (Adams et al. 2011; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014), campaign messages (Sommer-Topcu et al. 2020), leadership changes (Fernandez-Vazquez and Sommer-Topcu 2019), coalition arrangements (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013; Fortunato and Adams 2015), government policies (Adams et al. 2020; Seeberg et al. 2017), and elite interactions (Adams et al. 2021) shape (or fail to shape) voter perceptions of party positions. More recent work focuses on conditioning variables to explain

perceptual accuracy, such as intraparty issue unity (Jung and Somer-Topcu 2022) or personal issue saliency (Somer-Topcu et al. 2025).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that party strategies, government/elite behavior, and voter-level characteristics impact the accuracy of voter perceptions of party positions. Nevertheless, none of these studies examine how perceptual accuracy varies over time and how campaign periods differ from non-electoral periods in shaping voters' perceptual accuracy. Most of the existing literature on perceptions examines how government and campaign strategies shape voters' perceptions at the time of the election. Only a few recent papers examine off-electoral-cycle perceptual accuracy. Somer-Topcu et al. (2025) investigate perceptions outside of election cycles but do not compare them to perceptions during election periods. The only study to our knowledge with over-time component is Seeberg et al. (2017), which uses panel survey data across two years in Denmark to show that a major policy shift of a government led people to update their perceptions of party positions.

Our study, therefore, is unique and shifts the focus from what kinds of signals voters respond to, toward *when* voters are most accurate in their perceptions of parties. We emphasize the cyclical nature of perceptual accuracy across electoral and non-electoral periods. Our argument highlights how the temporal rhythm of campaigns itself shapes perceptual accuracy, primarily because citizens become less informed outside campaign periods. By demonstrating that perceptual accuracy fluctuates across electoral and non-electoral periods, our study offers a novel temporal dimension to the literature on political perceptions.

Our main argument is that citizens' accuracy of parties' ideological positions is not constant but varies with the amount of political information available to them and their heightened exposure to it. Election periods, by increasing the volume of political information available to voters and by amplifying it, allow citizens to become more politically informed (Banducci et al. 2017; Bartels 1993; Freedman et al. 2004; Nadeau et al. 2008). This argument is consistent with Zaller (1992), who shows that as message frequency, or the volume of the messages, increases, more people are likely to hear it, and with Gelman and King (1993), who state that it is through the media's coverage of the campaign, of parties' positions, and of the candidates that citizens gain the necessary information to make enlightened choices. In addition to this increased availability of information during election campaign periods, there is evidence that citizens' interest in politics and their consumption of political media coverage are particularly pronounced during election campaigns (Andersen et al. 2005). Hence, not only is there more information but also more interest in this information, helping voters develop accurate perceptions of party positions. Campaign periods, as a result, provide the conditions for citizens to gain ideological information. In contrast, outside of election time, there are fewer incentives and less information available for voters to become informed.

Our argument centers on the broader information environment rather than party output alone. Campaigns create a "hot" environment in which messages are amplified across various media, social platforms, and interpersonal channels, and citizens are particularly attentive. In such contexts, latent ideological associations become activated, enabling voters to reason more systematically about party positions, consistent with Zaller's model of accessible considerations. Research shows that while base-

line communication of political parties continue in off-election periods, suggesting “permanent campaigning” (Blumenthal 1982), campaign periods remain distinctive in both intensity and style (Poljak and Peter Van Aelst 2024): social media activity rises sharply and then falls after elections (Larsson 2016; Stier et al. 2018; Ceccobelli 2018; Peeters et al. 2023), news coverage gives greater prominence to parties (Van Aelst and Knut De Swert 2009), and politicians’ tone and priorities shift markedly during campaigns (Silva et al. 2024; Berz and Kroeber 2023). It is this information-heightened campaign environment that underpins our account of why perceptual accuracy should peak near elections and decline as the environment cools afterwards.

Following the election, the amount of information on party positions available to voters and hence voters’ exposure to information generally declines. While election campaigns increase the chances of inadvertent exposure to political information (Freedman et al. 2004), particularly for those uninterested in politics (Ferrín et al. 2019; Shehata 2013), once the election is over some voters lose their interest in politics¹ and others, who never were much interested, become less exposed.² We therefore expect the perceptual accuracy of party positions to be highest at election time, to decline after the election, and to increase as the next election approaches. We test these expectations using two datasets. In the following sections, we present the data and estimation approach, as well as the results, for each of these two studies in turn.

Study 1: Cross-National Analyses using CSES Data

Data and Methods

The CSES project’s Integrated Module Dataset, spanning 1996 to 2022, provides standardized measures of our variables of interest, which is crucial for a comparative study of voter perceptual accuracy. We focus on established democracies only where the left-right ideological dimension, which is the focus of our analysis, is meaningful and still one of the most dominant dimensions (Dalton et al. 2011). By focusing on established democracies, our sample consists of comparable political contexts, characterized by typically more stable and institutionalized political systems where citizens enjoy widespread access to information. This focus allows for a comparative analysis across 21 established democracies (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States), 84 election surveys including 803,736 respondents and is especially suitable for this research for two main reasons:³ First, it consistently pro-

¹ In Appendix A, we show that citizens’ expressed interest in politics peaks when the election is near.

² In additional analyses, we also account for the fact that in some contexts and instances, the media continue to cover politics extensively after the election—especially in settings where government formation takes a long time. We elaborate on this later in the paper and present these findings in Appendix B.

³ In some surveys, our key variable (interview date) is coded as the same day for all respondents despite macro reports indicating that the fieldwork has taken more than a day. We therefore excluded these elections from the analyses (Denmark 2001, Finland 2003, France 2002, Greece 2012, Iceland 2007, Italy 2006, Norway 2001, Portugal 2005). As described below, having the correct interview dates is essential for our “as-if random” assumption.

vides information on both voters' and country experts' placements of parties on the left-right ideological scale, which we need to test how well voters' perceptions of party positions align with those of experts. Second, the surveys were conducted at different points in time following the election, providing variation in our key independent variable (i.e., days since election) to test the influence of information effects on the perceptual accuracy of party positions.

Testing perceptual accuracy requires us to know where individuals locate each party in comparison to its actual position. Our outcome variable is respondents' perceptions of parties' positions, with each respondent included in the dataset as many times as the number of parties for which they were asked to locate them on the left-right ideological scale.⁴ This scale is an 11-point continuum (ranging between 0 and 10). As we explain in detail below, we use the CSES country experts' perceptions of party positions as the main indicator to measure parties' actual positions.⁵

Our expectation states that perceptual accuracy is highest when information about party positions is abundant. The CSES data allows us to test this hypothesis by leveraging a unique feature of the surveys. The exact timing of when the surveys go in the field and how long they remain in the field varies by survey.⁶ While they are administered right after the election in some countries, they are fielded somewhat later in other countries. Furthermore, the length of the fieldwork extends over a fairly long period of time in many countries, which introduces variation in the timing of interviews *within* countries as well. Overall, the dataset includes information from interviews occurring from 0 days to 298 days after the election day (for a visualization of variation in interview timing, see Appendix G).

We leverage this variation in the timing of interview-taking and create a variable that captures the number of days between the election and the day of the interview. We call this variable *days since election*. Following Singh and Thornton (2019) and Hernandez et al. (2021), we conceive of the timing of the interview as a treatment and argue that each respondent is treated *as if* randomly by the time of their interview (Dunning 2008). To make this assumption, it is important that those interviewed earlier during the fieldwork are comparable to those interviewed later. If this assumption holds, we can claim that the difference between groups is due to the treatment (number of days between election day and interview day), allowing us to identify the causal effect of election context/campaign (or election salience) on perceptual accuracy. If later interview-taking is mainly the result of the respondent being harder to reach by the interviewers and if the characteristics of those who are harder to reach correlate with our dependent variable, this assumption might be violated. Following Hernandez et al. (2021), we check the as-if random assumption by regressing the number of days between election day and interview day (the treatment variable) on different socio-demographic variables to assess whether these characteristics predict

⁴We exclude respondents who selected "Don't know" when asked to place a party on the left-right scale. Robustness checks recoding these responses to the party's country–election median yield substantively the same results (see Appendix C).

⁵We also verify whether results hold when using estimate of parties' positions from the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (CHES) in Appendix D and a party position estimate from the MARPOR in Appendix E.

⁶See Appendix F for a qualitative account of how variation in interview timing is generated across surveys.

the timing of the survey. The results of this test are available in Appendix H.⁷ Overall, we find little evidence that respondents' socio-demographic characteristics correlate in systematic and meaningful ways with the timing of interview-taking.⁸ Based on this test, we think it is safe to assume that the day that respondents are interviewed in an election survey can be considered independent of fixed individual-level characteristics that could influence how accurately voters perceive parties' positions overall.⁹

To evaluate perceptual accuracy, we use expert estimates of parties' positions as an independent variable.¹⁰ That way, we assess the strength of the association between a party's 'true' position on the left-right dimension and where a citizen perceives it to be. To examine the role of time, we assess whether the relationship between these two variables is stronger (i.e., close to 1) when the survey was done immediately following the election and weakens as time passes. Our primary indicator of parties' actual positions is the party position estimates provided by the CSES national survey teams in the macro-report, which they send with the survey data to the CSES secretariat. We note that the CSES macro-reports specifically asked the national survey teams to place parties according to their positions at the time of the election for which the post-election data is collected, and hence, we will be comparing country experts' assessment of parties' positions *at the time of the election* to the respondents' perceptions of party positions at different points in time after the election.

While CSES expert perceptions serve as our primary indicator of party positions, we also test whether patterns are similar when using two alternative measures of parties' actual positions. The first is the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (CHES) expert perceptions. For our purposes, this alternative is somewhat less ideal than the CSES expert perceptions. For instance, the timing of the CHES data collection rarely corresponds with parliamentary elections, making it hard to claim that we assess the correspondence between citizens' perceptions of party positions and parties' positions at

⁷Note that if the respondents take the survey on their own time and then mail back the survey, the assumption that the days since election variable is as if random may no longer hold. Even though CSES surveys do not provide respondent-level information about the mode of survey, it provides information about whether a specific survey allowed mail-back option or not. Therefore, we identified 35 election surveys that allowed the mail-back option and estimated additional models excluding these election surveys from the sample. These models yield similar results, and the analyses are presented in Appendix I.

⁸We argue that the effects that are found are more likely to induce a downward bias rather than inflating the estimates. For instance, we find that the most well-off are interviewed somewhat later. To the extent that these groups are also more politically sophisticated, this should attenuate the degrading perceptual accuracy that we expect in our hypotheses as time passes since election.

⁹Because of these results, our main models do not include respondents' socio-demographic characteristics as controls but we validate our results by adding socio-demographic controls. These results can be found in Appendix J.

¹⁰The CSES national teams typically consist of multiple country experts and academics familiar with the national political context. Although the number of experts involved varies across countries and elections, these reports provide a single party position estimate per party. While the CSES does not provide information on the partisan affiliations of the experts or adjust for potential bias, previous research (Dalton and McAllister 2015) and our robustness checks indicate a strong correlation (0.94) between CSES placements and independent expert assessments, such as CHES.

the time of the election. Despite this limitation, we assess the main patterns using the CHES and find that the results are substantially similar.¹¹

The second alternative measure we rely on is MARPOR's *rile* indicator of party positions based on their election manifestos. We acknowledge that MARPOR estimates are proxy measures of party positions, based on the salience accorded to specific issues in their manifestos rather than the exact positions parties take. This difference is reflected in the correlation between CSES expert perceptions, CHES expert perceptions, and MARPOR estimates in our data. Specifically, the correlation between the CSES and CHES expert perceptions (0.94) is significantly higher than that between the MARPOR estimates and CSES experts (0.59) or between MARPOR and CHES experts (0.61). Despite these differences, validating the robustness of our findings using both expert perceptions and parties' positions based on their election manifestos has advantages. Manifestos, prepared before election campaigns to highlight their election-specific positions (Adams et al. 2011), are not as sensitive to post-election party behavior compared to expert perceptions, which take into account a wider information environment (i.e., events that take place after the election, such as coalition formation (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013)). The results using MARPOR estimates are substantively similar.¹²

To test our hypothesis, we regress perceptions of party positions on expert perceptions of party positions, days since election, and the interaction of these two variables. We expect the coefficient for the expert-based party positions to be positive. If citizens' perceptions perfectly correspond to parties' actual positions, the coefficient would be exactly 1, indicating that for every one-unit change in the expert perceptions, voters' perceptions of party positions change by one unit in the same direction. Coefficients close to 1 therefore would suggest that voters have high perceptual accuracy when asked to locate parties on the left-right scale. We expect this coefficient to be high on the day of the election, but also expect a negative coefficient for the interaction between the indicators of expert perceptions and the timing of the interview. This would support our hypothesis that as the time since the election increases, perceptual accuracy decreases.

Given the stacked nature of the data, we analyze the data at the respondent-dyad level, meaning that each respondent enters the data for each party evaluation (for a similar approach, see Spoon and Klüver 2017). This results in a dataset that has a rather complex structure, with cross-nesting at multiple levels. With a large dataset like ours (approximately 803,736 observations), estimating a crossed-classified multilevel model that distinguishes among all types of nesting is neither practical nor feasible. We therefore opt to estimate a parsimonious model that makes abstraction of the cross-classification and treats the dyads as nested within respondents. These

¹¹These results are available in Appendix D and they point to decreasing perceptual accuracy post-election. Note that when we replicate our models using CHES expert estimates, we match CHES surveys that are within a one-year range of the CSES election survey. This way, we limit the analyses to expert surveys for which the timing roughly corresponds to parliamentary elections. However, this results in a substantial reduction in the number of polities and elections that can be included. For instance, the number of polities and elections that we can include is reduced to 13 and 31, respectively.

¹²The results are presented in Appendix E. The manifesto-based approach also reveals that accuracy declines over time post-election.

respondents are nested in election surveys and countries, respectively, leading us to estimate a four-level hierarchical linear model.¹³ We allow for random intercepts at the respondent, election, and country levels. This way, we account for the variation introduced by level-specific characteristics.¹⁴ We allow the effect of expert perception (measured at the lowest level) to vary at the respondent level (random slope for expert perception at the respondent level).

¹³In Appendix K, we also present an analysis without a dyadic structure. In these models, the dependent

Table 1 Explaining Citizens' Perceptions of Parties' Left-Right Positions: Main models with random intercepts and random slopes

Dependent variable	Model 1 Voter perception	Model 2 Voter perception	Model 3 Voter perception
Expert party position	0.846*** (0.001)	0.846*** (0.001)	0.873*** (0.001)
Days since election		-0.000* (0.000)	0.004*** (0.000)
Days since elec- tion × party position			-0.001*** (0.000)
Intercept	0.827*** (0.062)	0.842*** (0.062)	0.710*** (0.066)
Random intercepts			
Country level	0.063*** (0.024)	0.064*** (0.024)	0.071*** (0.027)
Election level	0.054*** (0.010)	0.054*** (0.010)	0.056*** (0.010)
Respondent level	0.218*** (0.004)	0.218*** (0.004)	0.000 (0.000)
Random effect			
Respondent level			0.015*** (0.000)
Residual variance	4.641*** (0.008)	4.641*** (0.008)	4.395*** (0.008)
Dyad <i>N</i>	803, 736	803, 736	803, 736
Respondent <i>N</i>	142,902	142,902	142,902
Election <i>N</i>	84	84	84
Country <i>N</i>	21	21	21

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

variable is the average perceptual accuracy of a respondent across parties in an election. These models yield similar results.

¹⁴In Appendix L, we also replicate our models without random intercepts at the country level. Instead, we include country fixed effects to account for country-invariant variables. Our main conclusions still hold for this specification.

Results Using the CSES Data

Table 1 presents our findings. In Model 1, we regress respondents’ perceptions of party positions on expert perceptions of party positions. The correlation between the CSES expert assessments of party positions and voter perceptions is quite high (0.85). A one-unit shift in experts’ perception of a party’s position—measured on an 11-point scale—is thus associated with voters shifting their perception by 0.85 units in the same direction. This indicates that voter perceptions correlate fairly strongly with experts’ perceptions of the parties’ positions. The same association remains when we include the days since the election variable in the model (Model 2).

Our hypothesis is that accuracy declines as the distance from the election increases. This implies that we expect a positive coefficient for the expert party position variable and a negative coefficient for the interaction between expert party position and days since election. Model 3 supports our hypothesis. This is further clarified in Figure 1, which visualizes the interaction by showing the average marginal effect of a one-unit shift in expert perceptions on voter perceptions as the days since election increase. Figure 1 shows that on election day (days since election is set to 0), the correlation between expert and voter perceptions is 0.87, while a 30-day time lapse since the election is associated with 0.02 decrease in accuracy. That would mean that three months after election day, the correlation between experts’ and voters’ perceptions

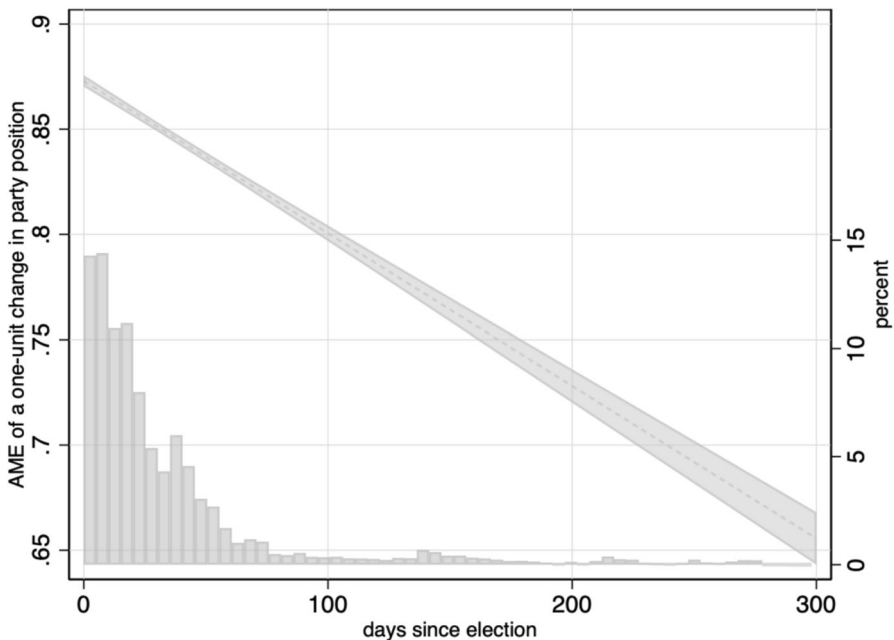


Fig. 1 Perceptual accuracy decreases as time passes since election. Note: Predictions are based on Model 3 in Table 1. 95% Confidence intervals are indicated with shaded areas. The histogram shows the distribution of days since election variable. The mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values of this variable are 34.7, 44.1, 0 and 298, respectively

of parties' position decreases from 0.87 to 0.81. After six months, the association decreases to 0.74 and one year after the election, the correlation is equal to 0.61.¹⁵

In sum, elections—which provide extensive information on parties during campaigns, make party cues salient, amplified and accessible and stimulate involvement through various means—appear to bring voters up to date concerning where parties stand. Because the days since election variable is not meaningfully related to respondents' characteristics, we attribute the increasing divergence between voters' perceptions and party positions to proximity to election day and, consequently, to the cooling of the post-election information environment, reduced salience and amplification, and hence lower accessibility of ideological cues. In addition to providing new information, campaigns activate latent associative links, but as cues fade, those links recede into latency and perceptual accuracy declines.¹⁶

Heterogeneity in the Effect of Days Since the Election

The results that are presented in Table 1 suggest that information about parties' ideological positions significantly decreases as the distance from the election increases. The main effect that is estimated in Table 1, however, might hide important heterogeneity, due to differences between parties, or due to differences between respondents. In this section, we test three potential sources of heterogeneity that might impact the accuracy trends post-election, one at the party-level and two that concern respondents.

First, one may argue that these results may differ if we focus on mainstream versus niche parties. Accuracy may be expected to decline more strongly for niche parties, which are often small parties and receive little attention outside election periods. While we do not have a specific expectation regarding whether perceptual accuracy should be higher or lower among mainstream and niche parties, if perceptual accuracy declines post-election similarly for both party categories, this would indicate a lack of heterogeneity in the post-election decline in accuracy by party family. We show in Appendix N that while accuracy is higher for niche parties, the slope of the decline in accuracy following the election is similar for mainstream and niche parties.

Second, the effects may differ by respondents' characteristics. One potential source of heterogeneity is partisanship. On the one hand, partisans, due to their emotional investment in politics stemming from their psychological attachment to a political party, are likely to be more politically engaged and pay closer attention to politics, which may lead them to be more knowledgeable about party positions. On the other hand, partisans might be biased when it comes to perceiving party positions overall, as they tend to view politics through a partisan perceptual screen, leading to decreased accuracy compared to non-partisans. We therefore explore heterogeneity

¹⁵ It is worth noting that these estimates are likely conservative, given that we exclude respondents who select "don't know" when asked to place parties—a response that becomes more common as time passes since the election. Because of this exclusion, the sample increasingly reflects respondents who are more attentive or confident, suggesting that the true decline in perceptual accuracy across the broader electorate could be even larger.

¹⁶ Sensitivity analyses in Appendix M reveal that the findings are not driven by either extrapolation or by outliers.

based on partisanship in Appendix O.¹⁷ The results of these analyses show, first, that on election day, accuracy is higher among partisans (0.93) than non-partisans (0.82). Second, and importantly, both partisans and non-partisans become less accurate following the election, indicating both groups are more accurate during electoral times compared to non-electoral times. Third, the accuracy gap between partisans and non-partisans becomes non-significant at a large distance from election day, indicating that the decrease in accuracy is starker among partisans.

As a third source of heterogeneity, we explore whether political interest moderates trends in perceptual accuracy following an election. It is plausible that individuals with a greater interest in party positions perceive them more accurately, especially when information is more readily available during electoral periods. Our analyses in Appendix A reveal two main findings. First, perceptual accuracy is always higher among those who are more politically interested. Second, accuracy declines for both groups, although the accuracy gap becomes smaller between the interested and not interested respondents (the decline is more pronounced among the politically interested).

These additional analyses thus suggest that the main effects reported in Table 1 hold quite widely, as accuracy decreases after the election for different types of parties and among different types of respondents.

Study 2: British Election Study Internet Panel Data Analysis

Data and Methods

Study 1 has shown that accuracy gradually decreases after election day. We argue that this is due to the decreasing availability of and exposure to information about party positions. If that is the case, accuracy should also increase before election day, as the media pays more attention to parties' election rhetoric and as political interest increases. The CSES dataset, which combines post-election surveys across our country cases, does not allow us to test these changes in accuracy leading up to the election. To test this expectation, in Study 2, we use the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) data to gain insights into the evolution of perceptual accuracy before, during, and after the 2015 UK General Election.¹⁸ BESIP offers an ideal dataset to test our expectations because it interviewed the same respondents five times around the time of the 2015 General election (the survey waves took place between September 2014 and May 2016), for which we have both CSES and British Election Study expert placements of parties. More specifically, waves 3 and 4 cover the pre-electoral context leading up to the campaign period, wave 5 covers the electoral campaign, and waves 6 and 7 cover the post-election period.

¹⁷This Appendix also explores heterogeneity due to partisanship using the BESIP data that are leveraged in Study 2.

¹⁸Unlike what holds for the 2015 elections, post-election waves did not ask perceived left-right party positions for the 2017 and 2019 elections, which hinders us from running the same analyses for these elections.

We rely on the CSES expert perceptions of party positions from the 2015 election to measure the party positions.¹⁹ As party positions, according to experts, are constant across these survey waves (expert perceptions come from the 2015 election), there is not enough variation in party positions to use them as our independent variable to predict voter perceptions. Therefore, our outcome variable in Study 2 is voter inaccuracy, operationalized as the average absolute difference between respondents' and experts' placements of the parties. A larger distance between voter and expert perceptions indicates lower accuracy. Our independent variables are dummy variables that capture differences across the five survey waves. We estimate a panel model with respondent-fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered at the individual level. The inclusion of individual fixed effects implies that the model accounts for time-invariant factors that may explain differences in accuracy across individuals.

Results Using the BES Data

Our analysis suggests that perceptual error decreases as the election approaches and increases again afterward. In Figure 2, we plot the estimated average perceptual error between where experts and respondents locate the British parties on the left-right dimension. The figure shows the average error across these four parties (the Con-

¹⁹Note that the mean perceived party positions of BES experts are always equal to CSES expert perceived position.

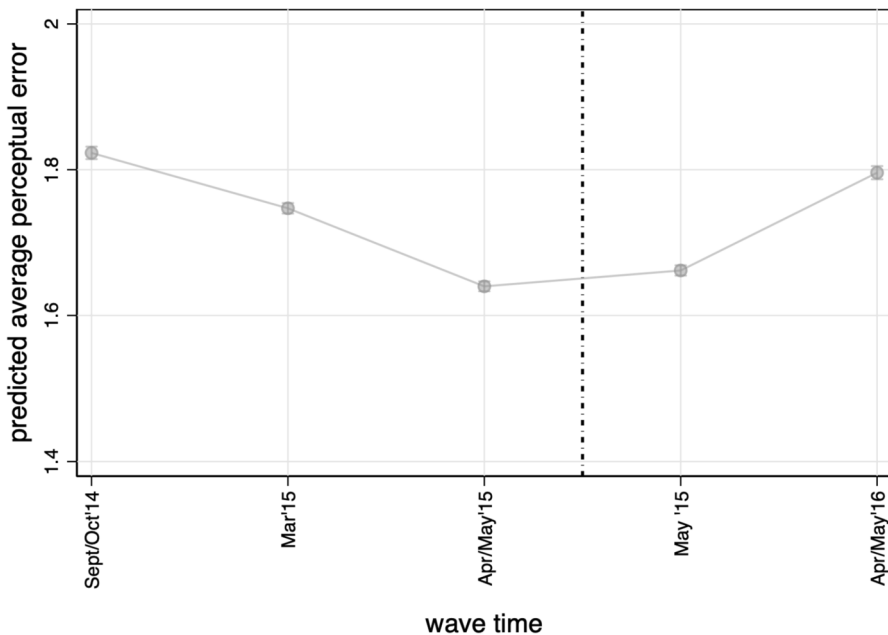


Fig. 2 Perceptual accuracy increases approaching the election day and then decreases. Note: Estimations are based on panel data OLS regression with individual fixed effects and robust standard errors at the individual level. Detailed estimates are shown in Appendix P. Higher values indicate lower accuracy. The vertical line indicates the 2015 General Election

servative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, and UKIP). The vertical dashed line indicates the election date. Recall that our model (full model available in Appendix P) includes fixed effects for respondents, meaning that the changes between waves can be interpreted as the average within-individual changes in perceptual error over time. It is evident from the figure that perceptual error decreases (i.e., accuracy increases) as the election approaches. The error declines between the first and third waves, reaching its lowest point during the election wave (April/May 2015). After the election, the error increases again.

We take these results to suggest that as the volume of information on parties' ideological positions increases (i.e., as the information environment becomes "hot"), the perceptual gap between voters and experts decreases. For example, overall perceptual error decreases by 0.18-points in the campaign wave compared to non-electoral waves.²⁰ In addition to showing that accuracy is at its highest level (the error is lowest) close to the election day, Figure 2 suggests that the level of perceptual accuracy almost returns to its previous levels one year after the election, pointing to a cyclical aspect of voter perceptual accuracy of party positions. Moreover, because respondents who participated in multiple waves are likely more attentive and informed, this may lead to a more conservative estimate of changes in perceptual accuracy.

Are Over-Time Changes Driven by Variation in Levels of Information or Updating with New Information?

The previous sections have established that there is important temporal variation in how accurately citizens perceive the parties' ideological positions, with perceptions most accurate around election day. The declining match between citizens' and experts' views of parties' positions as the distance from election day increases, however, does not by itself demonstrate that citizens are less informed outside of the election context. We would observe similar over-time patterns in perceptual accuracy if parties moved their positions in the run-up to the election and following election day, and if well-informed voters kept track of those changes by updating their perceptions of where the parties are positioned. Focusing on the results of the analyses of CSES data specifically, the increasing mismatch between what experts perceive to be a party's position at the time of the election and citizens' perceptions of parties' positions as the distance from the election increases could reflect citizens updating their perceptions of party positions based on new information, coming from post-election party behavior.²¹ Similarly, it could be that parties shift their positions in the months preceding the election, as they prepare their party platforms and respond to the positions that other parties are taking.

While it is hard to disentangle the effects of a lack of information from the dynamics of updating without having information on the actual party positions throughout

²⁰ See Appendix Q for evidence that newspaper coverage of politics and the number of party press releases both increase during electoral period.

²¹ While expert surveys could be done at any time during the CSES survey fieldwork, the experts were asked to locate the parties based on their positions at the *time of the elections*.

the governing cycle, in what follows, we demonstrate preliminary evidence for the decreasing accuracy argument instead of the updating with new information argument through *three sets of analyses*.

First, trends in other indicators included in the CSES data are consistent with a decline in accessible knowledge as distance from the election increases. More precisely, the survey items asking respondents to indicate the parties' left-right positions included a "don't know" option. We can thus assess whether "don't know" responses rise as the information environment cools. Figure 3 plots the predicted probability of respondents indicating "don't know" at different points in time following election day. On election day, approximately 7.6 percent of respondents indicated that they did not know where the parties were located. This figure increases to 12 percent 90 days after the election day and 27 percent one year after. This pattern is what our framework implies: ideological considerations are more accessible in "hot" information environment and recede into latency afterward. It also helps adjudicate an alternative explanation: if rising error reflected sophisticated updating to shifting party positions, "don't know" answers would not systematically increase post-election. In Appendix C, we use the BESIP data to show similarly that the predicted probability of choosing "don't know" when it comes to placing political parties on the left-right spectrum decreases approaching the election day and increases following the election day. These results are consistent with a pattern in which citizens become less informed about partisan politics and parties' ideological positions as time since the election increases.

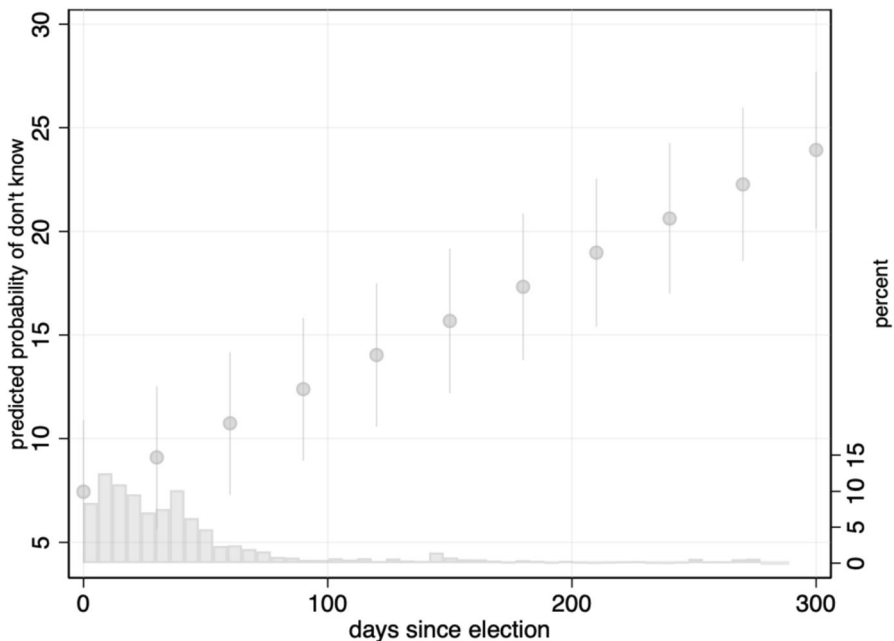


Fig. 3 Fewer citizens can place parties on left-right as time passes after the election. Note: Predicted probabilities of picking "don't know" are indicated in percentages and are based on the estimation reported in Appendix C. The spikes indicate 95 percent confidence intervals

A second way to test whether voters become less accurate, or instead update their perceptions in response to new information, is to narrow the focus to parties whose positions are more likely to remain stable and check whether we still find a decrease in accuracy post-election. Specifically, we can identify a scenario in which parties' ideological images are more likely to remain stable after elections: parties that form single-party governments. Position changes following the election are more likely for parties that enter coalition governments and have had to compromise on their election positions to negotiate a coalition agreement, or for opposition parties, who are more likely to change their policy offerings after an electoral loss that places them in opposition. In contrast, the parties that are least likely to change their positions are single-party government parties, which do not need to compromise for coalition negotiations and are more likely to pursue their election promises in office following the election. In addition, single-party government parties also get more media coverage following elections as the governing parties. On the other hand, if accuracy declines for these parties, that evidence would suggest that voters lose interest and become less informed about these parties' positions.

To assess accuracy across these parties, we estimate separate models for parties that became governing parties in single-party governments and for all other parties in the sample (i.e., parties that were in opposition following the election or that entered a coalition government). Because only 17 parties in our sample form single-party governments and the data structure necessarily collapses to one governing party per election survey in this subset, uncertainty around the corresponding estimates mechanically increases. Details on the parties included, the estimation strategy, the regression outputs, and further discussion are provided in Appendix R. The left panel

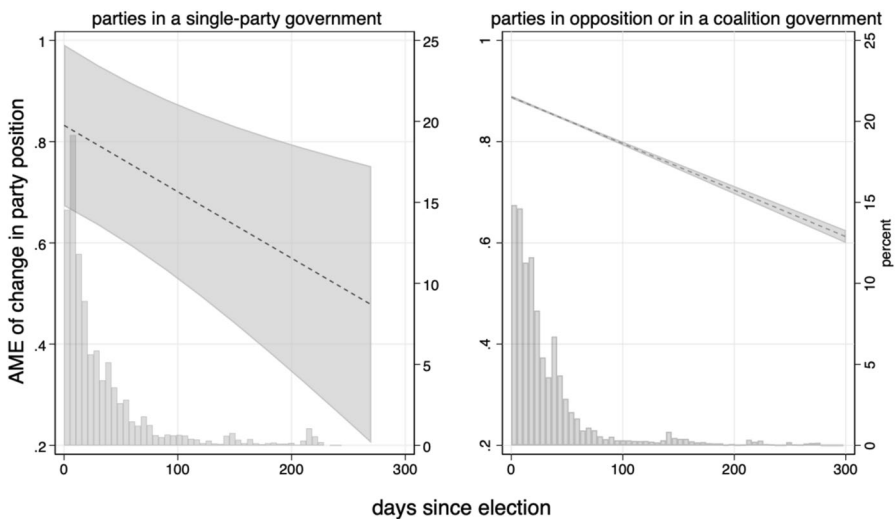


Fig. 4 Perceptual accuracy decreases as time passes since election for plausibly stable parties and others. Note: Estimates are based on models in Appendix R. 95 percent confidence intervals are indicated. The sample in the left panel is restricted to parties that ended in a single-party government, and the sample in the right panel is restricted to parties in opposition or in a coalition government, with days since election used as our key predictor

in Figure 4 plots the over-time changes in the average marginal effect of a one-unit shift in experts' perceptions of a party's left-right position on citizens' perceptions of this position for the parties in single-party governments. We observe a stronger correlation between voter and expert perceptions near election day for these parties. The correlation is at 0.83 on the day of the election, and every 30-day lapse is associated with a 0.04-point decrease in correlation. This means that the correlation decreases to 0.60 six months after the election. Overall, we observe a slightly stronger decline in accuracy for these parties, and because these parties have no reason to change their positions following the election, the finding supports the argument that people are becoming less informed rather than updating their perceptions in response to new information.²² The right panel presents the same trends for all parties, excluding those ending up in single-party governments. We see similar trends for these parties. The correlation near election day is 0.89, decreasing by 0.03 points per 30 days. The correlation decreases to 0.70 six months after the election. When comparing these results with those for plausibly stable parties, we observe that the decline in accuracy is slightly sharper for the latter. This suggests that the decrease in accuracy is not driven by parties changing positions and by citizens updating their perceptions in response.

As a third approach, we examine the stability of parties' ideological positions. If party positions are stable between elections, any decline in accuracy cannot be attributed to updating in response to new information. Previous research has shown "very high stability in parties' left-right position over time" (Dalton and McAllister 2015). We arrive at the same conclusion using the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys from 1999 to 2019 to assess over-time changes in the left-right positions of the parties in our sample. Figure 5 shows, for various time periods, the distribution of the absolute differences in parties' left-right positions between two CHES waves. The first five panels examine changes in position across different 4-year periods, while the last panel assesses the extent to which parties shifted their positions between 1999 and 2019. The vertical lines in the panels indicate 1-point changes. When focusing on short-term position changes (over a 4-year period), between 93% and 99% of all position changes fall within a 1-point range, either to the left or right. Moreover, when examining long-term changes (between 1999 and 2019), approximately 80% of the observed changes fall within a 1-point range. Even over 20 years, parties rarely change positions. These findings indicate that parties' ideological positions are highly stable, even over extended periods. It is therefore unlikely that the large changes in perceptual accuracy reflect voters' updating in response to important shifts in parties' positions.

Moreover, we identified CHES surveys conducted within one year of the CSES fieldwork, allowing us to examine elections for which we have both CSES expert perceptions at the time of the election, and CHES expert perceptions of party positions in the post-electoral period (within one year after the election day). This enables

²² In Appendix B, we show that the perceptual accuracy of single-party government parties declines even after the cabinet is formed. This indicates that even if there might be some coalition negotiations before the cabinet formation, accuracy declines for these parties after the government forms, when these parties are more likely to stick to their ideological stances/pledges.

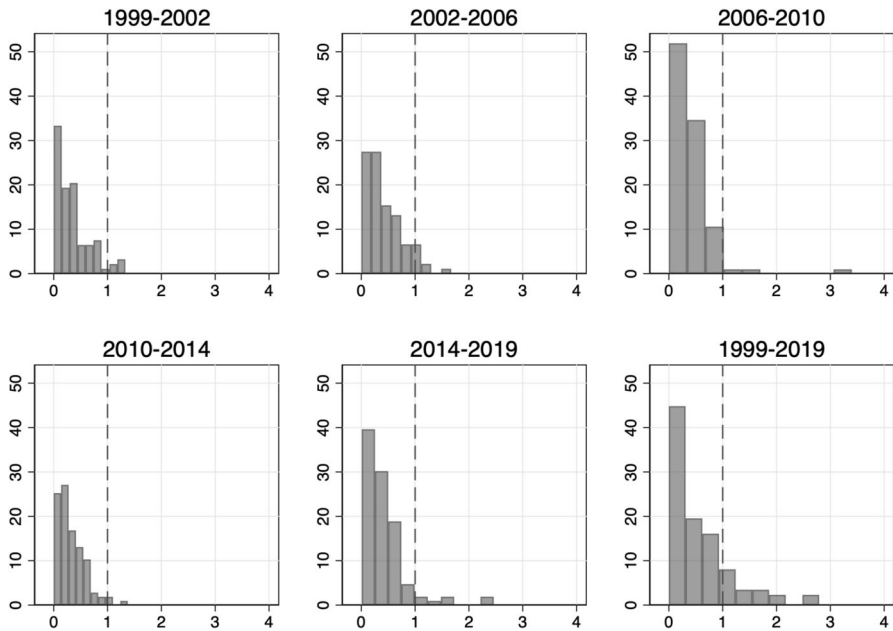


Fig. 5 Party position stability over time according to CHES experts. Note: Data from Chapel Hill Expert Survey. Vertical lines represent a 1-point change

us to pinpoint parties that changed their positions following the election. Specifically, we compared CSES experts' estimates of parties' positions during elections with CHES experts' perceptions of those parties' positions. While CSES experts were asked to indicate the parties' left-right positions at the time of the election, CHES experts were not provided with such instructions, and their responses likely reflect prevailing perceptions at the time of the survey. These comparisons reveal a high level of stability, with CHES experts agreeing with CSES experts for approximately 80% of parties (see Appendix S). These results bolster our argument that party positions remain largely stable over time, suggesting that the post-election decrease in accuracy is unlikely attributable to changes in party positions. More importantly, our further analyses indicate that the decrease in accuracy is more pronounced for parties whose positions remained stable between the election period and in the post-electoral period (those with similar positions according to the CSES and CHES experts), providing additional support for our argument (see Appendix S).

Conclusion

In this research, we argue and show that perceptual accuracy peaks during election periods, when political information available to citizens is more abundant and amplified. Our comparative analysis, Study 1, capitalizes on the as-if random variation in interview timing (which we also verify) in post-electoral surveys. This analysis reveals that while accuracy is quite high on election day, it deteriorates over time

following the election. Importantly, we find that these decreasing perceptual accuracy trends are not driven by any particular party family (mainstream or niche parties), partisanship, or political interest—although the latter two moderate the effect. In Study 2, an analysis of panel data shows that perceptual accuracy increases in the lead-up to election day and decreases post-election. Furthermore, additional analyses suggest that the decline in perceptual accuracy outside election periods aligns with patterns consistent with citizens forgetting party positions rather than updating their perceptions in response to new information. Specifically, citizens are more likely to report not knowing where to place political parties on the left-right scale outside electoral periods. Moreover, this decrease in perceptual accuracy occurs even for parties whose ideological positions remain stable (i.e., single-party governments). Finally, we showed that party positions remain largely stable following elections. Overall, we provide evidence on how perceptual accuracy evolves before, during, and after elections, as well as the driving mechanism behind these changes.

Our findings make two important contributions. First, they add to the expanding literature on voter perceptions of party policy positions (see, e.g., Somer-Topcu et al. 2020). Our results suggest that election campaigns are crucial in informing citizens about party policy positions. Equipped with this information, voters are better positioned to elect politicians who are ideologically similar to them. This process enhances the functioning of representative democracy (Dalton et al. 2011) by allowing voters to maximize their expected utilities. This, in turn, signals to political parties that their policy performances will influence citizens' decisions (Elinder et al. 2015). Notably, perceptual accuracy peaks when citizens must decide whom to elect. Second, our results highlight the importance of considering the evolving information environment in opinion formation beyond the election campaign period. While the perceptions literature heavily relies on the campaign environment, we provide evidence that perceptual accuracy ebbs and flows depending on changes in the information environment post-election.

From the fluctuations in ideological knowledge that we observe, with a decrease in perceptual accuracy as distance from the election increases, we infer that many citizens are tuning out of politics as soon as broader information environment is no longer “hot” (i.e., when political information is not abundant and amplified). We believe that this lack of awareness outside of election times is concerning for two reasons.

First, holding parties accountable becomes challenging if parties advocate certain ideological stances during election campaigns but deviate from them outside electoral periods. In such cases, citizens are unable to effectively hold them accountable for their decisions in office. Our findings reveal that citizens tend to largely forget about parties' ideological stances once the election concludes, which impairs their ability to evaluate whether the government adhered to its promises after assuming office.²³ Outside of election time, if individuals fail to retain information (i.e., they forget) and demonstrate reduced attention to political affairs, their assessments of the parties' performance (both in government and opposition) are likely to rest on heu-

²³Theoretically, a lack of political information does not mean citizens have to forget the acquired knowledge. Yet observed fluctuations in ideological knowledge over time suggest there is some forgetting in that the associative links and considerations that enable accurate perceptions recede into latency.

ristics such as party identification (Duval and Pétry 2020). Alternatively, they may become more susceptible to forming their judgments of parties' competence based on how other parties frame the issues (Fowler and Howell 2023) or how the media portrays them Tresch and Feddersen (2019). As a result, retrospective voting could potentially be undermined by misinformation. This would also explain why citizens hold the belief that political parties are unresponsive to public opinion (Bowler 2017) and fail to fulfill their campaign promises (Duval and Pétry 2020), despite evidence that parties do, at least partially, fulfill a majority of their election pledges (Thomson et al. 2017).

Second, an informed citizenry can shape party agendas. Typically, parties adjust their policy platforms based on feedback from their supporters, among other factors, and on their standing in the polls (Esaiasson and Wlezien 2017). However, if citizens are not actively monitoring their parties' ideological behavior in office, they lack the necessary information to provide feedback that could influence party agendas. This lack of engagement and awareness diminishes citizens' bottom-up influence on party policies and could weaken the mechanisms that enable democratic representation outside election periods (Esaiasson and Narud 2013).

Our findings also have important implications for work that theorizes and studies how citizens respond to changes in parties' left-right positions. First, the low accuracy in perceptions of parties' ideological positions implies that there might be more potential for parties to strategically alter their ideological positions than is assumed in work that stresses the reputational costs of party position change (Nasr 2024; Nasr and Hoes 2024). Second, even though there is work that shows that citizens are able to notice major policy shifts (Seeberg et al. 2017), our findings highlight that noticing change in party positions must be particularly challenging for most voters. The fact that voters appear to become less accurate about parties' ideological positions quite quickly, therefore, makes it unlikely that many voters recall the positions that parties took in previous elections. Many ideological changes, furthermore, are very subtle—further complicating the task for voters. In this way, our findings help clarify why previous research finds limited evidence of citizens responding rationally to changes in party positions (Ferland and Dassonneville 2021).

Previous research highlights the mobilizing effect of elections by activating partisanship (Singh and Thornton 2019). When partisanship is activated, citizens are more likely to engage in biased reasoning and selectively expose themselves to information that aligns with their preferences (Kim and Kim 2021). We would expect that the motivation to support their party (i.e., partisan bias) leads to less accurate perceptions of parties' ideological positions. However, our findings add an important nuance: even when partisanship is activated, there is evidence of increased accuracy in citizens' perceptions of parties' ideological stances, consistent with Bayesian updating (Hill 2017; Coppock 2023). This suggests that elections do not simply activate latent predispositions or mobilize citizens for expressive purposes but also have an informative effect regarding parties and their platforms. These findings complement those of Adams et al. (2021), who show that cooperative behavior between parties leads citizens to perceive their positions as closer, but this effect emerges only during elections when interest in related information peaks.

The fact that we find large over-time fluctuations in political knowledge in an analysis that focuses specifically on citizens' perceptions of left-right positions is remarkable, given that the left-right dimension is generally presumed to be an 'easy' heuristic for voters, which allows them to navigate politics without the need to acquire detailed information on specific policies (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). Yet even for this 'easy' heuristic, our results suggest that citizens' views are not strongly held, which highlights their limited political awareness. While a large literature shows that citizens are reasonably well informed about parties' ideological positions, and our analysis confirms that perceptions are quite accurate during election times, these findings paint a somewhat distorted—and overly optimistic—picture of how ideologically informed citizens typically are. Once the election is over, citizens appear to tune out of politics and become less accurate about parties' ideological positions. This underscores both the importance of the campaign period for informing citizens and enabling them to choose ideologically proximate parties, and the reality that citizens are substantially less politically informed outside of election periods—which likely hinders the extent to which they can contribute to mechanisms that foster democratic representation outside of election times.

Lastly, in studying the effect of proximity to the election date, our design estimates a 'bundled treatment' effect. Specifically, we argue that the primary contrast between election and non-election times is how much political and partisan information is available, but this change in the information environment is produced by changes in the behavior of a wide range of actors. During election times, not only is there more media coverage of partisan politics (see Appendix Q), parties also communicate more about their positions and policy views, while in society at large there are more (offline as well as online) discussions about politics. On the one hand, we think there is considerable value in studying the impact of overall changes in the information environment because, in practice, change also occurs at multiple levels simultaneously. We acknowledge, however, that this broad focus comes at the cost of the insights we gain into the roles of specific actors and sources of information. Having established that citizens' ideological knowledge is substantially reduced in low-information contexts, we hope that future research can address this limitation by employing designs that allow identification of the importance of different sources of information.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-026-10134-x>.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest
None.

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