Article

Party Politics

Agree or disagree: How do party leader changes affect the distribution of voters' perceptions

Party Politics
2017, Vol. 23(1) 66–75

DOI: 10.1177/1354068816655568
journals.sagepub.com/home/ppq
SAGE

Zeynep Somer-Topcu
The University of Texas at Austin, USA

Abstract
Political party leaders are among the most influential actors in parliamentary democracies, and a change in party leadership is an important event for a party organization. Yet, we do not know how these leadership changes affect voter perceptions about party policy positions. On the one hand, we may expect party leadership changes to renew attention to the party, educate voters about its policy positions, and hence reduce disagreement among voters about party positions. On the other hand, rival parties may use a leadership change as an opportunity to defame the party, its leadership, and policies, and hence, increase voter confusion about the party's policies. Using data from seven Western European democracies, I show that leadership changes help parties reduce voter disagreement about party policy positions. This effect is stronger if the new leader shifts the party's policy positions.

Keywords
party leaders, party organization, party policy, voter perceptions

Introduction

When Franz Müntefering became the leader of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 2008, following Kurt Beck's resignation, he had only 11 months before the 2009 election to revitalize and reunite a party desperately in need of stability after four leadership changes in 4 years. Angela Merkel, the leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), on the other hand, had enjoyed a secure position in the party for the past 8 years, and as the chancellor for 4 years in the grand coalition of CDU and SPD. Nevertheless, despite the SPD's intraparty volatility and the CDU's organizational stability, voters disagreed more about the CDU's policy position in 2009. When asked about parties' left-right positions in the post-election surveys following the 2009 election, voters had a higher shared understanding of SPD's position than of the CDU's, despite SPD's new leader. What explains this difference? Can a new leader help the party reduce voter disagreement about its policy positions?[1]

On the one hand, as the German example suggests, a new leader may in fact reduce voter disagreement. After all, party leadership changes are rejuvenating events for political parties. Media attention to the party often peaks around a leadership change, which facilitates information gathering for voters. As voters hear the party's message and receive it cheaply and frequently, they are more likely to have shared perceptions about the party's position. Therefore, party leadership changes may result in higher levels of agreement about party policy positions.

At the same time, a new leader opens new avenues for rival parties to criticize the party. A leadership change allows rival parties to defame the party and its policies in the body of the new leader. As the rival parties attach new and different interpretation to the party's policies and goals through attacks, voters get conflicting signals about party proposals. In this environment, we may expect the distribution of voter perceptions about party positions to be high, that is, agreement among voters about party policies to be low, following a leadership change.

Using data from seven Western European democracies between 1980 and 2011, I show that new leaders on average

Paper submitted 1 February 2016; accepted for publication 12 May 2016

Corresponding author:
Zeynep Somer-Topcu, Department of Government, University of Texas at Austin, 158 W 21st ST, STOP A1800, Austin, Texas, TX 78712, USA.
Email: zsomer@utexas.edu

decrease voter disagreement.[2] In the second section of the article, I also show that this effect is particularly strong if the new leader changes the party's left-right position. Not all leaders impact party organization and policies in the same way. While some new leaders transform the party organization and party policy offerings in a short time span, other leaders take a long time to stabilize their rule within the party or may prefer to continue with the existing policy offerings. I argue that those leadership transitions that result in significant party policy shifts further increase media and voter attention to the party and hence result in more agreement about party policy positions among voters. The findings support this expectation.

Understanding what affects voters' perceptions, and particularly voters' agreement about party policy positions, is important for normative reasons. An important underpinning of representative democracy is that voters accurately perceive parties' policy positions and respond to these positions by casting votes for parties that most closely represent their interests (see the Responsible Party Model, APSA, 1950). As a result, high disagreement about party policy positions among voters is not normatively desirable. When there is high disagreement about a party's position, important tenants of mandate democracy may fail (Dahlberg, 2009; Downs, 1957). Parties may wrongly assume that they have the mandate to rule in a particular direction while voters have a diverse understanding of what that direction is.

Beyond these normative reasons, I also note that understanding what shapes voters' agreement about party positions has potentially important implications for a broader literature on voter behavior. There is a growing literature, for instance, that examines when voters use party policy positions versus valence in their voting decisions (Green and Hobolt, 2008, Clark and Leiter, 2014). One question that the existing literature does not address, on the other hand, is how voter agreement about party positions affects ideological voting. Addressing this question is beyond the scope of this research. However, if perceptions matter for voter behavior, then it is important to understand what affects voters' perceptions, and how parties can shape voters' perceptions. This article provides an answer to these latter questions with a focus on how leadership changes affect perceptions.

In addition, the results I present below for the relationship between leadership changes and voter perceptions suggest that parties can indeed influence voter perceptions of their policy positions. There is only a limited literature examining whether parties can influence these perceptions. Adams et al. (2011, 2014) show, for instance, that citizens do not respond to parties' election manifestos (but see Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014). Fortunato and Stevenson (2013) argue that parties' behavior, rather than their manifesto promises, should influence voters' party positions (see also Aldrich et al., 2011; van der Brug, 1999). Building on this literature, I show that leadership changes affect voter perceptions and result in increased agreement about party policy positions (see also Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, *typescript*).

My findings also show the salience of party leaders for politics in advanced democracies. The increasing prevalence of party leaders for electoral campaigns, party image building, and election success in Western Europe has been documented (see, e.g. Bittner, 2012; Farrell and Webb, 2000; So, 2013). By showing that leaders matter for voters' party perceptions, this article also contributes to this growing literature.

Voter perceptions in response to party leader changes

Voters' perceptions about a party's ideological position are likely to differ across citizens. It would be unreasonable to expect all voters to be able to locate a party at the exact same ideological position. However, the extent of perceptual disagreement among voters varies from party to party and over time.[3] Understanding how leadership changes affect perceptual disagreement among voters is the focus of this article. This is an interesting question because there are reasons to expect that leadership changes may increase or decrease perceptual disagreement about party positions, leading us in conflicting directions.

The extant literature suggests that obtaining information is costly and voters face significant information constraints when making decisions (see, e.g. Ferejohn and Kuklinski, 1990; Popkin, 1991; Zaller, 1992). In this environment, it would be too demanding to expect voters to read every newspaper article, watch every show on politics, and constantly discuss politics with their acquaintances. The volume of information, therefore, is important, and can help reduce the costs of gathering information. As Zaller (1992) argues, as the volume of the message increases, more people are likely to receive it. When more people hear about the party and its policies, either via increased media coverage or in their homes and friendship/family circles, they are more likely to develop a perception about party policies.

Some argue that volume of information by itself is enough to reduce voter uncertainty and disagreement among voters about party positions. Gelman and King (1993) argue, for instance, that campaigns reduce voter uncertainty about candidate positions (see also Barabas and Jerit, 2009; de Vreese et al., 2006; Franklin, 1991; Stevens and Banducci, 2013). Yet, I argue that whether increasing volume of message leads to a higher agreement among voters about party policy positions depends on the content of information.

On the one hand, parties that changed their leaders get many opportunities to make their messages directly available to voters. As people get the direct message from the party in high volumes, it is likely that they will have higher agreement about the party's position. At the same time,

parties with new leaders are also more likely to find themselves at the cutting board. Other parties may use the leadership change to defame the party's intentions and policies. The volume of the message about the party may be high but the content of the message may be muddled by other parties' attacks, leading to higher disagreement among voters about the party's position. Below I explain these two conflicting expectations about how leadership changes may affect voters' perceptions.

In brand management terms, one central aspect of a party's brand image is its leader (Lock and Harris, 1996). Party leadership change, then, is an example of party rebranding and re-management energy is invested in organizational renewal (Bynander and Hart, 2006; Stimson, 2004). With a new leader and the dynamism she brings to the party, the spotlight understandably shines on the party and its policies: a new leader attracts media attention (Gomibuchi, 2001); she is more likely to appear on TV channels to give interviews, to speak about the goals of a party, and to contrast her leadership style with her predecessor's. Increased media coverage of the party and of its new leader, in turn, facilitates voters' exposure to the party and its policies.[4] As more people hear about the party and are interested in the new leader, conversations about the new leader and the party increase, and people learn more about the new leader and the party via media, directly from the party, or indirectly via their friends and family. Therefore, more abundant information about the party following a leadership change may help voters develop a shared perception of the party's policy positions.

Yet, as I stated above, leadership changes also give new opportunities to other parties to criticize their rival. They may criticize the party for not being stable enough to keep its previous leadership or for the policies the new leadership offers, or attack the leader's character or fit to rule the party and the country. When Jeremy Corbyn became the leader of the Labour Party in September 2015, for instance, David Cameron (the leader of the Conservative Party and the prime minister), immediately stated how Corbyn was unfit to rule the country. Conservatives were quick to blame the Labour Party for becoming too leftist and losing touch with the majority of the voters (Hughes, 2015). Similarly, when Wouter Bos resigned after the Dutch Social Democrats (PvdA)'s poor electoral performance in 2010 to be replaced by the incumbent Amsterdam mayor, Job Cohen, Geert Wilders (the leader of the right-wing populist -PVV) was quick to announce that "The PvdA is going back to the 1990s by bringing back tea-drinking multiculti-cuddler Cohen" (DutchNews.nl, 2010).[5]

It is more likely that rival parties frame the focal party's positions differently than the focal party's new leader frames them herself, and aim to attack and defame the party's new leader and its policy positions (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). These criticisms and the intentional attack on the new leader and his/her policies muddles the message the new party leader attempts to convey to the voters. Hence, while the volume of information about the party policy may be high following a leadership change, the message might become unclear, increasing voters' disagreement about the party's position.

These contradicting expectations about the effects of new party leadership on voter disagreement are also consistent with the extant learning and persuasion literature. According to this literature, voters rely on information shortcuts in order to form opinions about politics, such as opinion leaders, rival parties, campaigns, and so on, especially when they have incomplete information (see, e.g. Berelson et al., 1954; Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013; Popkin, 1991). Learning happens when voters are persuaded by the information they gather from these shortcuts. As Lupia and McCubbins (1998) show, however, persuasion may lead to enlightenment or deception, depending on the source of information. The attention paid to the new leader not only allows the party with the new leader to advertise its position but also gives an opportunity to rival parties to use the media and voter attention to attack and defame the party, its new leader, and its policies.

To sum up the argument so far, both the volume and the source of the information about party positions affect voters' perceptions. While leadership changes help parties to advertise their positions, the message may become confusing for voters if rival parties attack and differently frame the party's message. Whether, on average, leadership changes increase of decreased perceptual disagreement about the party's position following a leadership change is the first question I explore in this article. If we find that voters develop more shared agreement about party positions with a new leader, then we can conclude that leader changes help parties influence voters' perceptions and that other parties' attempts to frame and defame the party's message are rather futile.

Testing the effects of party leadership changes on voter perceptions

Testing these conflicting expectations about the effect of leadership changes on voter perceptions requires cross-nationally comparable measurements of voter perceptions of party positions and data on party leadership changes. To measure the dependent variable of voters' *disagreement* (i.e. the dispersion of voters' subjective perceptions of parties' left-right positions), I collected the national election surveys from Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden, in which voters are asked to locate political parties on a left-right scale. I focus on these countries because of the limited availability of survey data in other countries that ask respondents to locate parties on the left-right scale and because party organizations and the saliency of party leaders show many

similarities across these countries, making comparative cross-national research with these countries possible.

The dependent variable to test the hypothesis is change in disagreement scores. The question I used to measure the disagreements among voters about party positions asks respondents to locate each political party in their country on a left-right scale. The obvious way to calculate the distribution of voter perceptions would be to use the standard deviations of these perceptions. However, van der Eijk (2001) shows that standard deviations can be biased for limited ordinal rating scales. Using the distribution of respondents' placement of parties (the frequencies for each category) on the left-right scale, he develops a measure of perceptual agreement, which provides a comparable scale across countries and elections.[6] I use van der Eijk's measure and rescale it to a range between 0 and 1, where higher numbers suggest higher disagreement among voters. In my scale of *perceptual disagreement*, 0 refers to a scenario where all voters locate the party at the exact same position on the left-right scale (i.e. full agreement), while 1 refers to the scenario where equal number of voters locate the party at every possible position on the left-right scale (i.e. full disagreement). The disagreement scores in my data set range from 0.19 (for the Norwegian Left Party in 1985) to 0.59 (for the German CDU Party in 1998), with a mean of 0.38 and a standard deviation of 0.07.[7]

For theoretical and technical reasons I focus on the left-right scale. This ideological dimension still dominates politics in Western Europe, and many political commentators, scholars, and parties still use the left-right dimension to describe policy positions in Europe (Budge et al., 2001; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1989; Hinich and Munger, 1997). It is still an important heuristic device voters use to make sense of political world (van der Brug et al., 2005; van der Eijk et al., 1999). Beyond this theoretical importance of the left-right scale, I am limited to the left-right positions because the surveys I use to test the models do not consistently ask voters to locate parties on other issue scales.[8]

The main independent variable is *party leader change*. I collected information on leadership changes in seven Western European countries using Keesing's World Archives, secondary literature, and online newspaper archives. The maximum number of elections that were run with a new leader in the data is six. Dutch Liberal Party (VVD) and German Social Democrats (SPD) each entered six out of eight elections in the data set with a new leader.

To evaluate how leadership changes affect voter perceptions, I use a dummy variable for leadership change on the right-hand side with the dependent variable of change in voters' disagreement about the focal party's position. If the coefficient of the leadership change variable is negative (positive), this would indicate that party leadership change reduces (increases) voter disagreement.

I also include four control variables to the model: niche party status, party vote share in the previous election, changes in party vote share between elections $t - 1$ and t, and lagged disagreement score. Aldrich et al. (2009) show that voters' perceptions of political parties on the left-right scale are less accurate for niche parties (i.e. for parties that do not compete using left-right issues). Similarly, we can argue that voters' disagreement about party left-right positions should be higher for single-issue/niche parties as voters would have harder time estimating these parties' left-right positions. I coded ultra-right and ethnic parties as niche parties (*niche*).[9]

One may also argue that party vote share/party size and election performance may matter for disagreement. Because larger parties are more visible, voters may be exposed more to their policy positions and have less disagreement about their positions. I coded the *vote share* variable as the percentage of votes a party received in election at time $t - 1$, and the *vote change* variable as the change in the percentage vote shares between elections $t - 1$ and t.[10] Finally, I have the previous level of disagreement in the model ($disagreement_{t-1}$) to control for the possibility that the change in disagreement scores might be lower for parties with high disagreement scores.[11]

In addition to these variables, one may argue that there are country-level factors that may affect voter perceptions. Because of country-specific factors, such as the salience and clarity of the left-right scale in a country, voters in some countries may have less disagreement about party positions compared to other countries. In order not to reduce the degrees of freedom further I did not include country fixed effects to the results reported below. Nevertheless, I replicated the models including country fixed effects and tested whether any one of the countries drives the results by jackknifing by country. These results are reported in the supplementary document and show that the substantive and statistical results stay robust with these alternative specifications.

The analyses encompass 177 shifts in perceptual disagreement scores in 41 elections across 33 parties in seven European countries. The complete set of countries and elections included in the analyses are reported in the supplementary document.[12] These data should be regarded as time-series cross-sectional data. The Lagrange multiplier test fails to reject the null hypothesis of no serial correlation. As a result, I do not include the lagged dependent variable.[13] To control for contemporaneous correlation between elections I estimated the model using election clusters.

Table 1 shows how leadership changes affect voter perceptions. The coefficient (-0.012) implies that, *ceteris paribus*, if a party changes its leader between the last election and the current election, voters' disagreement *decreases* on average by about 0.012. While this looks like a substantively small effect and is statistically significant only at the 0.1 level, I note that average change in disagreement is 0.04 in the data and that disagreement scores range

Table 1. The effect of leadership changes on voters' disagreement.

	Effect of leadership change on disagreement
Leader change	−0.012*
	(0.006)
Absolute policy shift	0.034*
	(0.019)
Niche	−0.007
	(0.020)
Vote share ($t-1$)	0.001**
	(0.0003)
Vote change (t)	0.001*
	(0.001)
Disagreement ($t-1$)	−0.344**
	(0.069)
Constant	0.109**
	(0.027)
N	177
Adjusted R^2	0.30

Note: The dependent variable is the change in disagreement about party positions among voters. The model is run using OLS regression with election clusters. OLS: Ordinary least squares.
*$p < 0.10$; **$p < 0.05$.

from 0.19 to 0.59. In addition, the size of the coefficient is consistent with the story I laid out above. A new leader attracts voters' attention and helps parties to deliver their message to voters in greater volumes but rival parties do not stand still. They attempt to slander the party's message and its new leader. Hence it is not surprising to see these contrasting mechanisms to reduce the size of the coefficient. Nevertheless, the negative coefficient indicates that a new leader, on average, is more likely to reduce perceptual disagreement among voters. In addition, as I show below, this effect of a new leader on voter perceptions gets stronger as parties change their policy positions along with their leader change. For now, we can conclude the results suggest that leadership changes help parties deliver their message, and despite rival parties attempts to defame the party and its policy promises, leadership changes, on average, reduce perceptual disagreement about party positions.[14]

Leadership changes: Subsequent policy shifts

While new leaders appear to reduce perceptual disagreement on average, not all leadership changes are the same. I expect a new leader who substantively changes her party's position to further increase agreement among voters with regards to the party's left-right position. To understand how a new leader, who implements significant policy shift, helps voters further reduce the disagreement about the party's position, we first examine when a leader change may *not* lead to a policy change.

There are two reasons why a new leader may *not* change the party's policies. First, she may take on an organizationally divided party, beset by infighting and unable to agree on a policy shift. Faced with such a situation, the new leader would find it difficult to change the party image or to provide a unified new policy signal to voters. In those situations, it would not be the new leader but rather the infighting and intra-party division that would be in the headlines. When a party lacks a unified policy position and a new leader cannot rebrand the party, the party would likely transmit mixed policy signals to voters (Gabel and Sheve, 2007). In that environment, some voters may simply use the previous party position while some others may update their perceptions based on mixed signals. Taken together, these voter responses should impair the positive effects of leadership change on voter agreement.

Second, the leader may simply be a placeholder of the previous leadership regime. Leaders who follow the same policies of the previous regime are less likely to attract attention to their new leadership compared to leaders that implement significant change. They may even confuse voters, who expect change and rebranding of the party but do not see it. An example of a nontransformational leader is John Major, who replaced Margaret Thatcher in 1990. Before this change, there was an overwhelming concern in the Conservative Party that "Mrs. Thatcher's abrasive personality, style and policies would cost them their seats in a general election" (NY Times, 1990). This led to the leadership change, with Conservatives hoping that "*those same policies*, under a leader with Mr. Major's popular personality and more soothing style, could bring them victory at the next election" (NY Times, 1990, italics added). A new leader was elected but it was not clear what he was bringing to the party. Attention was mainly focused on Thatcher being ousted and the intra-party problems, rather than on Major.

In contrast to the types of leaders discussed above, others rejuvenate the party and its message. And, I argue that policy/message change helps parties further reduce voters' disagreement about party positions for several reasons. First, changing party policies is not an easy task, and may provoke resistance from different groups within the party. Therefore, new leaders are plausibly better positioned to change their parties' policies if they are backed by a unified party organization. Unified party messages in turn clarify the signal voters receive (Gabel and Sheve, 2007; Steenbergen et al., 2007).

Moreover, policy shifts are more credible under a new leader. Campaigning on new party positions is risky, especially for veteran leaders who risk being depicted as opportunistic and flip-flopping by their rivals and the media (Somer-Topcu, 2009). In that environment, while some voters may update their perceptions about party positions in response to the new message, others may find the message unreliable and may not update their perceptions,

leading to more disagreement among voters. New leaders, by contrast, cannot be framed as flip-floppers when they change the party's policy positions. Their policy shifts are more credible (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, *typescript*), and with increasing media attention, these policy shifts accompanying the leadership change should reduce voters' disagreement.

Finally, leaders who shift party positions hardly ever paper over these positional shifts. Rather, they prefer to use the changes as campaign tools and advertise their policy shifts to deliver a message of growth and renewal to voters. Barack Obama's campaign of ''change'' was a prime example. Similarly, Mariano Rajoy, the newly elected leader of the People's Party in Spain, ran a campaign for the 2011 elections with the slogan ''join the change'' (súmate al cambio), as he and his party were promising new economic policies in opposition to the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) government. As leaders utilize the change and advertise it, we expect people to receive more information about the new party position and to develop higher shared agreement about this position. The unified and new policy signal, which is seen as more credible by voters, as well as excitement about the new leader and the heightened coverage of his/her policies in the media, should significantly reduce voter disagreement about the party position. To sum up, I argue that those new leaders who change the party's policy position further reduce voter disagreement.

Testing the effects of policy changes on voters' perceptions

I use the same data from above to test the hypothesis on policy shifts. Once again, the dependent variable is change in perceptual disagreement. The hypothesis states that those new leaders who change the party policy should further reduce voter disagreement. I use absolute perceived party policy change to test this hypothesis. I first calculated the average perceived position of each party using the perceived party positions by all survey respondents in election surveys. I then calculated the absolute change in these party positions between elections $t - 1$ and t to calculate the *absolute policy shift* variable.[15] To test the hypothesis, I added an interaction variable between leadership change and absolute party policy shift into the main model from Table 1 (*leader ch x abs policy shift*). I expect a negative and statistically significant coefficient for the interaction variable, indicating that a leadership change decreases disagreements as absolute party policy shifts increase.[16]

Table 2 presents the results. The first column tests the moderating effects of party policy shifts on perceptions by including the interaction variable between *leader change* and *absolute policy change* to the main model. In this model the coefficient for the *leader change* shows the direct effect of a leadership change on disagreement when there is *no* party policy change (i.e. when *absolute policy shift* is equal to 0).

Table 2. Testing the moderating hypothesis.

	Policy change	Leader effect for abs policy ch > 0.29
Leader change	0.015	−0.043**
	(0.009)	(0.009)
Absolute policy shift	0.067**	
	(0.019)	
Leader ch *x* abs shift	−0.093**	
	(0.024)	
Niche	−0.005	−0.024
	(0.020)	(0.019)
Vote share ($t - 1$)	0.001**	0.002**
	(0.0003)	(0.0003)
Vote change (t)	0.001*	0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Disagreement ($t - 1$)	−0.337**	−0.501**
	(0.066)	(0.097)
Constant	0.095**	0.191**
	(0.024)	(0.034)
N	177	68
Adjusted R^2	0.34	0.58

Note: The dependent variable is the change in disagreement about party positions among voters. The models are run using OLS regression with election clusters. OLS: Ordinary least squares.
*$p < 0.10$; **$p < 0.05$.

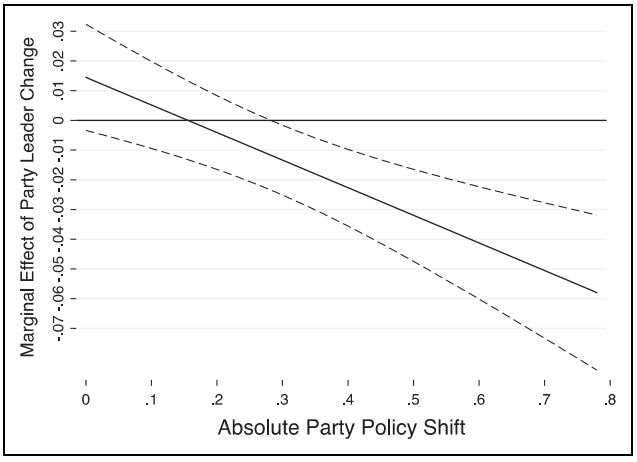

Figure 1. The marginal effect of a leadership change on voters' disagreement for different values of absolute party change. The solid line shows the marginal effect of a leadership change on disagreement using the model from column 1 in Table 2. The dashed-lines are the 95% confidence intervals.

To talk about the marginal effect of a leadership change on voters' disagreement for different levels of party policy shifts, we have to examine the coefficients for *leader change* and the interaction variables together. Figure 1 shows the marginal effect of a *leader change* and its standard errors (at the 95% level) for different values of

absolute policy shifts (*x*-axis). For marginal effects to be significant, the standard errors must be on the same side of the *x*-axis. We see in Figure 1 that there is no statistically significant effect of a leadership change on voters' disagreement about party positions if the absolute policy shift is less than about 0.29. I note that the average policy shift in the data is 0.29 with a standard deviation of 0.24. These results show strong support for the hypothesis that new leaders who change party policies reduce voter disagreement.

Column 2 in Table 2 focuses only on those cases where the *absolute policy shift* is more than 0.29 (the point beyond which leadership change has a significant effect on disagreement). The coefficient for leader change (−0.04) shows that for those cases where there is a significant policy shift, a leadership change decreases disagreement by about 0.04 points, on average, supporting the hypothesis on the effects of party policy shifts and showing a strong substantive effect of a leader change on perceived disagreement.[17] In the supplementary document I replicate the same model adding the absolute policy shift variable to the model as a control variable and find consistent effects of leadership change on perceptual agreement.

Regarding the control variables, the niche party control variable is not statistically significant. The statistically significant and positive coefficient for the vote share variable in Tables 1 and 2 indicates that voters are in fact more confused about larger parties' positions in the short term. And, the vote change variable suggests that there is also a long-term effect of vote changes on voters' disagreement. As parties gain more votes, disagreement about their policy positions increases. However, these effects are quite weak substantively. Finally, the previous level of disagreement shows that we see larger changes in perceptual disagreement scores for parties with higher disagreement scores.

One other interesting note concerns the marginal effect of party policy shifts. The coefficient of 0.067 in column 1 indicates that when there is no leadership change and when a party's perceived policy shift is 0.3 (the mean absolute policy shift in the data), ambiguity increases by about 0.02. This is consistent with my argument that, absent leadership changes, party policy shifts are more likely to increase voters' disagreement. When some voters find the policy change under the veteran leader credible and update their perceptions, others would evaluate the change as an opportunistic move and may keep their previous perceptions about party positions intact. When these two mechanisms work in tandem we see higher disagreement about party positions.[18]

Conclusion

In this article I tested whether and how party leadership changes influence voter perceptions. I argued that party leadership changes are important events in the history of party organizations. Given the salience of these leadership changes, voters get more exposure to the party policies and hear more about its policies either through media or in their close circles. At the same time, new leadership also opens avenues of criticism by rival parties. They may find weaknesses/holes in new leadership, and aim to defame the party and its policies in the eyes of voters. Therefore, voters may end up having more disagreement about party positions following a leadership change. I showed that despite potential rival party attacks and framing, leadership changes on average reduce voter disagreement about party positions. This effect is especially strong when a leadership change was accompanied by a policy shift.

While the results show that leadership changes are important for voter perceptions, there are additional questions that require further research. First, it remains to be seen how the other characteristics of new leaders affect voter perceptions. Does it matter, for instance, if the leadership change is a generational change for the party, whereby a young leader replaces an old one? Do personal characteristics of the new leader, such as his/her competence, integrity, charisma, or gender affect voter perceptions about party positions? Furthermore, we do not know whether the process of leadership selection influences voter perceptions. Do voters learn more about party positions when the party members elect the party leader in a one-member, one-vote system as compared to the selection by the party executive committee? How do competitive leadership changes affect voter perceptions? Finally, the details of the trend of perceptual disagreement before and after leadership changes remain to be explored. Does disagreement increases before a leadership change only to drop afterward? How do different types of leadership changes affect these trends?

In addition, it would be interesting to examine how other party level factors other than leadership changes affect voters' perceptions of party positions. For instance, one may argue that voters may develop a more accurate understanding and agree more about the positions of parties that experience an electoral boost during the interelection period. Similarly, parties that move from opposition to government status may receive more attention for their policy positions and affect voters' perceptions. None of these factors appear to moderate the relationship between leadership changes and perceptual disagreement (see the supplementary document). However, these and many other questions regarding what affects voters' perceptions of party positions await scholarly attention.

Acknowledgements

I thank James Adams, Kathleen Bawn, André Blais, Joshua Clinton, David Farrell, Jane Green, Robert Rohrschneider, Margit Tavits, the attendees of the Comparative Politics Workshop at Vanderbilt University and of the Workshop on Political Accountability at Duke University, and the two reviewers and the editors for their helpful comments; and Mollie Cohen, Hilary Dennen,

Matthew Layton, Claire Verville, and Sheahan Virgin for their superb research assistance. The survey data used in this publication come from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and from the following data centers: CIS (Spain), CSSR (Denmark), DANS (Netherlands), GESIS (Germany), NSD (Norway), and SND (Sweden). None of these organizations are responsible for the analysis/interpretation of the data presented here. All remaining errors are my own responsibility.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results as well as the Supplementary Document will be made available at https://sites.google.com/site/somertopcu/ upon publication.
2. These countries are Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden.
3. See the supplementary document for the distribution of perceptual disagreement in the data.
4. I argue that media coverage of the party increases after a leadership change. However, given data limitations, I do not directly test this assumption. Nevertheless, a quick search in LexisNexis shows support for this hypothesis. For instance, when Michael Howard was appointed as the leader of the British Conservative Party in 2003, he was facing the challenge of defeating the Tony Blair government. He replaced Ian Duncan Smith who was the leader of the Conservative Party during the second Tony Blair government. LexisNexis shows that Michael Howard was the subject of 372 articles within 3 months of his election (between October 29, 2003 and January 28, 2004). If we compare this to the Ian Duncan Smith coverage during the same period 1 year before (between October 29, 2002 and January 28, 2003), there were only 53 articles where the subject was Ian Duncan Smith.
5. This argument is also consistent with the literature that suggests party leadership changes are risky and destabilizing events for party organizations (Bynander and Hart, 2006; Grusky, 1960; Harmel et al., 1995).
6. Interested readers may refer to the supplementary document and to van der Eijk's article (2001) for more measurement details.
7. See the supplementary document for the summary statistics of the variables and for a figure showing the distribution of disagreement scores in the data.
8. The standard left-right perceptions question is as follows: "In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place [PARTY A] on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?" The wording is slightly different in a few surveys but all surveys in this article ask respondents to locate parties on the left-right scale.
9. The results (see the supplementary document) do not change if I include the Green parties in the niche category.
10. One may argue that being in government or opposition should also affect disagreement about a party's policy position. Parties in government may receive more attention and thus have lower perceived disagreement about their positions. However, because they have to follow a certain agenda (which may be imposed upon them by a coalition partner, for instance), disagreement about their position may in fact increase further. Because there is no clear expectation for the relationship between governing party status and disagreement and because the correlation between party vote share and government status is high, I only added the vote share variable to the model. Note that adding a dummy variable for governing parties do not change the main results. I report these results in the supplementary document.
11. I also note that the same logic may apply to parties with low disagreement scores, which suggests a quadratic relationship between the lagged level of disagreement and the change in disagreement (dependent variable). In the supplementary document I test this possibility.
12. Not all parties are included in the data set and some parties are in the data set for only a subset of elections. The criteria were: (1) the party should not have a shared leadership (more than one leader at a time); (2) the survey should ask the party's perceived position; and (3) the party should have won at least 5% of the vote share for the previous or current elections.
13. One might argue that I need to include the lagged dependent variable for theoretical reasons. In the supplementary document I show that the lagged dependent variable is not statistically significant, and the substantive effects of the independent variables stay the same.
14. While I showed that leadership changes reduce disagreement about party positions, this article does not address the question of whether parties in fact prefer to reduce disagreement about their positions. Recent research by Somer-Topcu (2015) shows that parties that appeal broadly and hence that have more disagreement about their positions may perform better in elections. This suggests that the findings I present are likely conservative estimates of how leadership changes affect perceptions. Some parties may prefer to intentionally blur their message, further weakening the size of the effect of leadership change on voter disagreement.
15. I acknowledge that perceptions may not fully reflect actual party policy shifts. However, for two reasons I am confident of using perceived shifts. First, we lack reliable data to measure actual party shifts. Second, perceived shifts are conservative estimates of actual party shifts. Not all voters update their perceptions of party positions when parties shift. If we observe a change in perceptions, this change includes all those voters' perceptions whereby voters observe the shift and update their perceptions as well as all those perceptions

whereby voters do not update their perceptions. Nevertheless, I replicated the results using the manifesto shifts in place of the perceived policy shifts in the supplementary document. The results stay robust.

16. The models include the same four control variables from Table 1 (niche party status, party vote share in the previous election, changes in party vote share between elections $t-1$ and t, and lagged disagreement score). See the previous section for the details of these variables.
17. Note again that the average change in perceptual disagreement in the data is 0.04.
18. One may argue that the timing of the leadership change may also affect voters' perceptions of party position. It is likely that as time passes from the new leadership selection, and hence, as voters hear less about the party and as its message gets contaminated, we should observe more disagreement about the party's position. Preliminary analyses for this hypothesis suggest that there is some evidence supporting the hypothesis. Leadership changes that happened immediately following the previous election are more likely to increase disagreement about the parties' position. Given space constraints, however, I leave the analysis of this interesting hypothesis to a future study.

References

Adams J, Ezrow L and Somer-Topcu Z (2011) Is anybody listening? Evidence that voters do not respond to European parties' policy statements during elections. *American Journal of Political Science* 55(2): 370–382.

Adams J, Ezrow L and Somer-Topcu Z (2014) Do voters respond to party manifestos or to a wider information environment? An analysis of mass-elite linkages on European integration. *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4): 967–978.

Aldrich J, Dorabantu SP and Fernandez MA (2009) Perceptions of party positions on the left-right scale. Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*. Toronto, CA, September 2009.

Aldrich J, Dorabantu SP, Fernandez MA, et al. (2011) When does the left-right dimension have meaning to voters in an election? Presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*. Seattle, WA, September 2011.

APSA, Committee on Political Parties (1950) Toward a more responsible two-party system. *American Political Science Review* 44(Supplement): 965–990.

Barabas J and Jerit J (2009) Estimating the causal effects of media coverage on policy-specific knowledge. *American Journal of Political Science* 53(1): 73–89.

Berelson BR, Lazarsfeld PF and McPhee WN (1954) *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in Presidential Campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bittner A (2012) *Platform or Personality? The Role of Party Leaders in Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Budge I, Klingemann HD, Volkens A, et al. (2001) *Mapping Policy Preferences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bynander F and Hart P (2006) When power changes hands: the political psychology of leadership succession in democracies. *Political Psychology* 27(5): 707–730.

Clark M and Debra L (2014) Does the ideological dispersion of parties mediate the electoral impact of valence? A cross-national study of party support in nine western european democracies. *Comparative Political Studies* 47(2): 171–202.

Dahlberg S (2009) Political parties and perceptual agreement -the influence of party related factors on voters perceptions in proportional electoral systems. *Electoral Studies* 28: 270–278.

de Vreese CH, Banducci SA, Semetko HA, et al. (2006) The news coverage of the 2004 European parliamentary election campaign in 25 countries. *European Union Politics* 7(4): 477–504.

Downs A (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper.

''Labour leader Bos quits, Cohen steps up.'' DutchNews.nl, March 12, 2010. Available at: http://www.dutchnews.nl/news/archives/2010/03/labour_leader_bos_quits_cohen/.

Farrell DM and Webb P (2000) Political parties as campaign organizations. In: Dalton R and Wattenberg MP (eds) *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 102–128.

Ferejohn JA and Kuklinski JH (eds) (1990) *Information and Democratic Processes*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Fernandez-Vazquez P (2014) And yet it moves: the effect of election platforms on party policy images. *Comparative Political Studies* 47(14): 1919–1944.

Fernandez-Vazquez P and Somer-Topcu Z (Typescript) The informational role of party leader changes on voter perceptions of party positions.

Fortunato D and Stevenson R (2013) Perceptions of partisan ideologies: the effect of coalition participation. *American Journal of Political Science* 57(2): 459–477.

Franklin CH (1991) Eschewing obfuscation? Campaigns and the perception of U.S. senate incumbents. *American Political Science Review* 85(4): 1193–1214.

Fuchs D and Klingemann HD (1989) The left–right schema. In: Jennings MK and van Deth JW (eds) *Continuities in Political Action*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 203–234.

Gabel M and Sheve K (2007) Mixed messages: party dissent and mass opinion on European integration. *European Union Politics* 8: 37–59.

Gelman A and King G (1993) Why Are American presidential election campaign polls so variable when votes are so predictable? *British Journal of Political Science* 23: 409–451.

Gomibuchi S (2001) *Followers and Leadership Durability: An Analysis of Leadership Support in the New Zealand Labour Party: 1990-1996*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

Green J and Sara B. Hobolt (2008) Owning the issue agenda: Party strategies and vote choices in british elections. *Electoral Studies* 27: 460–476.

Grusky O (1960) Administrative succession in formal organizations. *Social Forces* 2: 105–115.

Harmel R, Heo U, Tan A, et al. (1995) Performance, leadership, factions and party change: an empirical analysis. *West European Politics* 18: 1–33.

Hinich MJ and Munger MC (1997) *Analytical Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hughes L (2015) David cameron: jeremy corbyn is unfit to lead the labour party. *The Telegraph*, 15 September. Available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/labour/11858320/David-Cameron-Jeremy-Corbyn-is-unfit-to-lead-the-Labour-Party.html.

Lock A and Harris P (1996) Political marketing: vive la difference! *European Journal of Marketing* 30: 14–24.

Lupia A and McCubbins MD (1998) *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The New York Times (1990) Thatcher loyalist chosen as successor; finance official beats 2 rivals in tory vote. *New York*, 28 November. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/1990/11/28/world/thatcher-loyalist-chosen-successor-finance-official-beats-2-rivals-tory-vote.html?pagewanted=all.

Popkin S (1991) *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

So F (2013) Electoral systems and party leadership replacement in parliamentary democracies. Working Paper.

Somer-Topcu Z (2009) Timely decisions: the effects of past national elections on party policy. *Journal of Politics* 71(1): 238–248.

Somer-Topcu Z (2015) Everything to everyone: the electoral consequences of the broad-appeal strategy in Europe. *American Journal of Political Science* 59(4): 841–854.

Steenbergen M, Edwards E and de Vries C (2007) Who's cueing whom? Mass-elite linkages and the future of European integration. *European Union Politics* 8(1): 13–35.

Stevens D and Banducci S (2013) One voter and two choices: the impact of electoral context on the 2011 UK referendum. *Electoral Studies* 32: 274–284.

Stimson JA (2004) *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

van der Brug W (1999) Voters perceptions and party dynamics. *Party Politics* 5(2): 147–169.

van der Brug W, Fennema M and Tillie J (2005) Why some anti-immigrant parties fail and others succeed: a two-step model of aggregate electoral support. *Comparative Political Studies* 38(5): 537–573.

van der Eijk C (2001) Measuring agreement in ordered rating scales. *Quality & Quantity* 35: 325–341.

van der Eijk C, Franklin M and van der Brug W (1999) Policy preferences and party choice. In: Schmitt H and Thomassen J (eds) *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 161–185.

Zaller J (1992) *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Author biography

Zeynep Somer-Topcu is an assistant professor in the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on party organizations and policies, election outcomes, and voter perceptions of party policies. Her articles have been published in the *American Journal of Political Science*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, and other journals.