

Does party rhetoric affect voter perceptions of party positions?

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ABSTRACT

Do voters listen to parties? Do they pay attention to and understand parties' policy messages? We explore these questions with two studies. First, we assembled the most comprehensive cross-national dataset on media coverage of parties' rhetoric during election campaigns and show that parties' media messages about their left-right positions significantly affect voter perceptions of these positions. We corroborate the cross-national results with panel data from the UK that allow us to more rigorously identify the party rhetoric effect and to show that it extends beyond the left-right super issue: party messages affect voter perceptions also on specific issues, such as income redistribution and European integration. Taken together, these findings suggest that voters indeed listen to parties and understand their policy messages.

Do voters pay attention to and understand parties' policy messages? Do their perceptions of party positions reflect the policy stances that parties advocate? These are crucial questions in a representative democracy, which cannot function properly if voters do not understand what parties stand for (see Bartels, 1996; Banducci et al., 2015; Dahlberg, 2009; Downs, 1957; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; van der Brug, 1997). As Powell (2004) argues, responsive government depends on a chain of delegation, which ensures that voters' preferences correspond to policy outcomes. If voters are left unclear about parties' positions, the first linkage in this chain, "the structuring of choices," may be obstructed (Powell, 2004, 94). Put differently, if voters cast their votes based on inaccurate perceptions of party policies, they may unintentionally give a mandate to parties whose policy priorities they do not share. These parties, in turn, would wrongly assume that there is support for their policy positions when there actually is not. For example, as Converse (1964) describes, although elites claimed popular support for their policies in the case of both the McCarthyism and the rise of the Nazi Party, there may have been little actual awareness among the public about the contents and ramifications of these policies.

Prior work paints a relatively pessimistic picture about voters' ability to understand party messages. Most notably, a seminal study by Adams et al. (2011, 371) shows that voter perceptions of party positions "do not match up with the actual statements in these parties' policy manifestos."

Specifically, that study finds that when parties shift their left-right policy positions as coded by the Manifesto Research on Political Representation project dataset, (MARPOR), there is no evidence that voters adjust their perceptions of where these parties are located on the left-right scale.¹ This is a surprising and, to an extent, an alarming finding. While the authors propose a number of potential explanations for this null effect, critics of the manifesto data are quick to question whether ordinary voters really read these manifestos, and whether parties use these documents when talking to voters. In order to more fully understand the extent to which party messages affect voter perceptions of party positions, we need to look beyond manifestos at more direct forms of communication, such as media coverage of party positions.

In this paper, we provide the first systematic cross-national analysis of how *party messages covered in the media* impact voter perceptions of party positions. With a few rare exceptions (Banducci et al., 2015; van der Meer et al., 2016), media campaigns have not been considered in the prior literature on perceptions of party positions. Yet it is one of the most direct ways for parties to communicate their positions to voters.

Using novel and original data, we analyze how parties' messages in the media affect voter perceptions of party positions. First, we collected data on party messages covered in the media during election campaigns from ten European democracies across 21 elections. The Comparative Campaign Dynamics Dataset is the most comprehensive cross-national

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¹ But see Fernandez-Vazquez (2014) and Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu (2019), who show that voters' party placements correspond reasonably well with the policy tones expressed in manifestos, especially when a party has a new leader.

dataset on parties' campaign rhetoric that is currently available (Debus et al., 2016). We use the dataset to first measure each party's left-right position as portrayed in the media and match these data with information from surveys about voter perceptions of parties' left-right positions.² This cross-national analysis shows that parties' messages about their left-right positions correspond with voter perceptions of these positions, suggesting that voters do pay attention to parties and understand their messages.

We then use five waves of panel data from the 2014–2017 British Election Study (BES) (Fieldhouse et al., 2017) and original data on media coverage of party messages to match each of these waves. The panel data provide two distinct advantages. First, they allow us to employ a within-subject design and carefully identify whether an individual changes his or her perception of a party's position in response to the changes in that party's messages about its position. Second, unlike the cross-national survey data, which only include questions about parties' left-right placement, the BES panel data allow us to move beyond the left-right super issue and explore whether party messages affect voter perceptions on specific issues, such as income redistribution and European integration. With these more rigorous tests, we continue to find robust evidence that party messages affect voter perceptions.

Our findings contribute to the literature on party strategies and elite-mass linkages. First, our results paint an optimistic picture of voter capacity to understand and internalize party rhetoric. Voter perceptions of party positions are not random and unpredictable, but correspond reasonably well with the information that parties themselves disseminate about those positions. Second, there is very little systematic comparative research on party messages beyond manifestos, and the effects of these messages during election campaigns or other times are largely undocumented (see, e.g., Banducci et al., 2015; van der Meer et al., 2016). Given this, our finding that party rhetoric in the media shapes their policy images breaks new ground in the study of comparative party behavior. Furthermore, by making available a new, original, and comprehensive cross-national dataset on party messages delivered in the media, we pave the way for comparative study of party messages beyond their manifestos.

1. Party messages and voter perceptions: theoretical expectations

Do party messages matter for voter perceptions of party positions? This is a more difficult question to answer than it appears because the arguments in the existing literature lead to contrasting expectations. On the one hand, the argument that links voter perceptions to party messages is simple and straightforward. On the other hand, and in light of the findings in Adams et al. (2011), there are also several reasons why voters may not pay attention to party messages to inform their perceptions. As we discuss below, the arguments behind the contrasting expectations are equally theoretically plausible, which is why we remain theoretically agnostic. Instead, we believe that resolving the debate calls for a fresh empirical look at this question – a task we undertake in the second part of the paper.

1.1. Party messages affect voter perception of party positions

The most obvious way in which voters can develop accurate perceptions about party positions is to acquire substantive information about these positions. While acquiring and analyzing a significant amount of information is a task that is taxing for an average voter, who tends to be uninformed and uninterested in political affairs (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992), parties can reduce the cost of information gathering by providing voters with messages about their positions.

² In each case, the media data are gathered from a one-month period prior to the fielding of the survey.

Prior work suggests that voters generally learn about the issue positions of candidates and parties through media coverage (see Gelman and King, 1993; see also Chaffee and Kanihan, 1997; Nadeau et al., 2008). Media provide parties with an unparalleled opportunity to (1) simultaneously reach a lot of voters, and (2) provide them with such substantive information directly. Voters, in turn, are more likely to be tuned in to political news during elections, which are simultaneously a high priority event for the media (Andersen et al., 2005; see also Adams et al., 2011). Rather than talking solely to a select audience of party faithfuls or politically interested individuals, parties are likely to reach a large number of voters through the media coverage of their messages.

Media campaigns also allow parties to reach voters *directly* (e.g., Bartels, 1993; Druckman et al., 2018). They are specifically targeted at voters, and therefore more likely to reach them than party messages in manifestos. When presenting to the media, parties can craft their messages exactly the ways they want voters to understand them. Because of their accessible style, and because they are directed specifically at voters, media messages have a high likelihood of actually reaching voters and shaping their views on parties.³

In short, media campaigns allow parties to convey their policy positions directly to voters, which makes it more likely that voters receive these party messages. This heightened exposure to party-provided messages, in turn, should make it easier for voters to accurately identify party positions. In line with this expectation, some prior work shows that voters seem to listen to and respond to party messages disseminated in various contexts (see Seeberg et al., 2017 for an overview). A recent field experiment in Italy similarly shows that voters update their beliefs about parties' positions in response to campaign messages (Kendall et al., 2015).

1.2. Party messages may be ineffective

While the above discussion presents a very straightforward logic for party messages affecting voters, other arguments suggest that party messages in the media may have no effect. For example, when information about party behavior is available, voters may find such information more persuasive than parties' rhetorical messages. If that is the case then it is hard for parties to reshape their policy images with media campaigns (Adams, 2012). Extensive literature on retrospective performance-based voting certainly suggests that voters do pay attention to parties' policy behavior (Duch and Stevenson, 2013; Erikson et al., 2002; Soroka and Wlezién, 2010; Wlezién, 1995). More directly related to voter perceptions of party policy positions, recent research shows that voters also use other behavioral heuristics, such as coalition participation (e.g., Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013; see also Böhmelt et al., 2016) or political events (Abney et al., 2013; Clark, 2009) in decision-making. Such use of heuristics has been shown to lead to disregarding potentially relevant information (Adams et al., 2016), including information disseminated in the media. All of this evidence suggests that various party behaviors can interfere with and negate the effect of their rhetoric on voter perceptions of party positions.

Furthermore, insights from the theory of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990; see also Leeper and Slothuus, 2014) provide additional reasons for why voters may dismiss party messages. According to this

³ This is in contrast to party manifestos, which may serve various strategic purposes for the party, many of which may have little to do with communicating with voters. For example, manifestos can be strategically used to manage internal party affairs and appease activists, or to lure potential coalition partners. Because of these alternative purposes, and because of their formal style, manifesto messages may be less accessible to many voters. Of course, parties' positions in the media are related to their manifesto positions, as we show below. However, we also note that even when controlling for their manifesto positions, media messages of party positions have an independent effect on voter perceptions.

theory, people are reluctant to change their pre-existing beliefs when presented with new and contradictory arguments or evidence (Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Instead, they engage in motivated reasoning by favoring information that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs and dismissing (or actively counter-arguing) the rest (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Taber and Lodge, 2006). This implies that information disseminated in the media might not change people's beliefs about what parties stand for.

In sum, previous research does not provide a clear answer as to the question of whether voters pay attention to party messages. Reasonable theoretical arguments can be made in either direction. Given this, we remain theoretically agnostic. Instead, we believe that answering the question remains an important *empirical* task, one to which we turn now.

2. Research design

We conducted two studies to test the effects of parties' rhetoric on voter perceptions of party positions. Study 1 is a cross-national analysis. We collected original data on media coverage of party messages during election campaigns from 21 elections across ten European countries: the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. The goal was to include, within resource constraints, as diverse a set of countries as possible. The cases include two Scandinavian countries, two continental European countries, two Mediterranean democracies, three Central European post-Communist democracies, and the United Kingdom. This country selection allows for variance across a number of potentially relevant contextual factors including number of parties, electoral system, and level of democratic and economic development.⁴ We merged the campaign data with survey data collected *after* each campaign period on perceived party positions on the left-right scale.⁵ Here, we relied primarily on the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) modules 2–4, and added data from seven recent national election studies not included in the CSES.⁶ The broad-based cross-national coverage of Study 1 enhances the generalizability of our findings.

The goal of Study 2, in turn, is to offer a more rigorous identification of the effect of party messages and test the robustness of our findings beyond the left-right scale. Despite the advantage of being more generalizable, Study 1 has two important limitations. First, it does not allow taking into account respondents' pre-existing perceptions of party positions. The UK panel data overcomes this challenge, thereby offering a stronger research design for identifying the effect of party rhetoric on perceptions. Second, Study 1 allows us to explore perceptions of parties' left-right positions only. The UK panel data allows us to measure voter perceptions of party positions on a wider set of issues, including not only the left-right scale but also income redistribution and European integration. Specifically, Study 2 relies on five waves of panel data from the British Election Survey Study (2014–2017) and collected original data on parties' rhetoric to match *each* of these waves.

⁴ Theoretically, the scope of our study covers all well-functioning democracies with relatively established party systems, i.e., most European countries, as well as other advanced democracies, such as the United States, Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, and New Zealand. Resource constraints limited the number of countries for which we were able to collect the media coverage data.

⁵ Although included in the media data, Hungary excluded from the analysis here because of lack of survey data in which voters are asked to locate parties on the left-right scale. We also do not have access to the Swedish 2010 election survey and hence only use the 2014 data in the analyses below. Therefore, the number of elections covered in Study 1 drops from 21 to 18.

⁶ These national post-election studies are: British National Election Study 2010, Danish National Election Study 2011, Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2012, Polish National Election Study 2011, the Spanish National Election Study 2011, and the Portuguese National Election Study 2011.

3. Study 1: cross-national analysis

Study 1 uses cross-national survey data to conduct an individual-level analysis, where we estimate whether an individual survey respondent's left-right placement of a given party corresponds with that party's left-right position reflected in its campaign rhetoric. We focus here on the left-right scale only because of data limitations: the election surveys do not consistently ask respondents to locate parties on any other issue dimension. Nevertheless, prior work tends to agree that party competition in Europe still takes place mainly along a left-right dimension (Aldrich et al., 2010, 2018; Budge and Klingemann, 2001; Somer-Topcu, 2015).

Recall that information on the party rhetoric is collected from the period that precedes the fielding of the respective election survey. The unit of analysis is a respondent-party dyad (i.e., each survey respondent enters the dataset once for each party that they locate on the left-right scale). We describe the variables used in this analysis in turn.

3.1. Dependent variable: perceived party position

Our dependent variable (*Perceived party position*) is the respondent's perceived position of a party on the left-right dimension. In most surveys that we use, party positions were measured on an 11-point scale (where "0" is the most leftist and "10" the most rightist position). For those surveys that used a different scale, we rescaled the positions to the 0–10 scale.

3.2. Independent variable: media position

To measure our key independent variable, *Media position* of a party, we collected original data from the media coverage of election campaigns in ten European countries across 21 elections. The dataset is called the Comparative Campaign Dynamics Dataset and is publicly available at <http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/d7/en/datasets/comparative-campaign-dynamics-dataset>. Such original data collection was needed to get the most accurate measure of the theoretical concept of interest. Existing datasets, such as MARPOR provide only a distant proxy and are not appropriate for our purposes because, as we explain in the introduction, those data do not allow measuring those party messages that voters actually hear during and between elections. If there is no relationship between voter perceptions and MARPOR data, we wouldn't be able to say whether this is because voters do not listen to parties or because they simply aren't exposed to the manifesto messages. Our measure overcomes this challenge by measuring directly those messages that the voters are exposed to through the media.

In this paper, we focus on the following countries and elections: the Czech Republic (2010, 2013), Denmark (2007, 2011), Germany (2009, 2013), the Netherlands (2010, 2012), Poland (2007, 2011), Portugal (2009, 2011), Spain (2008, 2011), Sweden (2014), and the UK (2005, 2010, 2015), due to availability of the survey data. In each of these countries, we collected the data from the two highest circulation daily broadsheet newspapers during a month-long pre-election period.⁷ In selecting the newspapers, we chose one center-left and one center-right leaning newspaper to ensure that we cover the ideological spectrum in each country.⁸ The [Supplementary Material document \(SM\)](#) section 1 describes the data collection procedures in detail and lists the specific newspapers that we used. [Table SM.1.2](#) lists the countries and elections covered, as well as the number of newspaper articles coded, and the

⁷ In Portugal, the official campaign periods is only two weeks (rather than a month) before the election. We collected the campaign coverage for the official campaign period only.

⁸ Our newspaper selection criterion follows the procedure by 'Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union' (PIREDEU) (Banducci et al., 2015; Schuck et al., 2010).

number of parties' issue statements included in the dataset.

When coding the issue positions of parties, we mainly followed the issue labels used in the MARPOR dataset (Volkens et al., 2019) but also added some specific issues to the list that the MARPOR project leaves out or lumps together under broader categories (such as environmental protection, foreign intervention, pro/anti-immigration etc.). Table SM.2 lists the issues that we coded and how they match up with the MARPOR categories. Using this information, we can assess how much each party talked about each issue as part of their campaign (i.e., relative to all issue-related statements covered during the campaign period). This coding procedure directly follows that of the MARPOR (Volkens et al., 2019), which also codes the frequency of statements in a given policy area as a share of the overall issue coverage in each manifesto.⁹

Once we had the information on 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), we coded the left-right position of each party – once again, following the MARPOR's practice closely (Budge, 2013). Hence, we summed the shares for rightist statements and subtracted the summed shares of leftist statements to get the campaign left-right positions of parties.¹⁰ This resulted in a variable that ranges between -1 and $+1$, where negative values indicate a leftist position and positive values indicate a rightist position.¹¹ Table 1 summarizes the left-right media positions for each country. The purpose of this brief country-level descriptive information is to give readers a sense of the data, including the ideological range covered by the media data in different countries, and the size of the variance.

We also compared our measure of the left-right *Media position* with the MARPOR's left-right manifesto position. The overall correlation between the two measures is 0.6. SM.2 also presents a scatterplot showing the distribution of the MARPOR positions and the *Media positions* (Fig. SM.2.1). Given the different data sources and for theoretical reasons, perfect correspondence between the two measures is unlikely. Compared to manifestos, that cover a whole host of issues, media campaigns are focused on fewer, most important issues, and the message is delivered in a digested form and in a more easily understandable language. These differences in focus and style are likely to lead to differences in where the parties are located according to MARPOR vs. our data, but do not introduce ideological bias that relates to the method of coding.¹² Further, the previous literature has identified manifestos as documents that are only slowly changed and adapted to new issues (Walgrave and Nuytemans, 2009), whereas media messages can be adapted to new challenges without delay. The German 2002 federal election campaign offers a good example: in the last days of the election campaign, it was the floods in eastern Germany rather than party manifestos that shaped parties' campaign rhetoric. Furthermore, as we

⁹ Three research assistants coded each article. For each coded statement, they also indicated how confident they were about that coding. When finalizing the data, we only used 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 his/her coding and provided a unique code for the statement.

¹⁰ Table SM2 also shows which issues are categorized as left and right issues for the purposes of generating parties' left-right positions.

¹¹ In the analyses below we include only those parties who made at least two statements about their issue positions. We reason that at least two issue statements are necessary to establish an ideological position for the party. We replicated our results by setting this minimum number of required statements to 5 and 10. The results stay robust. Table SM.1.3 lists the parties included in the analyses.

¹² The likelihood of bias in either ideological direction is further reduced by the fact that we use both a leftist and a rightist newspaper to code the media data (see SM.1). In addition, our media position variable stays substantively and statistically significant when we control for the MARPOR left-right position in our models, while the MARPOR position also has a positive and statistically significant effect on voter perceptions.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics – the left-right scale based on the media data.

Country	Range (min/max)	Mean Position	Standard Deviation
Czech Republic	-0.19/0.15	0.02	0.12
Denmark	-0.63/0.64	0.02	0.29
Germany	-0.62/0.46	-0.03	0.27
The Netherlands	-0.28/0.30	0.06	0.15
Poland	-0.06/0.08	0.01	0.06
Portugal	-0.13/0.17	-0.02	0.10
Spain	-0.17/0.41	0.09	0.17
Sweden	-0.29/0.18	-0.12	0.15
United Kingdom	-0.17/0.28	0.03	0.17

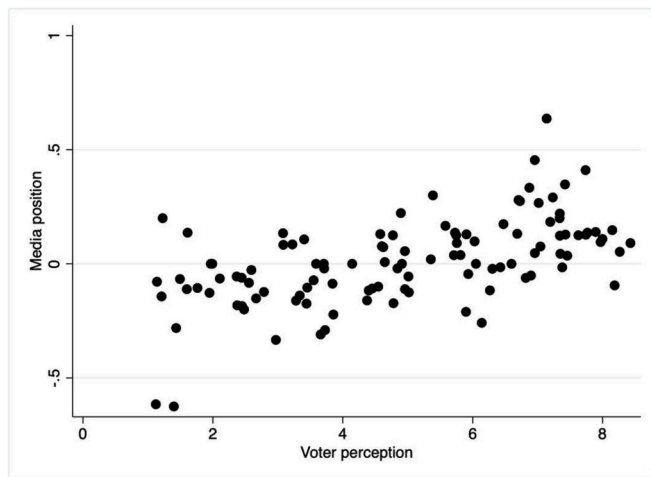
discuss in footnote 3, compared to the campaign rhetoric, manifestos are written with different goals in mind. The party manifesto is an opportunity for the party to appeal to its organization and activists, to nongovernmental organizations and think tanks, and to potential coalition partners. Campaigns, on the other hand, revolve around voters, with the goal of convincing people to turn out and vote for the party. The positions emphasized in the campaigns, rather than in the manifestos, become the talking points in the media and affect how voters perceive party positions and decide on their vote choice (Adams et al., 2011). However, we also note that our measure should not differ wildly from the MARPOR-based measure of party policy positions because the broad contours of these positions on the left-right scale should be similar. Somer-Topcu and Williams (2019) show that policy shifts between manifestos and campaigns are disliked and punished in the polls (especially changes in the party's socio-cultural position). The moderate level of correlation that we observe indicates that we are capturing the general left-right dimension well, but are not simply measuring manifesto positions with a different indicator.

3.3. Control variables

The models also include several control variables at different levels of analysis. At the individual-level, we control for *Political knowledge* (the percentage of the political information questions correctly answered by each individual) and *Party ID* (dummy variable coded "1" for the party that the respondent feels closest to and "0" otherwise).¹³ We use political knowledge as a proxy for the media attention variable. Naturally, one might expect that whether and how voters respond to party media rhetoric depends on how much media they consume. Unfortunately, our surveys do not include questions about media attention or even political interest, which might otherwise serve as a good proxy for media attention (see Strömbäck and Shehata, 2010). Instead, we rely on political knowledge to control for respondents' interest in and knowledge about politics. We include *Party ID* to control for any partisan biases in perceiving party positions.

At the election level, we control for *Effective number of parties*. When there are many parties, voters may be compelled to place each in a distinct position, which may lead them to perceive parties as farther apart than they actually are. We measure the effective number of parties using party vote shares from Volkens et al. (2019) and Döring and Manow (2016), and applying Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) formula. At the party level, we control for *Government status* with data from Döring and Manow (2016). This variable is coded "1" if the party was ever in government since the last election, and "0" otherwise. Given that most of our countries had a center-right government during the period of analysis, we expect the governing parties to be perceived more rightwing than the opposition parties. Finally, because party positions and

¹³ For the Dutch 2012 election survey, we had to rely on a question that asked voters to indicate their vote choice. The results stay robust if we exclude this survey from our data or if we drop the party identification variable from the models.



Note: Mean party positions as perceived by voters are plotted on the horizontal axis, while parties' left-right media positions are on the vertical axis.

Fig. 1. Voter perceptions and party media positions.

voter perceptions are not fully symmetric across countries, i.e., parties' and voters' mean positions may be shifted to either side of the left-right dimension, we include country fixed effects.

4. Study 1: results

Before we show the results for the models, we present a scatterplot of the relationship between party media positions and their perceived positions. Fig. 1 plots the average perceived party position in the x-axis and the media position in the y-axis. There is a clear positive relationship between the variables providing important face value to our results. With that, we move to the analyses of our models.

The data have a hierarchical structure with variables being measured at different levels. In total, there are four levels in the data: country level, election level, party (in the election) level, and finally the respondent level. Each of these levels may impose measured and unmeasured effects on the dependent variable. We included several control variables from some of these levels into the models as described above. In order to control for any unmeasured party-level and election-specific factors we run a multi-level model that accounts for these effects by incorporating a random intercept for the party-election-year; and we account for the unmeasured country effects by including country fixed effects as described above.¹⁴

To recap, our dependent variable, respondent's *Perceived party position*, is measured on a 0–10 left-right scale, and our main independent variable, *Media position*, is measured on a –1 to +1 scale. A positive and statistically significant coefficient for the *Media position* variable would show that voter perceptions correspond with parties' media positions.

Column 1 in Table 2 presents the results, and clearly shows that party rhetoric in the media matters for voter perceptions. The positive coefficient for the *Media position* variable indicates that the more left-wing (right-wing) the party's position, the more left-wing (right-wing) the voter perception of that position. Substantively, when a party's left-right position shifts one point on the –1 to +1 scale, perceived position of that party changes by about 6.5 points, on average, on the 0–10 scale. For a more meaningful comparison, one can look at the difference in voter perceptions produced by a party position that is one standard deviation above vs. below the mean. The former corresponds to a party position of

¹⁴ We replicated our models by including random intercepts for the campaign level and the results stayed robust.

Table 2

The effect of party positions in the media on voter perceptions, cross-national analyses.

	Model 1 Testing the Hypothesis	Model 2 Robustness 1: Log ratio position	Model 3: Robustness 2: No controls
Media position	6.523* (0.827)	1.021* (0.114)	6.337* (0.883)
Government status	1.226* (0.328)	1.074* (0.314)	
Political knowledge	0.198* (0.018)	0.198* (0.018)	
Party ID	0.140* (0.016)	0.140* (0.016)	
Effective number of parties	0.156 (0.474)	0.307 (0.451)	
Constant	4.381 (2.602)	3.975 (2.474)	4.869* (0.166)
Random effect: party-election- year	2.368* (0.321)	2.140* (0.290)	2.975* (0.403)
Random effect: residual	3.854* (0.014)	3.853* (0.014)	3.859* (0.014)
Log likelihood	–330718.17	–330712.66	–330833.76
N	157,805	157,805	157,805

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Models 1 and 2 also include country fixed effects. *p < 0.05, two tailed.

0.21 on the –1 to +1 scale (a center-right position) and the latter to –0.19 (a center-left position). In terms of difference in perceptions, voters on average would perceive a party, which was at –0.19 but now at 0.21 on the –1 to +1 scale, as about 2.6 points more to the right on the 0–10 left-right scale. This is a sizeable effect. It suggests that party rhetoric significantly and substantively influences voter perceptions—a finding that contributes to a contentious literature on whether voters pay attention to party messages.¹⁵

Briefly, the results for the control variables suggest that more politically knowledgeable respondents and party supporters perceive parties' positions to be more rightist than other voters. However, the substantive effects of these control variables are quite small. Governing parties are also seen more right-wing than opposition parties, on average. This is expected given that, for the period under analysis, several countries in our data had a center-right government in power.

We tested the robustness of these results in Columns 2 and 3. First, we acknowledge that the MARPOR left-right scale has been criticized for assuming a linear influence for additional units (i.e., quasi-sentences in MARPOR or statements in our data) and for yielding estimates that are biased towards the center (Lowe et al., 2011). For this reason, in Model 2 we replicated our models by employing the alternative “logged odds-ratio scale” proposed by Lowe et al. (2011). We also replicated our results by dropping the control variables as well as the country fixed effects in Model 3. Overall, our results stayed robust across these

¹⁵ One might be concerned about reverse causation in that parties may engage in “message testing” when getting ready for their election campaigns. However, the purpose of message testing is not to figure out what voters think the party's message is; rather, the goal is to figure out whether voters find the party's message appealing. This is not what we study. Instead, we are interested in understanding what explains voter perceptions of where parties are located. For these perceptions to affect party position-taking, there needs to be an electoral incentive for parties to follow these perceptions. It is not clear that such incentive exists or that adopting an ideological position that corresponds with voter perceptions of where the party is located should give that party an electoral advantage. Empirically, the temporal order of our measures also follows our proposed causal order, i.e., we measure parties' campaign positions prior to measuring voter perceptions of party positions, and Study 2 remedies for the causal direction by using panel data.

different specifications, which suggests that they are not driven by methodological decisions or control variables.¹⁶

5. Study 2: panel survey

Study 2 relied on a panel study conducted as part of the BES, with several waves fielded between early 2014 and mid-2017 (Fieldhouse et al., 2017). We use the following five waves that correspond with our data on media coverage of party messages: the first, second, fourth, sixth, and seventh. Table 3 shows the exact dates of the surveys for each of these waves, and the number of respondents in each wave.

As was the case in Study 1, information on parties' rhetoric was collected from one-month period prior to fielding of each of the survey waves. The survey waves cover the following key events: wave 1 was fielded prior to the European Parliamentary election while wave 2 was fielded right after; wave 4 was conducted a couple of months after the announcement of the Brexit referendum; wave 6 was conducted after the 2015 national election; and wave 7 was before the Brexit referendum. These five waves, thus, provide us with an ideal time period to test voter understanding of party because the waves cover key events related to British domestic politics.¹⁷

5.1. Dependent variables: Perceived party position

The BES asked respondents to locate the parties on the (1) left-right scale (except in the first wave), (2) income redistribution scale, and (3) European integration scale. With these perception questions, we generate three different dependent variables: *Perceived left-right position*, *Perceived redistribution position*, and *Perceived EU position*. The latter two issues are central to party competition in the UK during our observation period: The redistribution issue relates to the left-right cleavage, which is stable and a source of similarity across European democracies (Car-amani, 2015). The EU issue, in contrast, represents the divide between those who benefit from globalization and those who feel threatened by globalization and immigration (Kriesi et al., 2006, 2012), which arguably has become an integral element of political competition in several European democracies, especially in Britain.¹⁸

The left-right perceptions question was asked in all of our waves, except the first one, and reads as follows: "In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place the following parties on this scale?" The scale runs from 0 ("left") to 10 ("right"). The income redistribution question reads as follows: "Some people feel that government should make much greater efforts to make people's incomes more equal. Other people feel that government should be much less concerned about how equal people's incomes are. Where would you locate the political parties on this scale?" The scale runs from 0 ("government should try to make incomes equal"), to 10 ("government should be less concerned about equal incomes"). The European integration question asks the respondents to locate political parties on a different

¹⁶ We also tested for the moderating effects of three of our control variables: government status, political knowledge, and partisanship. One may argue that opposition campaigns are more effective on voter perceptions than those of governing parties given that the latter have a record of behavior in office that can also affect voter evaluations. In addition, one may argue that party supporters and highly educated respondents are more likely to follow (their) parties' messages. We report these results in the SM.3. First, our main results stay robust when we add these interactions. Second, only government status and political knowledge have a moderating effect on the relationship between campaign positions and voter perceptions, and they are in the direction we expected. Further unpacking of these conditional relationships would be interesting but is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁷ We focus only on these five waves because the European integration positions question was only asked in these waves.

¹⁸ In addition, the BES respondents consistently ranked European Union and income redistribution as highly salient issues during the period of our study.

Table 3

British election study waves, survey dates, and number of respondents.

BES Wave	Survey Dates	Number of Respondents
Wave 1	February 20- March 9, 2014	30,590
Wave 2	May 22- June 25, 2014	30,219 (26,870 from wave 1)
Wave 4	March 4-March 30, 2015	31,328 (18,958 took all waves)
Wave 6	May 8- May 26, 2015	30,027 (16,799 took all waves)
Wave 7	April 14-May 4, 2016	30,895 (13,309 took all waves)

0–10 scale, where 0 means "unite fully with the European Union," and 10 means "protect our independence." The question reads as follows: "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?"

5.2. Independent variable: Media position

To locate political parties on the left-right, income redistribution and European integration scales, we rely on the newspaper data that we collected, following the methodology described above, for the one-month period before each of the five waves of the BES survey. The parties covered in the media data include the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, the Scottish Nationalist Party, and the UK Independence Party.

To code the party positions on the left-right scale, we followed the same procedure as described above in Study 1. Hence, a score of -1 ($+1$) would mean that all media coverage of that party's issue positions in that one-month period was about left (right) issues, where the issues are once again identified as left or right following the coding decisions presented on Table SM.2. For the redistribution positions, we used the tax and welfare policy positions of parties.¹⁹ To determine the party positions on the redistribution issue, we summed the shares for increase-taxes and increase-welfare spending issues (i.e., pro-income redistribution positions) and subtracted this sum of shares from the sum of decrease-taxes and decrease-welfare spending issue shares (i.e., anti-income redistribution position). The resulting position matches with the scale that voters used to locate parties for the redistribution issue, where the party position could potentially range between -1 and $+1$. Negative values indicate a more pro-redistribution position and positive values indicate an anti-redistribution position. In a similar vein, the European integration position of parties is calculated by subtracting the shares of pro-EU discussions of parties from the shares of anti-EU discussions as depicted in the media. Similar to the redistribution position, the variable could potentially range between -1 and $+1$, where negative values are more pro-EU and the positive values are more anti-EU.

5.3. Control variables

As was the case in Study 1, we control for respondent's partisanship at the respondent level. Political knowledge questions were not asked consistently across all waves, which is why we use political attention instead.²⁰ The question reads as follows: "How much attention do you

¹⁹ The welfare policy positions of parties are determined based on the parties' positions on various welfare issues such as health care, education, unemployment assistance, housing, social security, public transportations, pensioners, childcare, etc.

²⁰ Given that our study uses the media position of parties as the independent variable, ideally, we would like to control for media consumption in our models. However, BES does not ask the media consumption question in the first two of our five waves. Instead, we use political attention as a proxy for respondents' media attention. As we noted before, Strömback and Shehata (2010) show there is a strong correlation between media attention and political interest.

generally pay to politics?" and the respondent can pick a value on a 0–10 scale, where higher numbers mean higher attention.²¹

As we describe below, following the advice in Angrist and Pischke (2009), we test our hypotheses in two different ways: (1) using fixed effects for respondent-party dyads (i.e., estimating the within-respondent model) and (2) including a lagged dependent variable. The fixed effects model does not allow including time invariant variables, and hence we only control for partisanship and political attention at the individual level in that model. The lagged dependent variable (LDV) model, on the other hand, includes all respondent-level control variables. Finally, because there might be unobserved wave specific effects, we include wave fixed effects into the models.

6. Study 2: results

The data in Study 2 have a panel structure with same respondent placing the same parties on the left-right, income redistribution and European integration scales at different survey waves. The strength of these data is that they allow us to observe whether a respondent changes his or her perceptions in response to receiving new information about party positions prior to each wave. This requires us to run a respondent fixed effects model, which amounts to estimating the effect of party rhetoric on each respondent's perception over time (i.e., the within-respondent effect), while holding the respondent-level time-invariant factors constant. In addition, because each respondent enters the data as many times as there are parties (i.e. because the data are stacked), we also need to have party fixed effects. Therefore, we run the models using respondent-party fixed effects model.²² We also replicate our results using a lagged dependent variable model. As recommended by Angrist and Pischke (2009), when some important omitted variables vary over time, an LDV model might be more appropriate (243).²³ In our case, each respondent may have unobserved individual-level factors that vary over time (e.g., what they hear or who they talk to may vary over time), which justifies estimating an LDV model.²⁴

To recap, like in Study 1, our main independent variable is party rhetoric measured on a –1 to +1 scale for left-right, income redistribution and EU integration positions. Our dependent variables, voter perceptions of party positions, are measured on a 0–10 scale. We expect a positive and statistically significant coefficient on our party rhetoric variable.

Fig. 2 compares the average perceived positions with the parties' media positions. On all three issues, there are clear positive relationships on the aggregate level. Turning to individual level analysis, Columns 1 and 2 in Table 4 test the effects of left-right rhetoric on voters' left-right perceptions, and Columns 3–4 and 5–6 test the effects for the income redistribution and European integration issues, respectively. The first model for each scale is the individual-party-level fixed effects model,

²¹ While Study 1 had the government dummy variable as a control variable in the models, given the lack of variation in the government variable in the UK case we exclude the variable from the Study 2 models.

²² There is an extensive methodological debate in the literature on the most appropriate method to analyze panel data. One issue of concern is whether to use fixed effects or random effects. The Hausmann test suggests that we should use fixed effects to test our hypothesis.

²³ Our panel data have a multilevel structure where the media position variable (our main independent variable) is at the party level, while the perceptions variable (our dependent variable) is at the individual-level. In Study 1, we used a multilevel model to address this hierarchical data structure. However, the within-respondent-party fixed effects model does not allow a multilevel analysis. Because the fixed effects model resolves the causal identification problem, we have decided to use the fixed effects model instead of the multilevel model.

²⁴ Yet another way to model panel data is to use a first-differences model (Angrist and Pischke, 2009). However, this model is more appropriate for independent variables that have significant variation over time. In our case, the British party rhetoric between 2014 and 2016 was quite stable.

and the second is the LDV model. Across all models, the coefficient for the party rhetoric (*media position*) is always statistically significant and positive.²⁵

Substantively, the coefficients from Columns 1, 3, and 5 in Table 4 indicate that, voters, on average, perceive political parties in Britain more rightwing, more anti-redistribution, and more anti-EU if the parties' positions if the parties are more right-wing, anti-redistribution, and anti-EU in their campaigns. The effects are comparable to the findings in Study 1, and even more impressive given that with the respondent, party, and survey wave fixed effects in the model we use all the variations for these levels present in the data. Taken together, the results of Study 2 provide strong evidence that party campaign rhetoric affects voter perceptions, and this effect prevails for the more abstract left-right scale, as well as for specific issue scales. In addition, the coefficients for all control variables are substantively small, especially compared to the effect of the campaign rhetoric variable. This underscores the substantive importance of our main results.²⁶

We replicated the models in Table 4 by replacing the campaign rhetoric variable with the log-odds ratio version, similar to our practice in Study 1 (Table SM.4.1). We also rerun these models by dropping one party at a time (Tables SM.4.2, SM.4.3, and SM.4.4). One may argue that, given the strong anti-European Union position of UKIP, and the pro-income redistribution position of the Labour Party, the results might be driven by these specific parties. The results stay robust in these models when we drop one party at a time.

As an additional sensitivity analysis, we calculated cluster bootstrapped confidence intervals for our models (SM.6). The models in Table 4 use cluster robust standard errors to account for the clustering on the respondent-party level. In fixed effects models, this is a common procedure to corrects the standard errors for residual cluster dependency (Bertrand et al., 2004). However, since the cluster-robust standard errors may lead to too narrow confidence intervals, in Table SM.6 we provide cluster confidence intervals derived with the wild cluster bootstrap procedure. Our results stay robust.

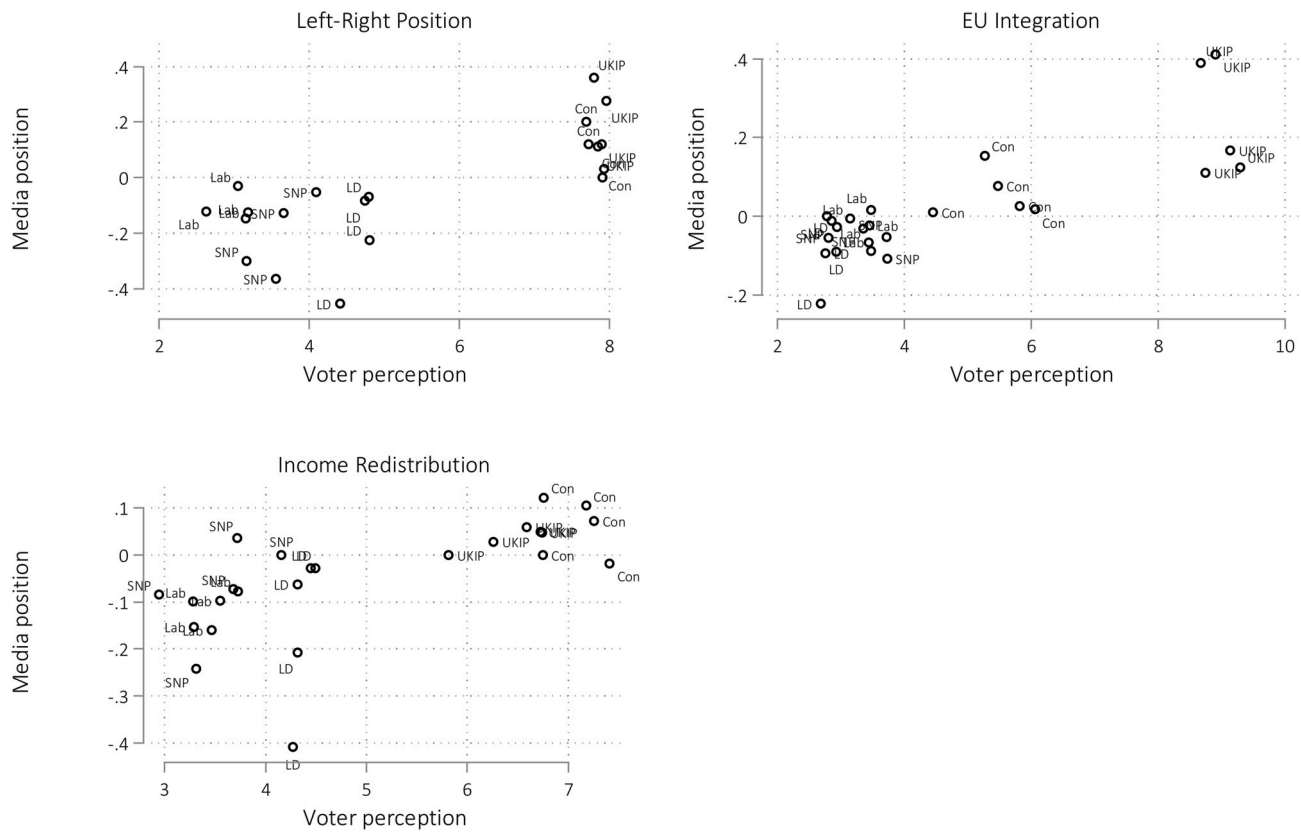
7. Conclusion

Can parties' media rhetoric affect how well voters understand their positions? We started our paper with this question and showed with new and unique data that the left-right positions of parties as portrayed in the media affect voter perceptions of those positions. We found further support for this conclusion with panel data from the U.K. and on two specific issues – income redistribution and European integration.

These findings contribute to the growing literature on voter perceptions of party positions. Prior work has produced conflicting findings as to whether party manifestos (Adams et al., 2011; Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014; Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2019) or party actions (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013; Fortunato and Adams, 2015) affect voter perceptions. We show that party messages do enhance voter understanding of party policy positions. This paints an optimistic picture of voter capacity to understand and internalize party rhetoric. Voter

²⁵ For the fixed effects models (models 1,3, and 5) we cluster standard errors based on a respondent-party grouping. For the lagged DV models (models 2, 4, and 6) we cluster standard errors based on respondents. To avoid the possibility that the clustering of standard errors has lead to too small standard errors, we also provide wild cluster bootstrapped confidence intervals (Cameron et al., 2008; Esarey and Menger, 2019) in Table SM.6 of the online appendix.

²⁶ We also tested the conditional effects of political attention in SM. Political attention appears to be consistently moderating the relationship between parties' media positions and respondents' perceptions, similar to the political knowledge variable's conditioning effect in Study 1. The positive and statistically significant interaction effects across issue areas suggest that as political attention increases, respondents are more likely to listen to what parties are saying. These models are presented in SM.5. Once again, exploring the details of these knowledge effects is interesting but beyond the scope of the current paper.



Note: Mean party positions as perceived by voters in the BES waves 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7 are plotted on the horizontal axes, issue specific media positions are plotted on the vertical axis. Each dot shows the party position for each of the waves.

Fig. 2. UK voter perceptions and party media positions on three issues.

Table 4

The effect of campaign positions on voter perceptions of party issue positions, British panel data analyses.

	Model 1 Left-Right Fixed Effects	Model 2 Left-Right Lagged DV	Model 3 Inc. Redist. Fixed Effects	Model 4 Inc. Redist. Lagged DV	Model 5: EU Int. Fixed Effects	Model 6: EU Int. Lagged DV
Media position	3.541* (0.052)	3.060* (0.031)	2.489* (0.049)	5.738* (0.048)	5.345* (0.081)	6.477* (0.067)
Party ID	-0.859* (0.024)	-0.168* (0.009)	-0.712* (0.021)	-0.431* (0.012)	-0.081* (0.028)	0.125* (0.013)
Political Attention	0.020* (0.004)	0.020* (0.002)	0.018* (0.005)	0.054* (0.004)	0.003 (0.007)	0.009* (0.004)
Lagged perception		0.703* (0.003)		0.493* (0.003)		0.549* (0.004)
Constant	5.437* (0.034)	1.699* (0.024)	5.138* (0.042)	2.612* (0.037)	5.070* (0.051)	1.571* (0.037)
R ² -within	0.073		0.020		0.065	
R ² -between	0.285		0.142		0.448	
R ² -overall	0.248	0.661	0.104	0.381	0.346	0.576
N	380,407	224,257	427,533	256,991	282,004	149,530

Note: Table entries are unstandardized coefficients with cluster robust standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is voter perception of party positions. Model 1, 3, and 5 include respondent-party fixed effects. All models also include survey wave fixed effects. The number of cases varies from model to model because left-right question was not asked in the first wave of the dataset, and the European integration question was asked to a randomly selected group of respondents in each wave. *p < 0.05, two tailed.

perceptions of party positions are not random and unpredictable, but correspond reasonably well with the information that parties themselves disseminate about those positions.

The results of this study also open new avenues of research. First, our results can be extended further by theorizing how the relationship between media positions and voter perceptions differs across different

types of democracies (e.g., majoritarian vs. consensus (Lijphart, 2012)). This would require extending the country coverage of both the media and perceptions data. Second, while focusing on parties' messages constitutes a significant advancement in the study of how parties communicate with voters, our current analysis misses the interactive nature of party messages. In future work, we plan to explore how parties

frame and distort their competitors' messages, and how such behavior affects voter perceptions. Do such distortions matter for how well voters understand party positions, or are a focal party's own messages more persuasive than distorted messages by its rivals? Does it matter who distorts? For instance, one may argue that the distortion by the main ideological opponent is most effective in misleading voters about the focal party's position. Alternatively, it is possible that the rhetoric of the ideological neighbors (i.e., those rivals that are spatially close to the focal party) have more influence on voter perceptions.

Third, this study looks at media coverage of parties' policy messages. It would also be interesting to consider whether and how parties' valence-related rhetoric affects voter perceptions. The Comparative Campaign Dynamics Dataset also records information on parties' valence statements, which opens the door for exploring various important questions, including whether emphasis on valence is more likely to lead to voter misperception of party positions, and how voters react to valence attacks by rival parties.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102153>.

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