

# Message Distortion as a Campaign Strategy: Does Rival Party Distortion of Focal Party Position Affect Voters?

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Do voters understand party positions? A growing literature is interested in answering this question but has limited its focus to parties' own policy messages. In real life, parties are engaged in constant exchange with their rivals about their policy positions, which creates possibilities for partisan rivals to misconstrue each other's policy messages. Using experimental ( $N = 9,562$ ) and large-scale cross-national data, we show that such message distortion by rival parties significantly moves voters' perceptions away from where the party locates itself and toward the distorted position. Furthermore, contrary to expectations from the literature on partisan motivated reasoning, this effect holds for all voters, regardless of whether they support the rival party, the focal party, or neither. These findings have important implications for our understanding of voter perceptions, partisan bias, and party strategies.

Less than one month before the 2019 election, the UK Labour Party was insisting that the personal tax increases they proposed would apply only to the top 5% of earners in the United Kingdom, and 95% of people would not pay any more income tax. The Conservatives, however, kept attacking Labour for their tax figures and spending plans. "Chancellor Sajid Javid claimed that Labour would also 'hike up taxes' to pay for its programme, estimating that this would amount to an extra £2,400 per year for every taxpayer" (BBC News 2019). Whom did the UK voters believe, and what did they think was Labour's tax policy position in this debate?

A growing literature explores whether and how voters understand party positions (Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2011; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014). This work has focused on parties' own messages about their positions. Yet, as the example above shows, these messages rarely occur in a vacuum in the real world. Instead, parties are engaged in constant ex-

change with their rivals about their policy positions. This is particularly true during election campaigns when parties often discuss and evaluate each other's policy offerings, and voters receive information about a focal party's positions from a mix of sources. Such exchange during campaigns creates possibilities for rival parties to misconstrue or distort each other's policy messages. While recent research shows that interparty cooperation and conflict matter for voters' perceptions of party positions (Adams, Weschle, and Wlezien 2021), how rivals' message distortion affects voters has not received any attention despite its prevalence in the campaign environment.

More specifically, we do not know whether voters listen to the distorted messages or discount them and whether message distortion by rivals affects voters' perceptions of what the focal party stands for. Answering these questions is important because it tells us (a) how voters process new information, (b) how they form their opinions of party positions, and

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(c) how party communication strategies affect voters, all of which are central theoretical and practical issues in contemporary party politics.

Extant literature generally agrees that voter perceptions about party positions are shaped by the campaign information to which they are exposed (e.g., Gelman and King 1993). This campaign information includes both (a) the focal party's own messages about its position and (b) rival parties' messages about that position. However, different sets of studies lead us to contrasting predictions about when each source affects voter opinion. On the one hand, insights from the Bayesian updating model suggest that voters update their prior perceptions of a party's policy positions in an unbiased manner by incorporating all of this campaign information. This implies that message distortion by a rival party likely moves voter perception of the focal party's position away from the party's self-position toward the distorted position.

However, a growing literature on partisan motivated reasoning (see, e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006) suggests that partisans of both parties are more likely to believe their own party's messages. For us, this implies that the focal party supporters are more likely to ignore the distorted message as less credible and update their perceptions of party positions based on what they hear from the focal party itself. Rival party supporters, on the other hand, are likely to be most affected by the distorted message and update their perceptions in the direction of the distorted position. Third-party supporters (i.e., those who identify with neither the focal nor the rival party) and non-partisans fall in the middle: they are likely to update their perceptions in the direction of the distorted message but not as much as the rival party supporters.

With these contrasting expectations in mind, we test the effects of message distortion on voter perceptions with two studies: a survey experiment in the United Kingdom and a cross-national study in nine European democracies.<sup>1</sup> The experiment includes close to 10,000 subjects and compares the perceptions of respondents in two experimental conditions: (1) those who only read the focal party's own message (control group) and (2) those who read both the party's own message and also a rival's distortion of that message (treatment group).<sup>2</sup> The results show that respondents' perceptions of party positions shift toward the distorted position and away from the focal party's self-depicted position—an effect that is present for all partisan groups across both issues.

1. The survey experiment is preregistered, and app. sec. OA.8 reports the preanalysis plan.

2. The experimental design includes a third group of respondents who did not receive any party prompts (the baseline group). In study 1, we show that our results are robust when we control for the perceptions of this baseline group.

To enhance generalizability, we supplement these experimental results with cross-national data from nine European democracies. We rely on the Comparative Campaign Dynamics (CCD) data set (Debus, Somer-Topcu, and Tavits 2018) to measure how parties portray each other's policy positions during election campaigns. We combine these data with national election surveys to show that message distortion significantly alters voter perceptions of the focal party positions in the direction of the distorted message. While this effect is somewhat stronger for rival party supporters, consistent with our experimental results, it is present for all.

In short, across two very different studies, using different designs and data, we find consistent evidence that message distortion matters and shapes how all voters, regardless of their partisan leaning, perceive what the focal party stands for. That messages about rivals' policy positions are not subject to partisan bias is a novel and significant finding. It implies that political rhetoric is a potentially powerful tool that parties can use to reach not only their supporters but also those parts of the electorate that seemed out of reach: independents and even political rivals. This important insight contributes to the scholarship on voter perceptions of party positions (Dalton and McCallister 2015; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014), to our understanding of (negative) campaigning in comparative context (Nai and Walter 2015; Somer-Topcu and Weitzel 2022), and to the study of partisan motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006). We elaborate on these in the conclusion.

## PARTY POSITIONS AND MESSAGE DISTORTION

Prior work suggests that voters generally learn about the issue positions of candidates and parties through election campaigns (see Gelman and King 1993; see also Nadeau et al. 2008). Party messages about their policy positions during election campaigns significantly affect the accuracy of voter perceptions of those positions (Somer-Topcu, Tavits, and Baumann 2020; see also Banducci, Giebler, and Kritzing 2015; van der Meer, Walter, and van Aelst 2016). That is, parties can help voters acquire substantive information about their policy positions (Fortunato 2021) and thereby foster voters' ability to accurately identify what these parties stand for on the left-right scale.

However, real-life campaign environments combine information from various sources, not only from the focal party itself. And information from other sources may not always be consistent with the party's own messages (Fortunato 2021; Fortunato and Stevenson 2013; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Stevenson and Vavreck 2000). A critical source of inconsistency is the campaign rhetoric of rival parties, who may be presenting conflicting information about the focal party's position. Note that differences in the message can be intentional

and strategic, or they can be accidental. We call such rival party behavior (i.e., spreading messages about another party's issue position that conflicts with that party's own messages about that issue) *message distortion*. Hence, distortion refers to the difference between the focal party's self-placement and the rival party's placement of the focal party. From the focal party's point of view, the greater the difference, the more their original message is distorted. Whether the focal party's self-position is its "true" position or one strategically chosen is not relevant in this context.<sup>3</sup>

Such message distortion by rivals is quite common in the real world. Take the following example. During the 2015 and 2017 election campaigns in the United Kingdom, when immigration was one of the most salient and controversial issues, the Labour Party advocated a cautious approach to immigration. They were against making any promises on immigration targets and stated clearly that they would "not discriminate between people of different races or creeds" (Labour Party 2017, 28). Yet, they were careful to acknowledge the necessity of immigration controls by saying that "immigration has made an important contribution to our economic and social life, but it needs to be properly controlled" (Labour Party 2015). The Conservatives, however, deliberately attempted to show the Labour as a pro-immigrant party that stands against any type of immigration controls. Prime Minister Theresa May stated, "Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour party want uncontrolled migration" (Travis 2017). While Labour presented a moderate immigration position, the Tories distorted Labour's message and located the party at an extreme pro-immigrant position instead.

As this example shows, parties may represent their rivals' issue positions differently, or they may selectively represent only part of the focal party's messages. In either case, these distortions to the party's own message create an environment where voters hear inconsistent messages about the focal party's issue positions.<sup>4</sup>

### MESSAGE DISTORTION AND VOTER RESPONSE

How do these inconsistent messages about party positions affect voters' ability to understand these positions? Two sets

of literature provide insights into how voters update their perceptions of party positions in a campaign environment with competing messages about those positions. First, according to the Bayesian updating model (Gerber and Green 1998; Hill 2017), voters update their political opinions and evaluations by a weighted combination of their prior beliefs and new information they receive. For our purposes, the important insight of the Bayesian model is that voters assimilate new information in an unbiased manner; that is, they interpret and incorporate incoming information independently of their own political affiliations and orientations. Applying this insight to our question, we expect voters to update their perception of party positions in response to any new information about those positions.<sup>5</sup>

This new information includes parties' own messages, and prior work indeed argues that voters rely on these messages/party cues as informational shortcuts to update their perceptions (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Kam 2005; Leeper and Slothuus 2014; Somer-Topcu et al. 2020). However, as we argued above, the new information also includes messages from rival parties, and the information in those messages may not always correspond with what the focal party itself is saying. If voters hear the same message from all sources, they are more likely to place the focal party where the party itself claims to be on the ideological scale, because the information from different sources gets reinforced. If, however, they hear different and potentially conflicting information from the rival party, their guesses about the focal party position are less likely to correspond with the focal party's self-placement. Instead, the insight from the Bayesian model about unbiased updating suggests that voter perceptions would be nudged in the direction indicated by the rival, and voters would perceive the focal party somewhere in between what the party itself is saying and what the rival is saying.<sup>6</sup> This serves as our first, Unbiased Updating Hypothesis.

The literature on (partisan) motivated reasoning offers a rival account to the notion of unbiased incorporation of all new information (Taber and Lodge 2006; see also Little 2019). Insights from this literature suggest that updating is subject to partisan bias and unlikely to affect all voters to the same degree. Specifically, according to the theory of partisan motivated

3. It would be interesting in future research to add further theoretical nuance by looking at whether voter responses differ depending on whether distortion clarifies the focal party's true position or distorts it. This extension remains beyond the current study and is also complicated by the fact that it is impossible for us to observe any party's true position with available data.

4. In addition to the anecdotal evidence, data from the CCD data set show that out of 8,137 party position statements, 5,512 (68%) were statements that parties made about their own positions, while 2,625 (32%) were about rival parties' positions.

5. To reiterate, our goal here is not to test the Bayesian model fully. Rather, we use its key insight about unbiased updating to generate theoretical expectations about whether message distortion by rivals is likely to affect voter perceptions of focal party positions.

6. Framing, i.e., providing alternative interpretations of an issue or event, is a type of message distortion and can significantly change people's attitudes and perceptions (see, e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Message distortion, however, can go beyond framing by changing the content.

reasoning, voters pay more attention to the messages consistent with their partisan identity (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014) and are more likely to assess their own party's message positively (see, e.g., Bisgaard 2015; Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Taber and Lodge 2006). At the same time, partisan identity motivates voters to distance themselves from the rival parties (i.e., the partisan out-group). Therefore, messages from parties with which the voter does not identify are more likely to be dismissed and discounted (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). This argument draws mainly from social identity theory, which suggests that group identities are detrimental to how people form opinions (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). According to social identity theory, individuals classify people who share certain characteristics (ethnicity, race, partisanship) as in-group, while perceiving those who do not share those characteristics as out-group. This classification has attitudinal consequences, whereby people feel closer and more in agreement with the in-group and dislike and reject the opinions and preferences of the out-group. The effects of partisan motivated reasoning and partisan bias on information processing are well documented, not only in the polarized US context but also in multiparty systems in other advanced democracies (see Leeper and Slothuus [2014] for reviews).

In short, partisan motivated reasoning suggests that partisans react differently to different sources of information. Accordingly, for our purposes, the supporters of the rival party are likely to be most receptive to the distorted message presented by their party and more likely to believe that the focal party is located not where it says it is but where the rival says it is. This line of reasoning also suggests that supporters of the focal party, whose message is being distorted, are less likely to be swayed by the rival party's message distortion. They are most likely to believe their own party's messages about its positions. Independents and third-party supporters lack any attachment to either the focal party or the rival party and hence are not expected to engage in motivated reasoning (Rogowski 2018). Therefore, we expect them to update in an unbiased manner and be nudged in the direction of the distorted position but by a lesser degree than the rival party supporters.

To better understand the differential effects of message distortion by partisanship, consider the following example. We discussed how the Labour Party advocated a moderate immigration position by highlighting the utility of immigrants while acknowledging the need for having some controls over immigration numbers. The Conservative Party, however, attempted to show Labour as a pro-immigrant party with an uncontrolled immigration policy. Following the above argument, we expect the Conservative Party supporters to locate the Labour Party at a pro-immigration position, even after

hearing what the Labour Party itself advocates. This is because we expect the Conservative supporters to reject Labour's own message and buy into how the Conservative Party is positioning Labour on this issue. We expect the Labour Party's own supporters to listen to their party and place it according to Labour's self-placement (i.e., close to the center). Finally, supporters of the third parties and independents are expected to place the Labour Party at a position between these two partisan groups. This expectation of the differential effects for the different partisans serves as our second, Partisan Bias Hypothesis.

While both hypotheses suggest that message distortion affects the perceptions of at least some voters, they lead to contrasting predictions about which voters are affected. Testing which of these contrasting predictions finds empirical support allows us to make a broader contribution to the literature about how voters process new information: whether they do so through a partisan lens or update their perceptions with information from different sources.<sup>7</sup> This, in turn, speaks to one of the biggest questions in contemporary partisan politics: Does party rhetoric have the power to reach across the ideological divide and persuade voters?

## RESEARCH DESIGN

We conducted two studies to test how rival party distortion of a focal party's message affects voter perceptions of the focal party's position. Study 1 is a survey experiment ( $N = 9,562$ ) that we fielded in the United Kingdom between September 18 and October 11, 2019, using the online survey company Prolific. The goal of study 1 is to offer a rigorous identification of the effect of party message distortions and ensure the internal validity of our results. Study 2 is a cross-national observational analysis using data collected as part of the CCD project (Debus et al. 2018). These data include media coverage of party messages during election campaigns from 17 elections across nine European countries: the Czech Republic (2010, 2013), Denmark (2007, 2011), Germany (2009, 2013), the Netherlands (2010, 2012), Poland (2007, 2011), Portugal (2009, 2011), Spain (2008), Sweden (2014), and the United Kingdom (2005, 2010,

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7. A couple of important clarifications are in order. First, in contrast to recent formal theoretical work that compares voters as motivated reasoners to voters as Bayesian updaters (Little 2021), we focus on voter beliefs and not on choice. Accordingly, our theory does not model a choice. Second, those studies also seem to suggest that one cannot separate out motivated reasoning from Bayesian updating. In a broad technical sense, that is correct, because one can always map directional (partisan) motives to prior beliefs and vice versa. However, as we noted earlier (n. 5), our goal here is not to test whether people are Bayesian or motivated reasoners in general. Instead, we simply contrast empirical predictions from two sets of arguments.

2015).<sup>8</sup> Using the two highest circulation daily broadsheet newspapers from each country (one left leaning and one right leaning), the CCD project codes party rhetoric during election campaigns. The data for the dependent variable, voter perceptions of party positions, come from surveys conducted after each campaign period. The country selection provides variance across several potentially relevant contextual factors and allows us to make generalizable inferences about the effects of party rhetoric on perceptions.

### STUDY 1: EXPERIMENTAL ANALYSIS

Study 1 uses a between-subjects design whereby we experimentally manipulate individuals' exposure to rival party distortion of the focal party's message, to test the effect of party rhetoric on voter perceptions. We conducted the experiment as part of an online survey fielded in the United Kingdom through Prolific, a crowd-sourcing platform for researchers developed in the United Kingdom, from September 18 to October 11, 2019.<sup>9</sup> The United Kingdom serves as an appropriate case for two main reasons. First, the electoral campaigns in the United Kingdom are relatively party centered. This is especially true in comparison to the very candidate-centered elections in the United States, but Kriesi (2011) finds that the politics in the United Kingdom is also less personalized than that in several continental European countries. This is essential because we are interested in exploring the effects of party rhetoric on voter perceptions. Second, it has two dominant political parties—the Conservatives and Labour—which offers a clean way to identify partisan rivals. At the same time, we believe late 2019 was an opportune time to run our experiment. Party identification with Conservatives and Labour was declining (even though they were still the two dominant parties), and the attention of the public was not focused on these top two parties only. This unique context makes it harder for us to find the hypothesized effects.

A total of 9,562 respondents participated in the experiment. This is a very large sample size—most survey experiments include considerably fewer subjects—and it results in a highly powered study.<sup>10</sup> We started by recording the respondent's party identification using the following question: "Generally

speaking, do you think of yourself as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or what?" Of the total number of respondents, 2,476 identified as Conservative Party supporters, 3,666 identified as Labour Party supporters, and 3,420 identified either with a different party or as independents.<sup>11</sup> We use responses to this question to test the Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis.<sup>12</sup>

### Experimental conditions

After they completed the pretreatment questionnaire, we randomized the respondents into 12 experimental conditions (see app. sec. OA.1). There are three main conditions: (1) baseline group, in which respondents are not receiving any party messages (from neither the focal nor the rival party); (2) "focal-only" group, in which respondents are asked to read the focal party's message about its own policy position; and (3) "focal + rival" group, in which respondents are asked to read two sets of messages: (a) the focal party's message about its own position (same as the focal-only group) followed by (b) the rival party's distortion of that message. These groups then get multiplied by two for Labour or the Conservatives as the focal party. We explore message distortion by each party to eliminate any possible ideological biases in the design.

The six groups are further multiplied by two because we focus on two issues: immigration and environment. This allows us to move beyond the left-right super issue, which has dominated prior work on voter perceptions of party positions because of limitations in observational data. We focus on immigration and environment because both issues are relevant and often covered in political debates in the United Kingdom. However, they also have different levels of issue salience: while environment is a politically relevant issue, it is not as highly salient as immigration.<sup>13</sup> Party positions on highly salient issues may be crystallized in the minds of voters already, and respondents may therefore discount any additional messages from the parties on these issues (Levendusky 2010). As a result, most studies in the motivated reasoning literature focus on relatively low salience but relevant issues (see, e.g., Druckman et al. 2013). Having one salient and one less salient issue in our

8. The CCD data set (more details in app. sec. OA.4) includes a few other elections and countries for which we lack appropriate survey data.

9. Prolific is similar to Amazon's Mechanical Turk but overcomes many of the problems that researchers face with Mechanical Turk and other similar platforms (Palan and Schitter 2018).

10. Given the novelty of this study, we wanted to ensure that our experiment had enough statistical power. Setting the power at 0.8 and statistical significance at 0.05 requires an  $N$  of about 150–500 for each party/issue scenario (depending on the strength of the coefficients we expect), while we had about 1,500 per party/issue scenario. Given this, our sample is highly powered to any distortion effects if they exist.

11. For a similar experimental design, see Fernandez-Vazquez (2019).

12. Appendix sec. OA.1 provides further details on study 1's design.

13. To check the relative salience of these two issues, we conducted a pretest in the United Kingdom in March 2019 with the same online platform, Prolific. We asked 100 respondents to indicate how salient the immigration and environment issues are in the United Kingdom (after providing respondents with a definition of each issue). On a 1–10 scale, where 10 is very salient and 1 is not salient at all, immigration policy received an average score of 7.36 with a standard deviation of 1.99, and environment received an average score of 4.82 with a standard deviation of 1.77.

experiment allows us to see whether issue salience matters and increases the generalizability of our findings.

Appendix section OA.1 presents the vignettes for all experimental conditions. We constructed the statements using the actual party programs or leader speeches with only slight modifications added to clarify the references. The full texts of these references are available upon request. This reliance on the actual statements generates an externally valid experimental setting where voters are exposed to competing arguments (Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman and Lupia 2016). As an example, for the immigration issue, the focal-only group received the following message about the Conservative Party's self-position:

*Here is how the Conservative Party describes its own position on immigration policy:*

"Throughout our history, migrants have made a huge contribution to our country—and they will continue to in the future." "We will introduce a new [immigration] system. It will be based on what skills you have to offer, not which country you come from." "Those with the skills we need, who want to come here and work hard, will find a welcome." (May, 2018).

The focal + rival group, in turn, received the above message together with the following message from a rival distorting the Conservative's position:

*Here is how a rival party describes the Conservative Party's position on immigration:*<sup>14</sup>

"The 'hostile environment' policies [that are designed to make it as difficult as possible for some immigrants to stay in the United Kingdom is] shameful brainchild of the [Conservative Party]. It has led to the scandal of British citizens being deported, detained and left destitute. That is nasty, cynical politics that demeans our country." (Corbyn, 2018).

For statements about the party's own position, we intentionally chose those that are close to the center of the policy dimension. The distorted message, in turn, puts the party at a more extreme position (e.g., to the extreme pro-immigration stance for the Labour Party and the extreme anti-immigration stance for the Conservative Party). Given the recent findings that

14. We did not specify the rival party, with the assumption that the Labour and Conservative Parties are seen as each other's the main rivals. We tested this assumption with 391 respondents on Prolific in February 2021. The sample was almost equally distributed between the Conservative, Labour, third-party supporters, and independents, and 95% identified Labour as the Conservative Party's main rival, and 93% identified the Tories as Labour's main rival.

perceptions of extremism undermine electability (Johns and Kölln 2020), this type of distortion is theoretically the most interesting and relevant.<sup>15</sup> We pretested our vignettes and found that the respondents can locate each message according to our expectations: focal party's own messages were identified as centrist and rival's messages as more extreme.<sup>16</sup>

Posttreatment, respondents were asked to locate political parties on 1–10 scales on either environment or immigration, depending on their experimental condition. We used the answers to this question to code our dependent variable, Perceived Party Position. Because our dependent variable is a 10-point issue scale, we use linear regression to test our hypotheses.

## Analysis and results

Our main analyses presented here include the focal-only and focal + rival groups and compare how those respondents that receive both the focal and rival party messages perceive the focal party in comparison to those who received focal-only messages.<sup>17</sup> Balance tests reported in appendix section OA.2.1 indicate that the focal + rival and focal-only groups are balanced across most of our pretreatment sociodemographic variables.<sup>18</sup>

In figure 1, we present the regression results for all respondents. The first two models refer to the respondents' perceptions of the Conservative Party's position on environment and immigration, respectively. The last two models show the same results for the perceptions of the Labour Party's positions. To recap, the focal-only scenarios presented the respondents with a party's own issue position, and these scenarios were always centrist. The focal + rival scenarios presented the respondents the focal party's own position text together with the rival party's message about the focal party position, and those latter scenarios were always more extreme (more leftist

15. Adding moderating scenarios would have doubled the number of experimental conditions and required a sample size that our financial constraints did not allow.

16. These pretests were conducted with undergraduate students at a public research university in the United States. We removed the party names from the text and randomly displayed one statement at a time (either party's own statement or that of the rival party but not both). After each statement, we asked respondents to place the party on an ideological scale. The full set of results of these pretests is available on request.

17. This comparison is the most direct test of our hypothesis. Comparisons to the baseline group cannot test our hypothesis because we have no control over what kinds of messages respondents in the baseline group have heard about parties. This group was included because it allows us to make interesting additional comparisons and explore whether the effects we report might differ depending on how the parties are perceived absent any treatment (see app. sec. OA.3.3).

18. The results stay robust when we include (a) all control variables and (b) only those few controls that appear not to be balanced across our experimental conditions (see app. sec. OA.3.4.1).

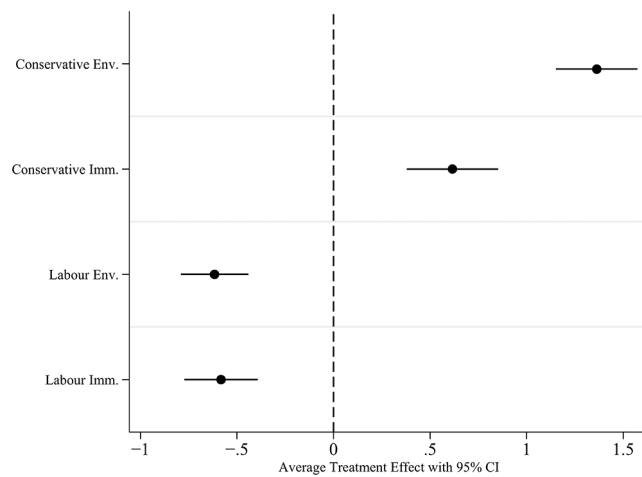


Figure 1. Average treatment effects for all respondents

[i.e., more pro-environment and pro-immigration] than Labour's own position and more rightist [more pro-business/anti-environment and anti-immigration] than the Conservative's own position). Therefore, if respondents' perceptions of the focal party positions are influenced by the rival party distortion, we should see positive average treatment effects (ATEs) for the Conservative Party (indicating that respondents in the focal + rival condition placed the Conservatives at a more anti-environment and anti-immigration position than those in the focal-only condition) and negative ATEs for the Labour Party.<sup>19</sup>

This is precisely what we see in figure 1. The ATEs for the Conservative Party are positive and significant, and the ATEs for the Labour Party are negative and significant. For substantive interpretation, consider the second model: the ATE of 0.6 suggests that those respondents who are exposed to both the Conservative Party's own centrist position on the immigration issue and the rival party's distorted description of this position perceive the Conservatives to be 0.6 points more anti-immigration than those respondents who only read the Conservative Party's centrist message. Appendix section OA.3.2 reports the mean and standard deviation of perceptions for different groups of respondents in our experiment. The average perceived Conservative immigration position was 5.6 for those respondents who received only the Conservative self-statement, and the average perceived position was 6.2 when the respondents also received the rival's distortion message. The negative ATEs for the Labour Party similarly suggest that respondents who read both the Labour Party's centrist statement and the rival's portrayal of them as more extreme perceive the Labour Party's positions as more pro-environment

19. Appendix sec. OA.3.4.4 shows how our sample compares to the weighted national survey data and that our results are robust if we apply raked survey weights to our experiment using the survey sample.

and pro-immigration than those who only read the Labour Party's centrist statements. These results support the Unbiased Updating Hypothesis: message distortion sways voter perceptions away from the focal party's self-position toward the distorted position.<sup>20</sup>

To test the Partisan Bias Hypothesis, we ran the same models separating the respondents into focal party supporters, rival party supporters, third-party supporters, and independents. Figure 2 shows the ATEs for these four groups of respondents. The squares refer to the focal party supporters, the circles are the rival party supporters, the triangles refer to third-party supporters, and the diamonds are the independents.

The Partisan Bias Hypothesis led us to expect that message distortion has a more substantial effect on rival party supporters (i.e., *circles*) compared to the focal party supporters (i.e., *squares*) or all other respondents (i.e., *triangles*). Evidence for this expectation is mixed. In all cases, the rival party supporters are swayed more than the focal party supporters when they read the rival party's distortion of the focal party's position. For instance, for the Labour immigration scenario, while the party was perceived at 4.5 by the Conservative supporters when they received the party's own statement, the perception shifted to an average of 3.95 when they heard the distorted position (see app. sec. OA.3.2). This is in line with the Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis. However, in most cases, the differences across partisan groups are not statistically significant. That is, the rival's message portraying the focal party as extreme makes supporters of both the rival and the focal party, as well as all other respondents, perceive the focal party as more extreme than it actually is.<sup>21</sup> This holds regardless of whether the focal (rival) party is the Conservatives or Labour and irrespective of the issue, which contradicts the expectation from prior work that voters are less likely to engage in partisan motivated reasoning on highly salient issues (Arceneaux 2008; Levendusky 2010).

Overall, our conclusions from study 1 are interesting, novel, and somewhat provocative because they run counter to the expectations from the literature on partisan motivated reasoning according to which partisans should be more likely to listen to their own party and dismiss the messages by rivals. We do not find this to be the case, which is remarkable given that prior work expects partisan bias to be widespread. The fact that the effect of distortion is relatively equal across all groups suggests that message distortion is a potentially powerful

20. Full results for the models presented in figs. 1 and 2 are in app. sec. OA.3.1.

21. The differences are statistically significant only in the cases of the Conservative Party's environmental position across the focal and rival party supporters and the Labour Party's environmental position across focal party and third-party supporters.

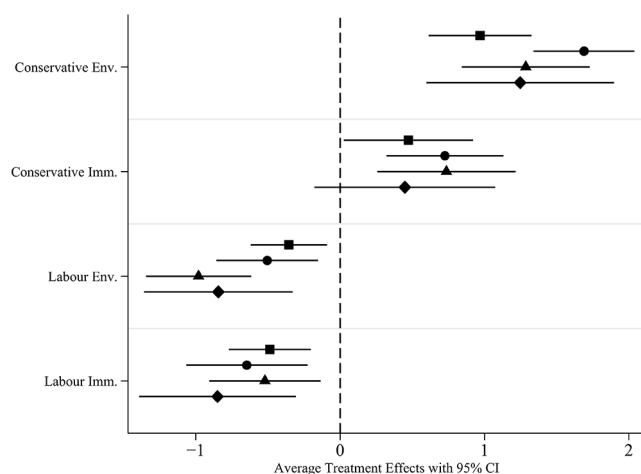


Figure 2. Average treatment effects for different partisan groups. Squares, focal party supporters; circles, rival party supporters; triangles, third-party supporters; diamonds, independents.

campaign tool because it can reach out-partisans as effectively as it does copartisans.<sup>22</sup>

### STUDY 2: CROSS-NATIONAL OBSERVATIONAL ANALYSIS

Our experiments were designed to uncover the causal effect of message distortion. However, the goal of achieving a high degree of internal validity restricted us to a specific national context, and specific types of messages and setup, limiting the degree of external validity. Furthermore, while we guarded against lack of realism by picking real-world statements for our vignettes, the experimental context is inherently artificial, creating the possibility that individuals behave differently from how they would otherwise.

The goal of study 2 is to address this limitation by conducting a cross-national analysis with individual-level post-election survey data from nine European countries. These data are available via the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (<https://cses.org/>) modules 2–4 or through recent national election studies.<sup>23</sup> To measure party messages about one another’s

22. We also tested whether strength of partisanship (e.g., Druckman et al. 2013) or political knowledge (e.g., Arceneaux 2008; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010) condition these effects. In app. sec. OA.3.4, we show that there is no statistically significant difference between strong or weak partisans or between high or low knowledge respondents in how they respond to the experimental condition. Our results also stay robust when we control for how certain respondents feel about their perception of the focal party’s position (app. sec. OA.3.4.5).

23. These national postelection studies are the British National Election Study 2010 (Whiteley and Sanders 2014) and 2015 (Fieldhouse et al. 2016), the Danish National Election Study 2011 (Stubager, Andersen, and Hansen 2013), the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2012 (Kolk et al. 2012), the Polish National Election Study 2011 (Markowski 2011), and the Portuguese National Election Study 2011.

positions, we use the CCD data set as described below and in appendix section OA.4. We focus on the two largest parties (in terms of vote share) in each country for the following three reasons. First, while the CCD has good country-election coverage, because the data set uses newspaper articles, it is most detailed (and accurate) for the rhetoric of the major political parties and is less reliable for the smaller ones. Second, and related, news media heavily focus on the top two parties in each country, even in crowded systems like the Netherlands or Sweden.<sup>24</sup> Focusing on the top two parties therefore best captures what voters hear during election campaigns. Adding messages from third parties, which voters are less likely to hear, would increase measurement error and lead to inefficient estimates. Third, focusing on the two largest parties in study 2 allows us to match the two-party design of our experimental study.<sup>25</sup> Each survey respondent enters the data set once for each party, producing a respondent-party dyad as the unit of analysis.<sup>26</sup>

### Variables

Our dependent variable (Perceived Party Position) is the respondent’s placement of a party on the left-right dimension, which ranges from 0 to 10, where 0 is the most leftist and 10 the most rightist position.<sup>27</sup> Focusing on the left-right scale follows prior work (e.g., Fortunato, Stevenson, and Vonnahme 2016; Somer-Topcu et al. 2020), and it is also the only issue scale for which cross-national survey data on perceived party placements exist.

We measure partisanship with four separate dummy variables, using a question that asks respondents to identify the party to which they feel closest and test our models separately for each group. Focal Party Supporters is coded 1 for those respondents who feel close to the party whose message is being distorted. Rival Party Supporters is coded 1 for those respondents who feel close to the party that is responsible for the message distortion. Third-Party Supporters is coded 1 for the supporters of all other parties. Finally, Independents is coded 1 for those respondents who do not identify with any party.

24. The CCD data set codes all election-related articles on the front page and a 5% random sample of the remaining election-related articles for the one-month campaign period before each election. According to the data set, in the United Kingdom, more than 60% of the articles are about the Labour or the Conservative Party. Even in more crowded systems, such as the Netherlands, more than 40% of the articles are about the top two rivals, VVD and PvdA.

25. By extending the analyses to all party dyads, one can examine how different messages by different parties affect voters. However, because of the data limitations and because it is not clear how each party’s message should be weighted, we leave this question to future research.

26. Appendix sec. OA.6 lists the top two parties for each country.

27. For those surveys that used a different scale, we rescaled the positions from 0 to 10.

To measure left-right positions of parties (both in terms of focal party self-placement and focal party placement according to rival party's rhetoric), we rely on the CCD data set, which is the only cross-national data set that provides detailed information about what parties say about themselves and their rivals during election campaigns. Specifically, it codes detailed information about party statements on several specific issues, mainly following the categories identified in the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) project set (Volkens et al. 2019). This allows us to identify, for each party, a collection of statements about their own positions and a collection of statements that each rival party has made about their positions.

When measuring the ideological positions of parties, we followed similar procedures for the coding of parties' left-right position in MARPOR (Volkens et al. 2019). First, we calculated the share of each party's coverage dedicated to each issue (in proportion to the total number of issue statements that the party made during the campaign). Then, we summed the shares for rightist statements and subtracted the summed shares of leftist statements to get the left-right position of each party (Party Self-Placement).<sup>28</sup> After that, we repeated the same procedure with statements made by the rival party about the focal party to find the Distorted Placement for each party on the left-right scale. Both self- and distorted positions range from  $-1$  to  $+1$ . We rescaled the position to  $0-10$  to correspond with the perceived party positions from the survey data, where lower values indicate a more leftist position.

The data have a hierarchical structure with variables being measured at different levels (country, election, party dyad, and respondent). To control for any unmeasured party-level and election-specific factors, we run a multilevel model that accounts for these effects by incorporating a random intercept for the election and party-dyad levels. We also include country fixed effects because party positions and perceptions are not fully symmetric across countries.<sup>29</sup>

## Analysis and results

To test the Unbiased Updating Hypothesis, we run two models: the first model mimics the experimental analysis and focuses on estimating the effect of Distorted Placement as the key independent variable, while controlling for party self-

placement. We expect to find a positive coefficient on Distorted Placement. This would indicate that message distortion sways voter perceptions in the direction of the distorted position. To test the Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis, we run the same models separately for the Focal Party Supporters, Rival Party Supporters, Third-Party Supporters, and Independents. Here, we expect the effects of the Distorted Placement variable to be the strongest for the rival party supporters and the weakest (and possibly statistically insignificant) for the focal party supporters. The coefficients for the third-party supporters and independents should fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

The second model includes an interaction term and allows us to test how the extent of distortion affects perceptions. The variable Extent of Distortion measures, for each party, the absolute distance between Party Self-Placement and the party's Distorted Placement. The interaction model includes Party Self-Placement and Extent of Distortion as constituent variables. We expect Party Self-Placement to have a positive coefficient. This would suggest that, when there is no distortion (Extent of Distortion is 0), voter perceptions match up with party's self-stated positions. We also expect the interaction term to have a negative and statistically significant coefficient, which would mean that as the extent of distortion increases, voter perceptions start deviating from the party's self-placement. To test the Partisan Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis, we run the same models separately for different groups of voters. Here, we expect these effects to be the strongest for rival party supporters and the weakest for focal party supporters.

Table 1 presents the coefficients for the additive models, and figure 3 presents the marginal effects of Party Self-Placement for the different values of Extent of Distortion. In line with our experimental results, we see in table 1 that all respondents, regardless of their partisanship, react similarly to message distortion. While the coefficient for Distorted Placement is slightly stronger for the supporters of the rival party, the effects are statistically significant for all groups and not statistically different across different partisan groups.<sup>30</sup>

Figure 3 shows the marginal effects of Party Self-Placement for all respondents (fig. 3A), focal party supporters (fig. 3B), rival party supporters (fig. 3C), and independents (fig. 3D).<sup>31</sup> The X-axis indicates the extent of distortion. While the variable has a theoretical range from 0 to 10 (where 0 refers to a

28. Appendix sec. OA.5 lists which issues are categorized as leftist vs. rightist for the purposes of generating parties' left-right positions and how they match up with the MARPOR categories.

29. Our main models do not include additional controls because there are no obvious factors that would simultaneously affect our outcome and independent variables. That said, perception studies commonly include individual- and party-level controls (e.g., Dahlberg 2009). In app. sec. OA.7, we report models that include these controls. Our results stay robust.

30. In app. sec. OA.7 we show the robustness of these results when we include several individual-level control variables and party government status.

31. The full set of results for all groups can be seen in app. sec. OA.7.

Table 1. Additive Model Results

	Model 1 All Respondents	Model 2 Focal Party Supporters	Model 3 Rival Party Supporters	Model 4 Third-Party Supporters	Model 5 Independents
Distorted position	1.037* (.177)	1.076* (.194)	1.141* (.225)	.974* (.177)	.878* (.149)
Party self-placement	.246 (.290)	.190 (.317)	.306 (.370)	.393 (.291)	.139 (.245)
Constant	.501 (.754)	.457 (.836)	-.245 (.967)	.534 (.748)	1.466* (.644)
Random effect:					
Election	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Party dyad	.552* (.143)	.642* (.173)	.877* (.242)	.536* (.142)	.374* (.104)
Residual	4.150* (.029)	3.710* (.057)	4.761* (.078)	3.564* (.045)	4.204* (.057)
Log likelihood	-86,273.71	-18,222.64	-18,780.71	-25,547.83	-23,086.81
N	40,459	8,757	8,514	12,407	10,781

Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Models include country fixed effects.

\*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed.

case when there is no distortion, and 10 refers to a case when the party locates itself at 0 [or 10] while the distorted party position is at 10 [or 0]), its largest value in our data set is 2.7 (Swedish Social Democratic Labour Party’s distortion of the Moderate Party’s position in 2014), with a mean of 0.94 and a standard deviation of 0.73.

Figure 3A shows that when the extent of distortion is 0, party messages about their policy positions and voter perceptions of those positions are positively correlated. This positive effect weakens as distortion increases. It loses significance altogether (i.e., the confidence interval crosses zero) at high levels of message distortion. More specifically, the focal party’s

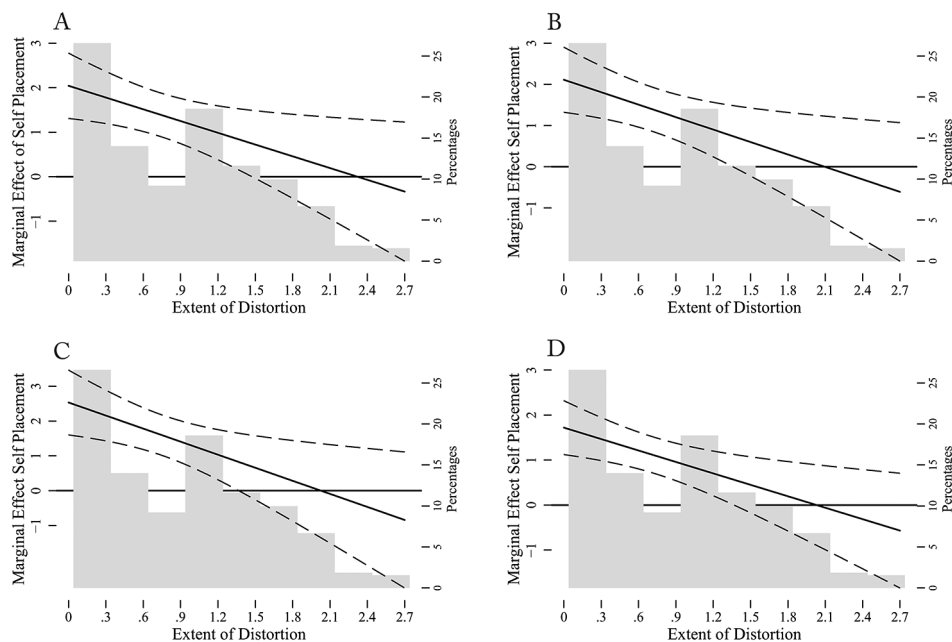


Figure 3. Solid lines, marginal effects of Party Self-Placement on Perceived Party Position at different values of Extent of Distortion. Dotted lines, 95% confidence intervals. Bars, distribution of the Extent of Distortion variable. A, All respondents; B, focal party supporters; C, rival party supporters; D, independents.

self-placement no longer affects voter perceptions once the rescaled Extent of Distortion (i.e., the difference between party's self-placement and its placement by the rival) reaches 1.5 (on the 0–10 scale). In short, when the extent of this distortion is high, voter perceptions of focal party position no longer correspond with the focal party's self-placement. The effects are very similar for the focal party supporters (fig. 3B), rival party supporters (fig. 3C), or independents (fig. 3D), which is fully in line with our conclusions from study 1.

Overall, the results from these different analyses—observational and experimental—point in the same direction: rival party distortion of the focal party message significantly affects people's perception of the focal party's position. When the rival party distorts the focal party policy message, voter perceptions of the focal party's position correspond less with the focal party's own self-placement.<sup>32</sup> Instead, message distortion by rivals moves voter perceptions in the direction of the distorted position. Across different analyses we also see that different partisan groups react to the distortion similarly. Both the focal party and rival party supporters, and all other respondents, are persuaded by the rival party's distortion of the focal party's position. The experimental results provide additional nuance to these general conclusions. They demonstrate that the effects of message distortion are similar regardless of (a) the ideological leanings of the focal and rival parties or (b) the salience of the policy domain.

## CONCLUSION

Our findings contribute to several strands of literature. First, our study adds to the literature on voter perceptions of party positions (Adams et al. 2021; Dalton and McCallister 2015; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014). One of the central debates in this literature is whether voters listen to parties. Our results suggest that they do, not only to messages from their own party but also to those from rival parties. These results highlight the need to account for this broader information environment in future research. When only studying the focal party's own messages, it may appear that voters are not listening to party messages, when, in reality, they are listening; it is just that rival's messages may overshadow the focal party's own.

Second, our study provides crucial information about how parties campaign—an underexplored frontier of research in comparative party politics. Recent work has started to explore negative campaigning outside the United States (Nai and Walter 2015) but not in an interactive manner and not with a focus on policy messages rather than valence (Jung and Tavits 2021; Somer-Topcu and Weitzel 2022). Our study paves the way for a better understanding of how parties campaign and how far they can influence voters purely by rhetorical tools.

Third, our project has important implications for the literature on partisan motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006), which suggests that partisans follow their own party's position and ignore the messages by competitors. We show that all voters—focal party supporters as well as opponents—update their perception of what the focal party stands for in response to messages from rival parties. In line with some work on performance and valence evaluations (Green and Jennings 2017; Schleiter and Tavits 2018), our results imply that voters are not always blind supporters of their own party and listen to what other parties are saying. On the one hand, this is a normatively positive result for democracy, which relies on dialogue and pluralism and suffers under dogmatism. On the other hand, this is a troubling result from the perspective of the focal party, who may find it hard to persuade even its own supporters in the face of alternative messages from rivals. In the context of party competition, therefore, our results suggest that parties cannot afford to ignore messages from rivals because such political rhetoric matters and has the power to shape opinions.

Our results also open several interesting avenues for future research. First, it would be interesting to theorize and study how voters react to more complex interactions between parties, those that involve more than one rival (common in multiparty systems), or situations in which focal parties have a chance to directly respond to distortion attempts by rivals. Relatedly, it would be interesting to examine the other consequences of message distortion: Do they affect voters' evaluations of party competence, their feelings toward parties, their partisanship, and their electoral behavior? While we showed that perceptions of party positions change, it is important to explore how these changes in perceptions affect voters' feelings, behavior, and in turn, election outcomes. Finally, identifying conditions under which distortion is effective (e.g., extremity or reliability of distortion, credibility of the source, consistency with party reputation, selective vs. accidental exposure) requires further theoretical refinement and more detailed data than we currently have available. That said, exploring these conditions is important for both theoretical and practical reasons, as it would help parties devise strategies to minimize the negative effects of message distortion.

32. Our results help reconcile the seemingly contradictory findings in the existing literature. On the one hand, some prior work has been quite pessimistic about parties' ability to strongly (if at all) affect voter perceptions with their policy messages (see, e.g., Adams et al. 2011; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014). On the other hand, recent work shows that voters do listen to parties' messages and adjust their perceptions accordingly (Somer-Topcu et al. 2020). Our results imply that both sets of studies can be right: whether voters listen to the focal party message depends on the extent to which this message is distorted by rivals.

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