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United we stand, divided we fall? The effects of parties' Brexit rhetoric on voters' perceptions of party positions

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ABSTRACT




Do voters update their perceptions of party positions? How certain do voters feel about their perceptions? We argue that perceptual updating and perceptual certainty depend on how divided or unified political parties are in their policy positions. We argue that voters do not accurately update their perceptions and that they become less certain about their perceptions when divided parties shift positions. For unified parties, we expect voters to accurately update party positions and become more certain about their perceptions. We test our arguments in the context of the European integration issue in the UK. Using original newspaper data on British parties' messages on European integration and five waves of the British Election Study (2014–2016), we find evidence in support of our arguments. The paper has important implications for research on party position-taking and its consequences on voters.

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Introduction

Parties vary in their levels of internal agreement on policy issues. When politicians in a party have similar preferences and coordinate on an issue, the party is unified. When politicians have heterogeneous preferences and do not coordinate, the party is divided on the issue. Both unified and divided parties can change their overall policy positions from time to time. But while the positions and position changes of unified parties tend to be cohesive, those of divided parties are often not, as they are products of different voices within the party.

How do voters react to the policy positions of unified and divided parties? Do voters *accurately update* their perceptions of parties' positions as the positions change over time? Do they *feel certain* about their perceptions? How do

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perceptual updating and certainty vary depending on whether the party is unified or divided? These are important questions for two reasons. First, they add to the growing literature on the perceptual consequences of policy shifts, which points to varying conclusions. Starting with Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu (2011), the literature at first was pessimistic about whether citizens notice party policy shifts. Recent work on the topic paints a more optimistic picture. In fact, the vast literature on how parties' position shifts affect their electoral performance (e.g. Spoon and Klüver 2019) is based on the assumption that voters follow position shifts. However, it appears that citizens accurately perceive party policy shifts only under certain circumstances, such as when issues are salient to voters (Plescia and Staniek 2017) or policy shifts are large (Seeberg, Slothuus, and Stubager 2017). Our work contributes to this body of work by examining perceptual updating as well as certainty in conditions of party division versus unity.

Second, the question of how intra-party division affects voters' perceptions of party positions has not received much attention. To be fair, previous research has examined the effects of party unity on party behaviour (e.g. Spoon and Williams 2017) and electoral performance (e.g. Pattie, Fieldhouse, and Johnston 1994), as well as the consequences of intra-party dynamics more broadly, including leadership selection and activist-elite relations (Ceron 2019; Cross and Blais 2012; Hazan and Rahat 2010; Kaltenegger, Heugl, and Müller 2019; Kenig 2009). However, the question of how intra-party unity affects voters' perceptions of party positions, to our best knowledge, remains mostly unanswered (but see our discussion of Lehrer and Lin (2018) in the theory section).

We argue that policy shifts of parties with divided messages, negatively affect perceptual updating and certainty about party policy positions, while shifts by parties with a unified message enhance updating and certainty. In other words, we expect that voters do not accurately update and become less certain about the positions of divided parties as they shift positions over time, while voters accurately update and become more certain about unified parties' positions as these parties shift positions.

We test our arguments in the context of the Brexit issue in the UK, an issue on which the two major parties, Conservative and Labour, have been highly divided, while the Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) have been unified. Using survey data from the British Election Study (Fieldhouse et al. 2019) and party rhetoric data from the Comparative Campaign Dynamics Project (Debus, Somer-Topcu, and Tavits 2016), we find robust evidence that voters do not accurately update their perceptions of party positions and become less certain about where the parties stand when parties are divided (i.e. for Conservative and Labour Parties). Meanwhile, we find that voters accurately update their perceptions

of party positions and become more certain about where the parties stand when the parties are united (i.e. for Lib Dems and UKIP).

These results have important implications. First, the question of how party rhetoric affects voter certainty has largely been overlooked, mainly due to the lack of survey data on voter certainty. Our work is one of the first to examine this relationship (see Alvarez 1997; Peterson 2015; Tomz and van Houweling 2009 for studies on certainty in the US context; see Ezrow, Homola, and Tavits 2014 for comparative work). Second, as we explained above, by showing how intra-party dissent conditions the effect of party rhetoric on voters' perceptions, we make an important contribution to the literature on the consequences of party positions. There is an extensive literature on heterogeneity within parties (e.g. Gauja 2013; Greene and Haber 2016; Kernell 2016), yet we do not know much about the interplay between party positions and intra-party dissent and its influence on voters' perceptions. Third, understanding how party rhetoric affects perceptual accuracy and certainty has important normative implications about representative democracy. We elaborate on these contributions in the conclusion section.

Finally, we note that, while this study focuses on the UK and the European integration issue, the findings are likely to be generalizable to other advanced democracies and salient issues. Parties in democracies like the UK have varying levels of intra-party dissent, especially on salient issues such as European integration (Edwards 2008). One may argue that the results might be weaker in countries where there are larger numbers of parties since voters might be less knowledgeable about party rhetoric in such systems. However, as Fortunato, Stevenson, and Vonnahme (2016) show, voters' knowledge about the ideologies of parties is at least as high in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden, for instance, where the number of parties in parliament is higher than the UK. This gives us confidence that our results are not driven by the narrower political landscape in the UK.¹ Nevertheless, we acknowledge that more data and analyses in other contexts will help us generalize our findings.

Theory

The central premise of our argument is that parties are responsible for whether voters accurately update their perceptions of party positions and how much voters feel certain about their perceptions. This builds on

¹Another concern is that the UK media system has traditionally been different from other European media systems. Hallin and Mancini (2004) note that the UK's Liberal Model is characterized by the dominance of market mechanisms, while the other European models have more active state involvement. Yet, as they also note, "by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the differences [between different media models] have eroded," and "the Liberal Model has clearly become increasingly dominant across Europe" (251).

Converse (1964), who argues that one of the most critical roles of elites is to tell people how things relate to each other, including what party stands for what issue. Similarly, the heuristics-based literature (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1991; Rahn 1993) argues that people rely on information shortcuts from “others” to form opinions about politics. These others include (party) elites, campaign events, media, and rival parties (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1991). Moreover, party rhetoric is arguably one of the most important heuristics voters use in perceiving the political world.² Indeed, in a recent work, Somer-Topcu, Tavits, and Baumann (2020) show that voters use campaign rhetoric of European parties to form perceptions of party positions.

For party-provided information to affect perceptions accurately, voters need to be able to interpret the information correctly. We argue that this is enhanced by the *clarity* of information that parties provide. The more clearly parties deliver their positions, the less room there is for confusion and more room for voters to interpret information about those positions accurately. The clearer the party-provided information, the more easily can voters use this information to infer party positions (e.g. Brader and Tucker 2009; Merolla, Stephenson, and Zechmeister 2008). Perceptions that are based on accurately interpreted party-provided messages are, in turn, more likely to correspond with actual party positions.

But what happens if the party has high intra-party dissent and the party's message is unclear? When a party's position changes over time, not with a unified voice, but because of different preferences within the party, how do voters react to that information? Do voters accurately update their perceptions? How does certainty about perceptions change? We argue that when parties are internally divided on their issue position, and thus when the changes in party position are less a result of a clear, unified, and intentional change, and more a result of who/which side is talking at any point in time, voters are unsure about which of the messages that they hear is referring to the actual party position. Even if, on average, the party appears at a certain position, given dissenting views that pull and push the party to different directions over time, voters are confused about whether to believe the new position or the previous one. Therefore, voters do not accurately update their perceptions in response to party shifts and feel uncertain about their perceptions.³

²The heuristics-based framework also informs comparative work on voters' knowledge of party positions (e.g., Adams, Ezrow, and Wlezien 2016). It shows that coalition membership is an important cue about party positions. Coalition membership is party-provided information, even though it is not in the form of messages, but in the form of party behaviour.

³We argue that message clarity declines as internal division increases. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that clarity may also depend on how ambiguous the party is, independent of division (Rovny 2012; 2013; Somer-Topcu 2015; Lehrer and Lin 2018). We do not argue that clarity solely depends on party dissent/unity. As Rovny (2012) explains, “Position blurring, understood here as the deliberate misrepresentation of party positions on some dimensions, is conceptually distinct from intra-party dissent” (272). One way

There is some existing empirical evidence that intra-party dissent decreases the ability of elites to cue voters. Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries (2007) and Gabel and Scheve (2007) argue that as intra-party dissent on European integration increases, cues sent by the party to voters will be muddled (see also Zaller 1992) and that, as a consequence, it is difficult to move voters' preferences in response to party positions. Steenbergen et al. suggest that "internally divided parties are unable to cue their base" (28), which is also the conclusion by Gabel and Scheve. Yet, our work differs because we examine voters' perceptions of party positions. Voters' perceptions of where parties stand arguably come before voters form their own opinions, but the former has not been the focus of previous studies.

The work that comes closest to our argument is Lehrer and Lin (2018). They show that parties' broad-appeal strategy helps them win votes because voters perceive broadly-appealing parties as closer to their preferences. Using German survey data, Lehrer and Lin show that voters do not perceive broadly-appealing parties to be closer when the party is internally divided. However, Lehrer and Lin do not answer the question of whether people update their perceptions of party positions and how certain they feel about their perceptions when parties with internal division change positions.

In an environment where the party provides clear, unified messages about its policy positions, on the other hand, we should see accurate updating and high certainty even as parties shift positions. The party may have a center-left position at one point and then shift toward the right in the next, but if this change is a result of a unified party message, voters are expected to follow this shift and update their perceptions. Moreover, even if the party adjusts positions over time because the party gives a clear and unified message about its new position, certainty about the party's position should increase. Empirical work focusing on election campaigns across Europe shows that during periods when parties are unified on message and provide clear and abundant information about their positions, voters are likely to perceive those positions accurately (Andersen, Tilley, and Heath 2005; Somer-Topcu, Tavits, and Baumann 2020). It is then also reasonable to expect that voters' certainty about party positions will increase.

H1: When parties with high internal dissent shift their issue positions:

H1a: Voters do not accurately update their perceptions of positions.

H1b: Voters become less certain about their perceptions.

to distinguish the two concepts might be to think about the dimension of competition and determine whether the party has incentives to blur on that dimension strategically. We do believe, however, that the implications of strategic ambiguity and intra-party dissent go together since strategically ambiguous parties are also likely to decrease perceptual accuracy and certainty. Nevertheless, the relationship between dissent and ambiguity is an empirical question, which we leave for future studies.

H2: When internally unified parties shift their issue positions:

H2a: Voters accurately update their perceptions of positions.

H2b: Voters become more certain about their perceptions.⁴

The UK case (2014–2016)

We test our hypotheses using newspaper and survey data on the European integration issue in the UK. There are several reasons for this choice. First, European integration has been a salient issue in British politics, especially during the period of our study. Throughout the five waves of public opinion surveys we use (February 2014–May 2016), respondents consistently ranked European integration as one of the most salient issues (on average, 25% of respondents in each wave ranked it as most salient). This high issue saliency means that parties discussed the issue extensively. This allows us to be sure that our results are not driven by a lack of attention or debate.

Besides, the issue has divided the Conservative and Labour Parties, while UKIP and the Lib Dems have shown a unified stance against and for continued membership in the European Union (EU), respectively. The Lib Dems have always supported European integration, with Tim Farron, the then party leader, stating after the 2016 Brexit referendum that “The Lib Dems are different. We have always been proudly pro-European.”⁵ In contrast, UKIP has always been anti-Europe as a party founded on achieving Brexit. In the 2017 general election, commentators noted that “UKIP has long campaigned to leave the EU – and having finished on the winning side of the referendum, is now styling itself as the ‘guard dog of Brexit.’”⁶

In contrast, Labour and Conservative Parties have been divided over the issue. In April 2016, two months before the Brexit referendum, research showed that “scores of Conservative MPs ... have endorsed the Leave campaign. Other MPs have sided with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor in backing Remain.”⁷ The percentage of MPs supporting Remain was 52% while supporting Leave was 38%. Meanwhile, Labour’s leader Jeremy Corbyn declared that the party would support the Remain campaign in the Brexit referendum. However, he also stated that “there is a diversity of opinion on Britain’s membership in the country and within the PLP [parliamentary Labour party] and individuals will be free to campaign as they

⁴We clarify that we are interested in both updating and certainty because they are concepts that go together. The level of certainty about a party’s position depends on whether and how voters perceive the party’s position. Although our results for certainty are substantively stronger (see below) and certainty is a more novel concept, because certainty follows updating, we study both outcomes.

⁵<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/07/liberal-democrats-fight-brexit-labour-not-doing-job>.

⁶<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-39665835>.

⁷<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/04/05/the-conservative-party-split-on-brexit/>.

wish.”⁸ This lack of clarity was also reflected in the party’s statement that it would make a “hard-headed, patriotic case both for Britain in Europe and for change in Europe.”⁹

Expert survey data have also documented the extent to which the four parties have experienced internal dissent. The 2017 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Polk et al. 2017) shows that the Conservative and Labour Parties had high average internal dissent scores of 7.79 and 7.43, respectively, on the 1–10 European integration dissent scale. In contrast, the scores were lower for UKIP (1.29) and the Lib Dems (1.36). This variation in party division makes the UK a good setting to test our expectations.¹⁰

Research design

Our data for voters’ perceptions and certainty about party positions (i.e. our outcome variables) come from the 2014–2018 British Election Study (BES). The BES conducted a panel survey of 15 waves, from 2014 to 2018. We use five of these waves because the question about certainty was asked in five waves: the first, second, fourth, sixth, and seventh. This also led us to code the data for our main predictors (party policy shifts) for the same waves. Section 1 of the Online Appendix (OA) details the exact dates of the surveys, the number of respondents in each wave, how we organize the data for analysis, and the major political events that happened throughout the time period.

In each of these waves, respondents were asked to locate the political parties on European integration:

Some people feel that Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union. Other people feel that Britain should do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union. Where would you place the political parties on this scale?

The response scale ranges from zero (“unite fully with the European Union”) to ten (“protect our independence from the European Union”).

The outcome variable we use for perceptual updating (*Updating*) measures the difference in the survey respondent’s placement of the party’s position on European integration between the current wave and the previous wave. Higher values indicate that the respondent perceives the party to be more anti-Europe than before. The variable ranges from –10 to 10, with a mean of –0.03 and a standard deviation of 2.61.

⁸<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/sep/17/jeremy-corbyn-labour-campaign-for-uk-stay-in-eu>.

⁹<https://www.euractiv.com/section/uk-europe/linksdossier/voting-on-brexiteu-issues-shaping-the-uk-election/>.

¹⁰One final practical reason for our focus on European integration in the UK is the unique availability of survey data on voters’ perceptions and certainty about party positions.

Following the question on party positions, which was asked for each party, respondents were asked to indicate how certain they feel about their perceptions. Answer choices are “Not at all certain,” “Somewhat certain,” and “Very certain” (there was also a “Don’t know” option). We use each respondent’s answer to this question to measure voter certainty. Our second outcome variable (*Certainty*) is ordinal and takes the values of one, two, or three. Higher values indicate more certainty.

Using a direct survey question that asks voters to evaluate their level of certainty is the most straightforward way of measuring certainty. As Peterson (2015, 120) states, “a survey-based measure of uncertainty would obviously be a preferable approach, and if one existed in a data set with the other necessary requirements, those would be the correct data to use.” Only a few studies have been able to use the direct survey-based certainty measure (Alvarez 1997; Koch 2003), and their data come solely from the U.S. Both the BES survey and the surveys the US scholars use have the same scale.

Our main predictors are the direction of change in party position (*Policy change*) and the magnitude of change in party position (*Absolute policy change*). *Policy change* is the predictor for analysing *Updating*, while *Absolute policy change* is the predictor for *Certainty*. The reason we use two different predictors in updating and certainty models (directional change for the former and magnitude of change for the latter) is straightforward. In the first model, we are interested in understanding whether voters accurately update their perceptions of party positions when parties change positions. For example, if voters accurately update their perceptions of party positions when a party moves toward the anti-European direction, we expect voters to change their perceptions in the same direction. This requires the directional change in party position as the main predictor. In the second model where we test voters’ certainty about their perceptions when parties change positions, we do not have any directional expectations (whether voters become more or less certain when parties move towards more anti-EU or pro-EU directions). Therefore, we use the magnitude of change as our main predictor in the certainty model.

To locate parties on the European integration scale, we use newspaper data for the one-month period before each wave of the BES. These data are part of a new project, called the Comparative Campaign Dynamics Project (CCD) (Debus, Somer-Topcu, and Tavits 2016). For this project, scholars collected original data from the media coverage of one-month election campaign periods in ten European countries across 21 elections. For the current paper, in addition to the one-month period before the 2015 UK election, which is part of the larger dataset, we also collected and coded the one-month media coverage of party policy positions before each of our remaining

four waves of surveys. The parties in the data are the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, and the UK Independence Party.

To measure party positions, we use the two highest-circulating daily broadsheet newspapers that represent center-left and center-right political views, similar to the larger CCD dataset: the Guardian (center-left) and the Daily Telegraph (center-right).¹¹ When coding parties' issue discussions for the broader CCD dataset, scholars followed the issue labels used in the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Volkens et al. 2015) but also added some specific issues to the list that the CMP leaves out or lumps together under broader categories. Using this information, we can assess how many articles each party discussed each issue and in what direction, relative to all issue-related discussions covered during the period.¹² This coding procedure is similar to that of the CMP, which codes the frequency of statements in a given policy area as a share of the overall issue coverage in each manifesto.

With information on the share of each party's campaign coverage dedicated to each issue (in proportion to all issue discussions the party made during the campaign), we estimated the European integration positions of each party.¹³ Specifically, we used the immigration and the European Union issue mentions. We summed the shares for increase-immigration and pro-European Union mentions (i.e. pro-European integration coverage) and subtracted this sum from the sum of decrease-immigration and anti-European Union issue shares (i.e. anti-European integration coverage).¹⁴ This resembles the way that the CMP measures parties' positions on

¹¹Newspaper data is only one type of media data. Nevertheless, as Peterson (2019) finds, "newspapers remain an important contributor to political awareness in a changing media landscape, even for those with limited political interest" (1).

¹²Three research assistants coded each article in the CCD dataset. For each coded statement, they also indicated how confident they are. The final data include only the responses on which either two or more students agreed (while being at least "mostly confident") or where at least one assistant was "fully confident" in their coding.

¹³To be clear, we fully acknowledge that our estimates of party positions from newspaper coverage are not perfect. There are issues of media bias that cannot be eliminated even though the CCD project took great care to minimize such issues by, for example, using both left-wing and right-wing broadsheets and recording proportions, as opposed to just absolute numbers, of issue mentions. Therefore, we use the word "estimates" when we talk about measures from the CCD data to be clear that we are *estimating* parties' positions by taking stock of the strengths of the CCD project, in spite of its limitations. However, as reporters have much agency about what to report and how, it would be an interesting topic of future research to investigate how the CCD data, and media portrayals generally, differ from other existing measures of party positions.

¹⁴We included immigration coverage into our measure because in the UK around the time of this study, immigration was highly associated with EU politics. See, e.g., "Immigration: Brexit an opportunity to fix 'broken' system" (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-37177937>). Moreover, according to the 2014 and 2017 Chapel Hill Expert Surveys, the correlations between experts' mean assessments of positions on the EU issue and the immigration issue for Labour, the Conservatives, UKIP, and the Lib Dems are 0.972 (in 2017) and 0.999 (in 2014). The correlations are 1 (in both 2017 and 2014) if we only examine the united UKIP and Lib Dems. In terms of expert-level (not averaged) correlations, the values are 0.914 for all parties and 0.962 for UKIP and the Lib Dems in 2014. In 2017, the correlations are 0.842 for all parties and 0.961 for UKIP and the Lib Dems. These high correlations are additional evidence that the EU and immigration issues were intertwined.

issues.¹⁵ The values can range from -1 to $+1$, where negative values are more pro-Europe, and positive values are more anti-Europe. -1 would mean that all media coverage of that party's position in that one-month period was pro-EU, and $+1$ would mean that all coverage was anti-EU.¹⁶ In OA2, we present parties' European integration position estimates and proportions of pro-European and anti-European discussions in each wave. We also discuss how reporting in the CCD data correlates with issue salience, which can be measured through party divisiveness on the issue, occurrence of related political events, and journalists' newspaper coverage.

As explained previously, the main predictor that we use to analyse *Updating* is *Policy change*. This is created by subtracting the party position estimate in the previous wave from that of the current wave. Higher values on *Policy change* mean movement toward a more anti-EU position. We expect not to find a significant positive coefficient on *Policy change* when we analyse the Conservative and Labour Parties. That would suggest that voters do not accurately update their perceptions of the two divided parties' positions as the parties move. For the united Lib Dems and UKIP, we expect to find a significant positive coefficient, indicating that voters are updating their perceptions of the parties' positions in the direction that these parties are moving.

The main predictor for analysing *Certainty* is *Absolute policy change*, which is the absolute magnitude of change in party policy estimates across waves. Higher values indicate larger movement, regardless of direction. We expect such movement to have a negative effect on certainty about Conservative and Labour positions while having a positive effect on certainty about Lib Dem and UKIP positions. Table 1 summarizes our expectations.¹⁷

To analyse *Updating*, we run linear regression since the variable is continuous. To analyse *Certainty*, we use ordinal logit, given the ordinal nature of the variable.¹⁸ In the models, we control for wave-specific effects since the time

¹⁵Although the CCD follows the measurement approach of CMP, we do not argue that CMP's approach is not without flaws. There are alternative measures of party positions, such as the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, that complement the weaknesses of CMP's emphasis-based approach.

¹⁶We find that the correlation between the CCD position estimates and existing expert survey data on party positions is 0.803 and statistically significant, suggesting the validity of the CCD measures. This is further discussed in OA2. We would have liked to test correlations with data that reflect parties' direct messaging, such as manifestos and leadership speeches, but that is very difficult because the CCD data cover inter-election periods. Yet, party manifestos are written for elections only, and it is not obvious what would be the most representative speech to analyze in inter-election periods.

¹⁷One may notice that the divided parties are large and that the united parties are small. This has both theoretical and empirical implications. Theoretically, since party size is most likely to be causally prior to party division, it makes sense to argue about the effect of party division (instead of party size) on voters' perceptions. Empirically, because we examine divided and united parties separately, we are essentially controlling for the influence of party size on voters' perceptions.

¹⁸We note that individual fixed effects models are inappropriate for our data. First, we have a very short panel. Some respondents answered all five waves, but there is attrition and new respondents were included in the middle. Furthermore, the main predictors measure change, so we have data on a respondent for at most four time periods. Second, when we analyse *Certainty*, the limitations of statistical packages do not allow us to run fixed effects models with an ordinal outcome.

Table 1. Our expectations as parties change positions.

	Conservative & Labour (divided)	Lib Dems and UKIP (unified)
<i>Updating</i>	No positive effect	Positive effect
<i>Certainty</i>	Negative effect	Positive effect

periods in our study were marked by important political events. We additionally control for education, gender, age, and copartisanship,¹⁹ which might confound our hypothesized relationships between position shift and voter updating/certainty. We also cluster the standard errors by respondent to account for correlation in the error terms within respondents.^{20 21}

Results

Table 2 shows the results for *Updating* (Model 1) and *Certainty* (Model 2) using data for the Conservative and Labour Parties. Model 1 shows that *Policy change* has a significant negative coefficient. This indicates that change toward the anti-Europe direction by divided parties is associated with a change in the perceived position toward the pro-Europe direction, and vice versa. That is, voters did not accurately update the policy positions of the divided Conservative and Labour Parties. In fact, they moved their perceptions in the opposite direction of what these parties were on average presenting to voters. Meanwhile, Model 2 shows a significant negative coefficient on *Absolute policy change*. This indicates that voters are confused by the position shifts of divided parties, i.e. position shifts by parties with intra-party dissent decrease voters' certainty about party positions.²²

Substantively, for Model 1, when other variables are held at their mean values, as *Policy change* increases from one standard deviation below the mean (-0.082) to one standard deviation above the mean (0.054), *Updating* changes from 0.796 to -0.923 . This change of 1.72 in the outcome is

¹⁹The BES does not consistently ask about newspaper consumption, political knowledge, or political interest. Therefore, we use education as a proxy.

²⁰We do not have controls for media reporting because the CCD project measures (1) coverage for all parties using the left-wing Guardian and the right-wing Telegraph and (2) positions on European integration using *shares* of the issue discussed out of all issues discussed by the party. Hence, we do not think there is variation in the type or quality of media reporting across parties that would confound the relationship between position shifts and voter perceptions.

²¹We do not have control variables that account for party behaviour because we cannot think of observable party-behaviour factors that are causally prior to position shifts and correlated with voters' perceptions. Moreover, such controls are likely to overfit our models because our models include only two parties (of similar size) and already have wave fixed effects, respondent clustered standard errors, and individual-level controls.

²²The number of observations in the second model is smaller than that in the first because the BES asked the certainty questions to a random subset of respondents who were asked the perceptual position questions.

Table 2. Effects of position change on updating and certainty (Conservative and Labour Parties).

	Model 1 Updating	Model 2 Certainty
Policy change	-12.64* (0.34)	
Absolute policy change		-2.74* (0.33)
Copartisan	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.06* (0.03)
Age	-0.00* (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)
Male	0.08* (0.02)	0.66* (0.04)
Education	0.03* (0.00)	0.01 (0.01)
Intercept	0.78* (0.05)	
Wave fixed effects	✓	✓
N	73,223	23,793
R ²	0.03	
Log pseudolikelihood		-23,009.79

Note: Model 1 is linear regression, and Model 2 is ordinal logit, both with standard errors clustered by respondent. * $p < 0.05$.

meaningful, considering that the standard deviation of the variable is 2.67.²³

Regarding *Certainty*, we calculated the predicted probabilities from Model 2. [Figure 1](#) shows the predicted probabilities of a respondent being very certain (left panel) and not at all certain (right panel) throughout the values of *Absolute policy change* when all other variables are held constant at their means. We find that the probability of being very certain decreases, and the probability of being not at all certain increases as *Absolute policy change* increases. For example, the predicted probability of being very certain decreases from 0.347 to 0.322 when *Absolute policy change* increases from the first quartile (0.048) to the third quartile (0.090) (first difference: -0.026, 95% confidence interval: [-0.032, -0.020]). A corresponding increase in *Absolute policy change* raises the probability of being not at all certain from 0.133 to 0.147 (first difference: 0.014, 95% confidence interval: [0.010, 0.017]). These results provide evidence in support of H1.²⁴

²³We would like to clarify that it is not counterintuitive to find updating in the opposite direction. First, the range of the outcome variable is larger than that of the main predictor. *Updating* ranges from -10 to 10, while *Policy change* ranges from -0.10 to 0.08. Therefore, the finding that, for example, voters move their perceptions to the right by 0.796 when the party moves to the left by 0.082 is not a disproportionately large movement on the voter's part. Second, substantively, because Labour and Conservative often delivered both pro-European and anti-European messages, it is not unreasonable that voters perceive the party to have moved toward the opposite direction in which the party moved toward *on average*.

²⁴One might ask whether it is difficult for divided parties to make large policy shifts. We find in our data that divided parties indeed make smaller shifts than united parties do. For example, the average

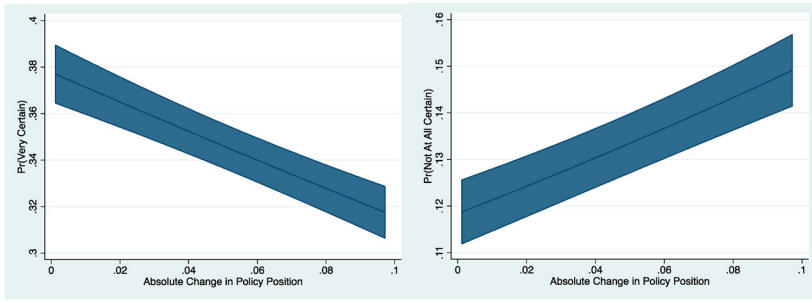


Figure 1. Predicted Probabilities of Being Very Certain and Not at All Certain Across the Values of Absolute Policy Change (Conservative and Labour Parties).
 Note: The plots show predicted probabilities and their 95% confidence intervals of being very certain (left) and not at all certain (right) across the values of *Absolute policy change* while holding all else constant in Model 2 of Table 2.

Table 3. Effects of position change on updating and certainty (Liberal Democrats & UKIP).

	Model 3 Updating	Model 4 Certainty
Policy change	0.15* (0.05)	
Absolute policy change		5.14* (0.11)
Copartisan	0.06* (0.02)	0.32* (0.05)
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Male	-0.02 (0.01)	0.74* (0.04)
Education	0.00 (0.00)	0.06* (0.01)
Intercept	-0.05 (0.04)	
Wave fixed effects	✓	✓
N	72,563	23,298
R ²	0.00	
Log pseudolikelihood		-21,166.60

Note: Model 3 is linear regression, and Model 4 is ordinal logit, both with standard errors clustered by respondent. * $p < 0.05$.

Table 3 shows the results for the two united parties: Lib Dems and UKIP. Models 3 and 4 present results for *Updating* and *Certainty*, respectively. First, we find that voters accurately update their perceptions of these parties’ European integration positions, as seen by the significant positive

absolute policy shift for the Conservatives is 0.057, that for Labour is 0.069, Lib Dem 0.109, and UKIP 0.315. However, we do not think policy shifts by divided parties are conceptually invalid as those parties still move.

coefficient on *Policy change* in Model 3. When other variables are held at their mean values, as *Policy change* increases from one standard deviation below the mean (-0.252) to one standard deviation above the mean (0.299), *Updating* changes from 0.003 to 0.084 . In other words, when a party shifts to the pro-Europe (anti-Europe) direction, voters update their perceptions toward the pro-Europe (anti-Europe) direction as well. However, the change of 0.08 in the outcome is not very substantial considering that the standard deviation of the variable is 2.56 . This suggests that the amount of updating on the positions of the Lib Dems and UKIP is minimal. This is not surprising and does not go against our hypothesis, because the two parties took very clear policy positions regarding European integration and shifted within a limited space, i.e. there is likely a ceiling effect.²⁵

Model 4 shows that there is a significant positive coefficient on *Absolute policy change*, indicating that policy shifts by Lib Dems and UKIP increase certainty. Substantively, we checked how predicted probabilities of being very certain and not at all certain change when *Absolute policy change* moves from the minimum value to the maximum value while all other variables are held constant at their means. Figure 2 shows the results for very certain on the left and not at all certain on the right, and we see that the probability of being very certain increases and that of being not at all certain decreases as *Absolute policy change* increases. The predicted probability of being very certain increases from 0.37 to 0.57 when *Absolute policy change* increases from the first quartile (0.091) to the third quartile (0.417) (first difference: 0.203 , 95% confidence interval: $[0.195, 0.212]$). A corresponding increase in *Absolute policy change* decreases the probability of being not at all certain from 0.204 to 0.101 (first difference: -0.103 , 95% confidence interval: $[-0.109, -0.097]$).²⁶ These results provide evidence in support of H2.

We have checked the robustness of all these results. In OA3, we present the robustness of *Updating* results by running models using just EU positions for *Policy change*, measuring *Copartisan* from the first wave, and clustering standard errors by respondent-party. In OA4, we check the robustness of *Certainty* results by running models with a lagged outcome variable, using only the EU issue to measure *Absolute policy change*, measuring *Copartisan* from the first wave, using a four-value measure of the outcome variable, and clustering standard errors by respondent-party. In OA5, we present models for

²⁵To clarify, our main predictor is a measure of change, not a measure of ideological position on the left-right scale. When we talk about parties moving from one standard deviation below the mean (-0.252) to above the mean (0.299), we are saying that the party moves to the left by 0.252 and then moves to the right by 0.299 . The party ends up moving by just 0.047 to the right. These are not unrealistically big changes in party position in the -1 to 1 scale.

²⁶As with *Policy change*, *Absolute policy change* measures change in position. Hence, when we posit that *Absolute policy change* moves from 0.091 to 0.417 , the party is moving by 0.091 and then by 0.417 . These are reasonable shifts, considering that the range of absolute movement by UKIP and the Lib Dems is from 0.027 to 0.56 (see Table OA2.1).

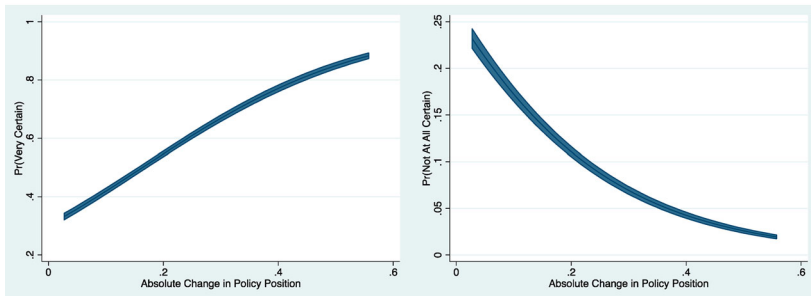


Figure 2. Predicted Probabilities of Being Very Certain and Not at All Certain Across the Values of Absolute Policy Change (Liberal Democrats & UKIP).

Note: The plots show predicted probabilities and their 95% confidence intervals of being very certain (left) and not at all certain (right) across the values of *Absolute policy change* while holding all else constant in Model 4 of Table 3.

both outcome variables and for both divided and united parties that control for parties' European integration positions from expert survey data, parties' emphasis of the European integration issue, newspapers' coverage of parties, and wave-level salience of the European integration issue. All these analyses show results consistent with our arguments.^{27 28}

Conclusion

Using newspaper and survey data from the UK, we showed that voters accurately update their perceptions of party positions and also feel more certain about their perceptions when unified parties (i.e. UKIP and Liberal Democrats) change their issue positions. In addition, perceptual updating and certainty are negatively affected by the position shifts of divided parties (i.e. Conservative and Labour).

Our paper makes several contributions. First, it adds to the literature on campaign effects by showing that voters follow party position statements even during inter-election periods. Furthermore, we paint a nuanced picture of the significance of party rhetoric. Much work in this literature assumes that parties are unitary organizations taking a commonly-agreed

²⁷We acknowledge that our data have limited time and party variation—two parties and four waves in each model. We have tried to address this by including wave fixed effects, respondent(-party) clustered standard errors, and respondent-level controls, which serve to account for correlations between responses in each wave and about each party. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that we need longer panel data and data on multiple parties (most likely through multi-country data) to have further confidence in the generalizability of our findings.

²⁸One might ask whether there is a curvilinear relationship between *Absolute policy change* and *Certainty*. We discuss the analyses and results in OA6. Moreover, it might be helpful to know party-level correlations between policy shifts and voter perceptions across waves. The analyses and results are explained in OA7.

position in the ideological space (going back to Downs 1957; but see, e.g. Gabel and Scheve 2007; Schumacher, de Vries, and Vis 2013), despite the extensive literature on intra-party politics that shows that parties have varying interests within (e.g. Ceron 2019; Kaltenecker, Heugl, and Müller 2019). Although it is normatively good that voters follow party positions, high perceptual accuracy and certainty do not immediately follow – they depend on how divided or united the parties are in their messages.

Second, we contribute to research on voter certainty, which has been mostly missing in comparative politics.²⁹ By having uncertainty as one of our outcomes, our paper is one of the first to investigate the predictors of voters' certainty about party positions. Moreover, the extant literature measures uncertainty indirectly by, for example, measuring the variance in the evaluations of a candidate's traits (e.g. Peterson 2015; but see Alvarez 1997). In contrast, we use a measure that directly asks voters how certain they are about parties' positions.

Third, it is normatively important to understand how position shifts affect voters' updating and certainty about their knowledge of party competition. The proper functioning of representative democracy relies on accurate perceptions of party positions by voters (Banducci, Giebler, and Kritzingler 2017; Dahlberg 2009; van der Brug 1998). If voters cast their votes based on inaccurate perceptions, they may give a mandate to parties whose priorities they do not share. Moreover, prior theoretical and empirical work suggests that certainty affects voter behaviour and attitudes toward parties (e.g. Enelow and Hinich 1984; Hinich and Munger 1997; Koch 2003). Uncertainty about party positions can influence the extent to which voters can rely on information about these positions when making political decisions (Alvarez 1997). This, in turn, may have negative downstream consequences on programmatic party competition.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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²⁹An exception is Ezrow, Homola, and Tavits (2014), who argue that centrist party positions increase voter uncertainty, which in turn negatively affects party performance.

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