

The Electoral Consequences of Ambiguity for Opposition Parties and Junior Coalition Partners

****WORKING PAPER****

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Abstract

Despite a growing number of studies that analyze the electoral consequences of political elites presenting ambiguous policy positions to the electorate, there is no scholarly consensus on whether policy ambiguity enhances or depresses European political parties' support. I argue that the electoral consequence of policy clarity for European political parties is conditional on whether or not a party is in the opposition or is a part of a governing coalition. I empirically evaluate whether European voters disproportionately reward governing parties for becoming increasingly clear on policy position in comparison to opposition parties. I test these hypotheses via analyses of election survey data from more than a dozen European countries included in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems dataset along with expert survey data included in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey data set.

Introduction

One of the basic tenets of a democratic government is that voters elect officials to represent their interests while in office. This implies that voters choose political parties with policy preferences that are congruent with their own preferences, and thus voters choose the party that is closest in proximity to their own policy preferences. In order to make such educated and spatially correct decisions, parties must clearly communicate their policy positions to voters. Indeed, Downs' (1957) classic proximity model suggests that in multi-party systems, parties “strive to distinguish themselves ideologically from each other and maintain the purity of their positions; whereas in two-party systems each party will try to resemble its opponents as closely as possible” (Downs 1957; 127).

More recently, scholars are questioning whether ideological clarity is actually an electorally rewarding strategy for political parties in multi-party systems. On the one hand, voters may reward parties who communicate clear policy platforms in an environment that is otherwise characterized by uncertainty. On the other hand, parties may be able to cast a wider net over potential voters by taking ambiguous platforms that do not isolate moderate or extreme voters.

In this paper, I argue that the effect of ideological clarity on voter preferences is conditional on the governing status of a party. This theory builds on work by Somer-Topcu (2014) that finds parties with “broad appeal” strategies enjoy boosts in vote-shares because voters project their own preferences onto parties with ambiguous Left-Right policy positions, thereby increasing a party’s base of voters. Using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) dataset from 1999-2014, I find evidence that governing parties are rewarded for presenting clear ideological stances, but opposition parties are punished

for presenting increasingly clear ideological positions. This finding has important implications for the campaigning strategies of political parties: as Downs' suggests, governing parties should indeed strive to present clear and consistent positions to the electorate, whereas I find preliminary evidence that opposition parties are electorally rewarded for presenting muddled positions to the electorate.

What are the electoral consequences of ambiguity?

Despite a growing number of studies that address the electoral consequences of candidate and party ambiguity, the literature remains divided on whether or not taking ambiguous policy positions actually helps or harms parties. Similar to how our mothers cautioned us to not be assertively political on first dates or around the Thanksgiving dinner table, politicians are sometimes also cautioned to remain ambiguous, if not silent, on certain political issues (Shepsle 1972). Hersh and Schaffner (2013) provide experimental evidence that voters are persuaded more by general messages to the electorate rather than by specific messages targeted to sub-groups of voters. By taking ambiguous positions, political candidates may be able to cast a wider net over potential voters by taking ambiguous platforms that do not isolate moderate or extreme voters.

Similarly, Tomz and Van Houweling (2009) find that that ambiguity does not repel voters; in fact, the authors find that ambiguity can actually help candidates gain votes from members of their own party without costing the candidate votes from members of the opposition party. The authors offer two main reasons why voters may prefer ambiguous candidates. First, optimistic voters may project their own positions onto a candidate's ambiguous position and thus believe that the candidate's position is close to their own. The

authors also find that voters with weak preferences are more likely to prefer candidates with unclear positions.

Jensen (2009) and Somer-Topcu (2014) also find that ambiguity increases political parties' vote-shares due to similar projection-effects. Jensen (2009) finds that voters tend to distort their perceptions of ambiguous candidates' policy positions by pulling the positions of the candidates with valence advantages (such as honesty, likability, and experience) and pushing away candidates with they do not like. Somer-Topcu (2014) finds that European political parties gain votes by broadly appealing to diverse sectors of the electorate. Furthermore, the author finds evidence of similar push and pull projection effects to be the attributed cause of the broad appeals parties increased vote-share.

On the other hand, risk-averse voters may reward candidates who communicate clear policy platforms in an environment that is otherwise characterized by uncertainty (Shepsle 1972; Glasgow and Alvarez 2000). Similarly, in an empirical study of the 1980 U.S. presidential election, Bartels (1986) finds that voters punished the leading candidate when there was uncertainty surrounding the candidate's policy positions. (Brady and Ansolabehere (1989) also find that voters prefer candidates who are clear and concise regarding their policy positions over candidates who are more ambiguous about their policy positions.

One of the main reasons that the literature is so conflicted is due to the difficulty in obtaining measures of candidate ambiguity that are not susceptible to endogeneity or other measurement concerns. For example, several scholars rely on survey responses to capture how ambiguous voters perceive candidates to be (e.g. Campbell (1983) and Bartels (1986)). This raises endogeneity concerns, however, as politicians may be strategically

ambiguous when targeting groups of voters who disagree with their positions (Hersh and Schaffner 2012), as well as measurement concerns with survey questions regarding political knowledge (Boudreau et al. 2011)). More recently, scholars are turning toward either experimental research designs (i.e. Tomz and Van Houweling 2009; Hersh and Schaffner 2013) or observational studies that employ an exogenous measures ambiguity in order to overcome the obstacles associated with empirically measuring the ambiguity of candidates' positions (see Milita, Ryan, and Simas 2014; Somer-Topcu 2014).

Should we expect ideological clarity to have the same electoral consequences for all party types? Much of the literature on party positioning suggests that opposition and governing parties face different incentive structures when choosing policy platforms. Bawn and Somer-Topcu (2012) find evidence that voters discount the positions taken by governing parties more so than the positions taken by opposition parties. Junior coalition partners must bargain with other coalition partners and the party of the Prime Minister to create policies or legislation, often compromising their own policy positions in order to reach agreement. Moreover, Fortunato and Stevenson (2013) find that participation in coalitions is a heuristic that voters use to update their perceptions of parties positions, and Adams, Ezrow and Wleizen (forthcoming) also find that voters use coalition participation as a heuristic for updating their perceptions on the party's stance on European integration. Finally, Adams and Cahill (working paper) show that junior coalition parties shift their positions with the party of the prime minister, whereas opposition parties do not consistently shift either toward or away from the party of the PM.

Moreover, Cahill and Tomashevskiy (working paper) find that campaign contributions to political parties are negatively associated with the clarity of parties'

ideological positions. The authors find that when campaign contributions increase, parties becoming increasingly ambiguous on their policy positions. Parties may be incentivized to emphasize different policies to different groups of voters (appease the more extreme donors while not isolating the more moderate voters). By sending similar messages to both groups in order to increase donations, governing parties are incentivized to present ambiguous “catch-all” messages in order to increase donations and maintain the satisfaction of moderate voters.

Overall, this literature suggests that we should not expect ideological clarity to exert similar effects for the vote-shares of governing and opposition parties. While the behavior, actions and words of governing parties may be more visible, or clear, to voters—the constraints of bargaining with coalition partners, the pull of policies toward the party of the prime minister, and the incentives parties face to appease donors and moderate voters all contribute to the difficulty for governing parties to present clear ideological policy positions. This literature motivates the *ambiguity* hypothesis, more formally stated as:

H1: The policy positions of governing parties are more likely to be perceived as ambiguous than the policy positions of opposition parties.

Should junior partners be disproportionately punished or rewarded for ambiguity compared to opposition parties? Somer-Topcu (2014) finds that ambiguity helps parties gain diverse sectors of the electorate due to individual voters’ projection of policy beliefs onto the ambiguous party. On the one hand, governing parties’ base of voters may view ambiguity as a type of negative valence—that the party is “selling out” on the core policy platforms that the party originally campaigned upon. On the other hand, opposition parties do not face similar push and pull effects of policy positioning that junior coalition partners do, and therefore these opposition parties may actually gain votes by being ambiguous due

to the broad appeals and projection advantages. This idea is more formally stated as *the cost of governing hypothesis*, where:

H2: Governing are more likely to be disproportionately punished in vote-shares for holding ambiguous positions compared to opposition parties.

Research Design

I use the 1999-2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey data, in which experts in **the 16 countries** included in the dataset are asked to locate the positions of each major party in the system on numerous issues, including each party's overall left-right policy position. Below is the question in the 1999, 2002, 2006, 2010, and 2014 CHES surveys pertaining to a party's overall left-right ideological position:

Please tick the box that describes each party's overall ideology on a scale that ranges from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right).

The countries and parties included in at least four of the CHES modules are reported in Table 1. UPDATE TABLE 1.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

In the analyses, the key independent variable is the clarity of a given party's overall Left-Right policy position as perceived by the CHES experts. Following Somer-Topcu (2014) and Van der Eijk (2001), I operationalize the clarity of a party's position using a measure of the extent to which experts consistently place a given party in the same category on the 11-point ideological scale. The variable ranges from (1) to (-1), where a value of one indicates that there was perfect agreement between the experts in a given parties' policy position, and a negative one implies there was perfect disagreement between the experts. Higher values of the measure indicate that the experts are more consistently placing the party in the same category on the 11-point L-R scale—the party's

ideological stance is clear to the experts. In contrast, smaller values reflect that the party had a less clear policy position—there is less consistency among the experts in placing a given party in categories on the 11-point scale. I utilize the *shift* in the agreement of a party's position from an election at time $t-1$ to an election at time t . Positive numbers indicate that parties' policy positions became clearer over time (higher agreement); and negative numbers imply the parties' policy position became more ambiguous (less agreement) during the time period between elections.

Testing the ambiguity hypothesis

To test the *ambiguity* hypothesis that governing parties hold more ambiguous policy positions than opposition parties, I calculate the mean shift in clarity for opposition parties and for governing parties.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Table 2 shows that the mean shift in clarity for governing parties is negative, so governing parties are perceived to actually become slightly more ambiguous after entering government. In contrast, opposition parties' policy positions become somewhat clearer during the same time period. Yet the difference between the mean shift in clarity for governing and opposition parties is $-.0013$ and fails to reach the conventional norms of statistical significance. This analysis suggests there is no substantial difference in the clarity of the positions of governing and opposition parties. This reduces concerns for endogeneity—the higher visibility of governing parties does not necessarily imply more clarity in their positions. This is an important finding for the following section in which I test the *cost of governing hypothesis*.

Testing the Cost of Governing Hypothesis

I specify an error-correction OLS regression model to estimate the extent to which opposition parties and governing parties' vote-shares change from one election to the next, and, most important, whether or not governing parties are punished disproportionately for ambiguity compared to opposition members. Error correction models (ECMs) are both theoretically and methodologically appropriate for modeling dynamic representation (Bernardi and Adams (working paper); Bevan and Jennings 2014; Jennings and John 2009; Keele and DeBoef 2008). Substantively, ECMs capture both the long-term and short-term effects of the clarity of parties' positions on their subsequent electoral performance. The short-term effect shows how parties' vote-shares are affected by changes in the clarity of their policy positions, and long-term effects show how lagged levels of clarity on parties' issue positions impact their subsequent vote-shares.

The model is specified as:

$$\Delta \text{voteshare} = \alpha + \text{lagged vote}(\beta_1) + \Delta \text{clarity}(\beta_2) + \text{gov}(\beta_3) + \Delta \text{clarity} * \text{govt}(\beta_4) + \text{lagged clarity}(\beta_5) + \text{lagged clarity} * \text{govt}(\beta_6) + \Delta \text{unemployment}(\beta_7) + \Delta \text{unemployment} * \text{govt}(\beta_8) + \text{niche}\beta_9 + \Delta \text{inflation}\beta_{10} + \Delta \text{inflation}\beta_{11} * \text{govt}(\beta_{12})$$

where the dependent variable is the *change* in the vote share of a focal party *j* from two consecutive national elections taking place nearest to the time period from 1996 to 2014.

Positive numbers denote that the party's vote share increased from time *t-1* to time *t*, and negative numbers show that the party lost votes. The key independent variables are:

[*lagged vote*], which is the parties' vote-share in the election at time (*t-1*); [*Δ agreement*] is the change in parties' clarity in the current election (*t*) compared to the clarity in the previous election (*t-1*); [*gov*] is a dummy variable indicating the status of a governing party (1) or opposition party (0) during the current election at time *t*; [*Δ clarity * govt* (β_4)] is

the interaction that shows the differing effects of clarity for governing and opposition parties; [*lagged clarity*] is the level of clarity of a party's position during the previous election (*t-1*); and [*lagged clarity * govt*] is the interaction between government status and the level of clarity of a party's position during the previous election (*t-1*).

I control for [Δ *unemployment*], which is the change in the current percentage of citizens unemployed (*t*) compared to the percentage of citizens unemployed in the last election (*t-1*) and [Δ *inflation*], which is the change in the current level of inflation (*t*) compared to the level of inflation in the last election (*t-1*). I interact both of these economic control variables with government status, as governing parties are likely to be disproportionately rewarded or punished for changes in a country's economic status.

Table 3 shows the estimated ECM OLS regression coefficients for the change in vote-shares of opposition and governing parties.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The key coefficient in this analysis is the interaction between the change in party *j*'s level of clarity from election (*t-1*) to election (*t*) and whether or not party *j* is an opposition party or a governing party. Support for the *cost of governing hypothesis* would indicate a positive and statistically significant coefficient on the interaction term, indicating that governing parties' vote-shares increase when parties present increasingly clear policy positions. Indeed, Table 3 shows that the coefficient for this short-term effect is statistically significant and positive. I calculate the effect of a one-standard deviation increase in the change in clarity of a governing party for interpretation purposes, where a one-standard deviation increase in the change of a governing parties' ideological position is associated with a 2.50% increase in vote-share, holding all else

constant¹. So governing parties that become increasingly clear while in office experience a substantively important short-term increase in vote-share in the next election.

There is also a statistically significant long-term effect of the level of clarity of governing parties' ideological position at the last election. This positive and statistically significant effect suggests that the clearer parties' ideological positions at the previous election period, the more its vote-share increases at the current time period. More specifically, a one-standard deviation increase in a parties' level of clarity at the previous election is associated with a 2.5% increase in vote-share at the current election time period. This again suggests support for the cost of governing hypothesis, which parties are disproportionately punished for holding ambiguous policy positions in comparison with opposition parties.

Indeed, Table 3 shows that opposition parties are likely rewarded for presenting ambiguous policy positions. The coefficient for the change in agreement (β_2) is negative and is statistically significant at the $p < .10$ level, although this is not quite within the conventional norms of statistical significance. This coefficient suggests that opposition parties are punished as they become increasingly clear from the previous election period to the current election. A one-standard deviation increase in clarity over time is associated with nearly a 1% decrease in opposition parties' vote share. This finding is consistent with Somer-Topcu (2014) that parties are rewarded for presenting ambiguous policy positions to the electorate. I do not find evidence of a long-term effect of clarity on parties' current vote-share (β_5).

¹ The interactive effect of a change in clarity for governing parties' vote-shares is found by summing the coefficient for the change in clarity and the coefficient on the interaction, then multiplying the sum by one-standard deviation in the change in clarity measure. $((-10.40 + 27.87) * .09) = 2.51\%$ increase in governing parties' vote-share.

Discussion and Next Steps

This paper shows preliminary evidence that the effects of presenting increasingly clear policy positions on parties' vote-share are conditional on parties' governing status. Governing parties are significantly rewarded for presenting increasingly clear positions, while opposition parties are actually rewarded for presenting increasingly ambiguous policy positions. This suggests that the campaigning strategies for governing and opposition parties are vastly different—in fact opposite! Opposition parties are incentivized to be “catch-all” parties by appealing to different sub-sets of voters, whereas governing parties are rewarded for becoming increasingly clear over time.

I also plan to develop this paper by rerunning the analyses using voter-level data—I didn't quite have the data ready for this analysis for the UC Merced conference, but plan to have this ready for the 2016 MPSA conference. It will be interesting to see if the results hold up with the voter-level data!

Overall, this paper is a first step in examining the electoral consequences of ambiguity, and presents preliminary evidence that the effects of ambiguity are mitigated by party type. Existing research shows that ambiguity may help parties gain voters due to individual projection of policy preferences onto an ambiguous party, but I find that this finding may not hold for all party types—especially for governing parties.

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Appendix

Table 1: Countries and Parties Included in the Analyses (1999-2014)

Denmark	Ireland
Finland	Netherlands
Portugal	Belgium
Spain	Germany
Sweden	Austria

Notes. The table lists the countries that were included in the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys in at least four modules (1999, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014), which is necessary for Error Correction Model specifications included in this paper.

Table 2. Mean Shift Clarity of Positions for Opposition Parties and for Junior Coalition Partners (CHES Data)

	Opposition Parties	Governing Parties
Mean Shift in Clarity	.006 (.008)	-.012 (.008)
Difference in Means Standard Error		.018 (.011)
	N= 221	N=147

Table 3. Estimated Error Correction Model OLS Coefficients for Change in Vote-Share for Opposition and Governing Parties (1999 - 2014)

	Coefficient
Lagged Vote	-.19* (.05)
Δ Agreement	-10.40 (5.44)
Gov	-19.07* (8.49)
Δ Agreement * Gov	27.87* (7.47)
Lagged Agreement	.22 (5.43)
Govt* Lagged Agreement	25.01* (9.51)
Δ Unemployment	-.12 (.11)
Δ Unemployment * Gov	.13 (.41)
Niche	.09 (.75)
Δ Inflation * Gov	.41 (.84)
Constant	1.14 (4.36)

N=210

*p<.05, standard errors clustered by country. Model 1 includes country fixed effects (not reported); Model 2 does not include country fixed effects.