

# Everything to Everyone: The Electoral Consequences of the Broad-Appeal Strategy in Europe

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*Parties often tailor their campaign message differently to different groups of voters with the goal of appealing to a broader electorate with diverse preferences and thereby winning their votes. I argue that the strategy helps a party win votes if it can convince diverse groups of voters that the party is ideologically closer to their preferred positions. Using election data from nine Western European democracies, I first show that parties gain votes when they appeal broadly. Analysis of individual-level survey data suggests that voters perceive broadly appealing parties as ideologically closer to their own positions, a finding that identifies a plausible mechanism behind the aggregate positive effect of this strategy on party election performance. These findings not only help explain the behavior of some European parties, but they may also offer a potential recipe for electoral success in multiparty democracies.*

Political pundits, commentators, and scholars alike expect clarity and consistency from political parties, especially in multiparty systems. While Downs (1957, 136) argues that parties in a two-party system should disguise their positions “in a fog of ambiguity” to increase the size of their constituency, he argues that parties in multiparty systems should distinguish themselves ideologically from each other and take clear and differentiated positions to win (126–27).

Taking clear, consistent, and differentiated positions also has important implications for many normative conceptions of representation and is often thought to be critical for the effective functioning of a representative democracy (Berelson 1952; Dahlberg 2009). When parties do not clearly articulate their positions, or appear consistent and to the point, voters arguably have a much harder task when attempting to identify the party that would best represent their interests in office. The failure to take clear and consistent positions during campaigns

may also affect the ability of voters to hold governing parties accountable for their policy behavior in office.

Despite the normative appeal of such a party system and the ruminations of Downs (1957) noted above, there is evidence that political parties and candidates in multiparty systems rarely take clear and consistent positions and that they instead frequently appeal to different groups of voters with diverse policy preferences, with the goal of expanding their electoral support (e.g., Campbell 1983; Dahlberg 2009; Tomz and van Houweling 2009). Consider, for example, the behavior of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) during the 2013 federal election. The party’s chancellor candidate, Peer Steinbrück, is a moderate politician who belongs to the centrist wing of the party. In choosing Steinbrück as the chancellor candidate, the SPD attempted to appeal to centrist Christian democratic (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and liberal (Free Democratic Party, FDP) voters who may be tired of chancellor Merkel and the policies of the

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I thank James Adams, Kathleen Bawn, André Blais, Joshua Clinton, Russ Dalton, Marc Debus, David Farrell, Jane Green, Christoffer Green-Pedersen, Cindy Kam, Noam Lupu, Michaela Mattes, Robert Rohrschneider, Margit Tavits, Chris Wlezien, and the four reviewers and the editors for their helpful comments, and Mollie Cohen, Hilary Dennen, and Sheahan Virgin for their superb research assistance. Previous versions of this article were presented at the Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties Conference in Oxford (UK), Aarhus University, Cornell University, the Juan March Institute, Temple University, the University of Amsterdam, the University of Gothenburg, the University of Illinois, the University of Mannheim, and the University of Texas at Austin. I thank all the participants for their comments. 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.

*American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 59, No. 4, October 2015, Pp. 841–854

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DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12165

CDU-FDP coalition. At the same time that they chose a more moderate candidate for chancellor, however, the party's election manifesto for the 2013 election contained the more traditional leftist economic and welfare policy proposals (Hilmer and Merz 2014). We can interpret the actions as suggesting that whereas the manifesto position was aimed to keep the party's more ideologically left-wing clientele and union members in the party and to win back votes lost to the Left Party, the choice of its chancellor candidate was an attempt to appeal to the center. As another example, British Conservative Party leader David Cameron was characterized as "love bombing" the Liberal Democrats by stressing the importance of civil liberties" in the 2010 British elections while, at the same time, using a "liberal-conservative" agenda to win back those "well-heeled and increasingly well-educated voters" who earlier had deserted the Conservative Party for the Labour Party (Bale and Webb 2011, 45).

If appealing broadly to different subgroups of voters is an openly pursued and common strategy, does it actually help parties electorally? The evidence on this important question is more anecdotal. Evaluating the aftermath of the German 2009 election, Lees (2012, 546) argues that in order for the Social Democrats (SPD) to regain their lost votes and office, "it is not sufficient just to tack to the left or to the center to regain support; it must in effect widen its appeal to the left, the center and to the non-voters . . ." As stated before, the SPD followed this strategy in 2013, and though the party lost the government to the CDU, they managed to increase their vote share from 23% to 25.7%. Similarly, Cameron won the 2010 election and formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, ending 13 years of Labour rule. While such anecdotal evidence suggests that the strategy may have electoral benefits, a systematic comparative analysis of the consequences of this strategy has been lacking.

I argue that the *broad-appeal strategy* can help parties gain votes, provided they can convince different groups of voters with diverse preferences that the party is now closer to their preferred ideological position. Using voter election surveys from nine Western European countries—Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden—I test the electoral consequences of this broad-appeal strategy and demonstrate using aggregate electoral data that parties do indeed gain votes when they broaden their appeal. Moreover, in examining possible individual-level mechanisms behind this aggregate effect, I explore whether parties are able to successfully convince diverse groups of voters that the party is ideologically close to them despite making broad appeals. My individual-level findings, using data from the Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems (CSES), reveal

that voters do indeed perceive broadly appealing parties as closer to their own preferred position than they actually are. These findings not only help explain the behavior of some European parties, but also contribute to the growing literature examining the consequences of party strategies on performance, and may offer a potential recipe for electoral success in multiparty democracies.

## Appealing Broadly: A Recipe for Electoral Success

Regardless of whether a political party's ultimate goal is winning office or implementing its policies, either as a governing party or as a strong opposition party, parties need votes to achieve their objectives. Scholars have long been interested in the factors that affect the electoral performance of political parties in multiparty democracies. Party performance in office (Powell and Whitten 1993; Rose and Mackie 1983), as well as party valence evaluations (Clark 2009; Clark and Leiter 2014), have been shown to significantly influence party support. An extensive scholarship also examines how party ideological strategies, particularly party position-taking and shifts in these positions, affect party support (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012; Downs 1957; Ezrow 2005). While taking a clear party position or changing the party's ideological position are policy strategies that might influence election results, another possible strategy is appealing to a broader electorate. This strategy, which I call the *broad-appeal strategy*, aims to broaden the party's constituency by convincing different groups of voters with diverse ideological preferences that the party would best represent their interests in office.<sup>1</sup>

What is the broad-appeal strategy and when should we expect it to work? There are several ways that a party may attempt to broaden its appeal, each being a different means to the same end: to appeal to the interests of as many voter groups as possible rather than presenting an ideologically clear and coherent (and thus limited) party platform. One potential way of employing the broad-appeal strategy is for the party to take clear positions on various issues, but without regard for the "sides" of the spectrum. Hence, the party may take left positions

<sup>1</sup> Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012) argue that when parties try to be ideologically proximate to both loyal partisans and other voters, they find themselves under a "representational strain." The authors do not examine the electoral consequences of this strain, but this is the same tension that I argue leads parties to adopt the broad-appeal strategy.

on some issues and right positions on others. A good example of this version of the broad-appeal strategy is the Danish Liberal Party's centrist turn on welfare policies while simultaneously tightening and radicalizing its immigration policy stances before the 2001 election. Following election defeats in the 1990s, the Liberal Party abandoned its neoliberal rhetoric and instead advocated improved maternity and paternity leaves and increased budgets for hospitals and health care in order to appeal to the traditional centrist and center-left clientele of the Social Democrats. At the same time, it appealed to the supporters of more right-wing, anti-immigration parties, such as the Danish People's Party (DF) and Progress Party (FP), by demanding tighter controls and proposing stricter rules for family reunions of immigrants and for access to social security (Andersen 2003). Across issues as a whole, the party thus appeared centrist and right wing at the same time, and it helped them win a landslide victory over the dominant SPD.<sup>2</sup>

Politicians openly admit that they often aim to appeal to a broad electorate by taking different issue positions. In a personal interview, a party elite from the CDU party in Germany noted:

On the one hand we have to keep the traditional voters attached to the party, and we have to deliver to them. On the other hand, we have to be attractive for many additional people in this country. . . . If you look at our new, basic program . . . you will see that there are certain issues that are really important to our traditional voters. With other issues we have tried to open up to new voters, talk to or reach new groups of voters. So, it is a job of ensuring permanent balance. (CDU party elite, July 2008)

Parties can attempt to broaden their appeal in other ways as well. In addition to the example of the German Social Democrats in 2013 noted previously, when they had a moderate chancellor candidate and a more leftist election manifesto, the dual leadership strategy of the party in 1998 provides an example of another manner in which a party may attempt to appeal to multiple voter groups simultaneously rather than trying to advocate for a clear and consistent party platform. Leading up to the 1998 elections, the SPD had been out of government since

1982 and greatly desired to win back the government. Oscar Lafontaine, SPD's chairman since 1995, was a leftist politician who appealed to leftist and core SPD voters (Paterson and Sloam 2010). However, SPD believed that in order to win the election, it needed to appeal to dissatisfied liberal democratic (FDP) and Christian democratic (CDU) voters at the center. As such, they bucked the German tradition of having the chairman as the chancellor candidate and decided to elect as their chancellor candidate Gerhard Schröder, a more moderate politician. Lafontaine and Schröder ran the election campaign together and presented the party "as a fresh, vibrant party which was managing to combine its basic, traditional values of freedom, justice, and solidarity with the demands of a modern industrial service industry and communication society" (Potthoff and Miller 2006, 363).

As yet another possible way to appeal broadly, a party may purposefully "becloud" its policy positions "in a fog of ambiguity" (Downs 1957, 136). Ambiguity, as defined in the literature, refers to a strategy of representing "a probability distribution over points in the issue space" (Tomz and van Houweling 2009, 84), and it has been used to describe candidates who largely are vague about their specific positions (see also Shepsle 1972). As in Tomz and van Houweling's experimental design, ambiguous candidates occupy a range, as opposed to an exact point, on the dimension by being vague and unclear about their stances. Gerhard Schröder's "vague pledges to reduce unemployment" before the German federal elections in 1998 (Andrews 1998) and David Cameron's "vague aspirations" for the British Conservative Party's tax policy before the British elections in 2010 (Watt 2010) are good examples of this strategy.

To sum up, the broad-appeal strategy encompasses various strategies that aim to cast a wider net. In addition to being ambiguous, political parties may appeal broadly by taking clear yet different positions on various issues, use two leaders with different ideological appeals, use centrist candidates alongside more extreme manifestos, and so on. At the end, the goal of the party is to increase the size of its constituency by appealing to their diverse interests.

I note that the broad-appeal strategy is similar to Kirchheimer's catchall party strategy (1966) in the sense that the goal of the party is to increase its vote share. Yet the two strategies are also different. The catchall parties of the post-World War II era were the center-left and center-right, mainstream, large parties of Europe, and their main strategy consisted of moderating their policy positions toward the center while de-emphasizing ideological, class, or denomination-based politics in an attempt to add floating centrist voters to their ranks (the

<sup>2</sup>Another good example is the famous Labour Party strategy under Tony Blair. The Labour strategy was to appeal to the "middle England" and Tory voters with stricter immigration policies and neoliberal economic policies, such as low taxes and policies aiming to increase economic growth, while simultaneously pursuing traditional Labour voters with leftist policies, such as minimum wage, family tax credits, and increased social spending.

French National Republican Union is one example Kirchheimer discusses; Allen 2009). Converging to the center, however, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the broad-appeal strategy.<sup>3</sup> As the SPD's 2013 strategy shows, a party may keep its ideological position close to its base while having a moderate chancellor candidate, or a party may take leftist positions on some issues and rightist positions on some others, like the Danish Liberal Party's strategy in 2001.

In fact, moderating the party position (i.e., moving the party's position to the center) may be a riskier strategy, as party activists and members, feeling "betrayed," could react negatively to a moderating policy shift away from their ideal policy positions (Aldrich 1983, 1995; Karreth, Polk, and Allen 2013). The risks of moderating party positions are particularly high in multiparty systems where there are ideologically close party alternatives and where the likelihood of new party entry into the system is high. Policy change may facilitate new party entry by opening ideological space, and these new parties may siphon off voters who are dissatisfied with their own party because of the moderation (Ignazi 1996; Palfrey 1984). The broad-appeal strategy, in contrast, does not involve an abandonment of the party's previous ideological space; rather, it entails expansion of the party's appeal.

While the benefits of appealing to as many voters as possible is self-evident, it is less clear whether such appeals are electorally successful. Existing work, especially in American politics, has examined whether one specific way of appealing broadly, the ambiguous appeal, helps parties/candidates electorally, but its findings have been mixed. Shepsle (1972), for instance, uses a formal model to demonstrate that parties benefit from being ambiguous only when voters are risk-acceptant.<sup>4</sup> Other formal models examine the conditions under which political parties benefit from being ambiguous, such as uncertainty about the median voter's position (Glazer 1990), the intensity and salience of voters' policy preferences (Aragones

and Postlewaite 2002), and context-dependent voting (Callander and Wilson 2008). In recent empirical work, Tomz and van Houweling (2009) show that ambiguity may in fact help parties electorally (see also Campbell 1983). Nevertheless, these studies are limited to the American two-party system<sup>5</sup> and do not examine the electoral consequences of various other strategies beyond being ambiguous that parties use to appeal broadly.

I argue that the electoral success of a broad-appeal strategy depends on the ability of the party to convince diverse groups of voters that the party represents their policy preferences. Hence, parties must be able to convince their own supporters that the party is still the same old party they have supported in the past while also attracting new voters with the promise that the party will represent their preferences in office. The question is whether such acrobatics can work.

It is perhaps not overly demanding to expect party supporters will continue to support their party despite its broad-appeal strategy. According to the projection literature, a core party supporter attempts to eliminate the "cognitive dissonance" she experiences when her party advocates a position with which she does not agree, by projecting her own position onto the party (Heider 1958). But can parties convince "other voters" with a broad-appeal strategy? Hillygus and Shields (2008) show that American presidential candidates do not take positions at the middle but instead aim to convince weak leaners of the other party who are cross-pressured between their partisan loyalties and policy preferences, by appealing to them on specific issues. With empirical evidence from the 2000 and 2004 campaigns, they show that the strategy works to convince these cross-pressured voters to change their vote choices. The broad-appeal strategy is similar, and its success depends on appealing to new voters with specific issues, candidates, or manifestos. Whether the strategy works is an empirical question I explore in this article.

I also note, however, that a broad appeal may fail if voters believe that the party is now further away from them than before. One possible risk of the broad-appeal strategy is that some voters may hear messages that were targeted to a different group of voters, and they may perceive the party to be even further than it actually is. Targeted campaigning may fail if word about the strategy gets out (Hersh and Schaffner 2013). It is also possible that voters may perceive these parties as "evasive or spineless"

<sup>3</sup>Among the 241 cases included here, the Pearson correlation between perceived party shifts to the center and changes in perceptual disagreement among voters, which I use to measure the broad-appeal strategy, is 0.38 (see below for the description of these variables).

<sup>4</sup>Shepsle (1972) argues that ambiguity helps parties only if voters are risk-acceptant (but see Callander and Wilson 2008, who dispute this claim). The results I present provide a different explanation for how the strategy may help parties. I do not examine individual-level uncertainty or make any claims about whether European voters are risk-acceptant but instead focus on the aggregate effects of the broad-appeal strategy. Some voters who perceive the broad-appeal party closer may be fully certain about that position and some others may feel uncertain (Bartels 1996). Without a measure of uncertainty at the individual level, it is not possible to test the effects of uncertainty and attitudes toward risk on party performance.

<sup>5</sup>The only exception is Rovny (2012). With a focus on European democracies, he examines the conditions under which parties prefer to blur their issue positions, and one argument he introduces in the article is that voters react to this strategy in their vote choice. However, his focus is on the strategy of blurring specific issue positions.



(Campbell 1983, 278). Media and rival parties may capitalize on the broad-appeal strategy of the party, depicting the party as flip-flopping or opportunistic (see, e.g., Tomz and van Houweling 2012).

These negative campaigning tactics and media framing of party positions may hurt parties' images and depress their electoral performance (Elmelund-Praestekaer 2008; Farrell and Schmitt-Beck 2002; Popkin 1991). A politician from the FDP of Germany summarized these risks well during a personal interview:

We have had this discussion before, and I think that in the end you may lose (if you target the broader public) because your strong supporters ... won't accept that you are now soft on that (particular issue) position and they will cut their support. But you won't gain in the general public as well because they won't believe you that you really do it from your heart. (FDP elite, July 2008)<sup>6</sup>

When the goal of a party is winning more votes by keeping its supporters attached and gaining/stealing new voters, parties have an incentive to try to make appeals to a broader electorate, that is, move beyond their supporters and appeal to voters with various, diverse ideological preferences. In the analysis that follows, I focus on the first-order empirical question of whether there is evidence that parties can benefit electorally from making a broad-appeal strategy. Questions related to the circumstances under which different appeals are made are certainly important, but they are only of interest if the benefits of appealing broadly can first be established. As a consequence, I first explore whether there is any evidence that a broad-appeal strategy helps parties using aggregate electoral data and then proceed to test the individual-level evidence regarding whether voters with diverse preferences feel closer to a party that is appealing broadly using survey data.

## Empirical Analysis

Appealing broadly to different electorates with diverse preferences requires parties to adopt various strategies, as alluded to above. Parties may take both left and right positions on various issues, use their manifestos to

appeal to their core voters and their leader and campaign rhetoric to appeal to the median voter, have two leaders who have diverse ideological positions, or be ambiguous/vague. In the end, the aim is to persuade a diverse group of voters that the party is ideologically closer to their preferences.

Given that there are various possible methods parties can use to broaden their appeal, it is hard, if not impossible, to directly measure the precise strategy. To do so would require a wide-ranging analysis of campaign speeches, ads, party manifestos, election debates, and so on. And, even if one were to collect these data, coding the broad-appeal strategy would require strong assumptions regarding how to classify specific speeches and issue positions. In addition, while the term *party strategy* is used to refer to actual party behavior, it is not the actual party positions, but voters' perceptions of these positions that influence their vote choice and determine the electoral consequences of a party strategy (Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2011).

As a result, I use the distributions of voter perceptions, that is, *perceptual disagreement*, about party left-right positions to measure the existence of a broad-appeal party strategy. Higher levels of perceptual disagreement among voters indicate that voters have diverse understandings of where the party is ideologically located, which I attribute to broad party appeals.

I collect survey data in nine Western European countries to measure the extent of citizens' disagreement about a party's left-right position. Data availability limits the set of cases to nine.<sup>7</sup> Table 1 lists the countries and the time periods for which I have the survey data available to measure changes in respondents' perceptions of parties' left-right positions.

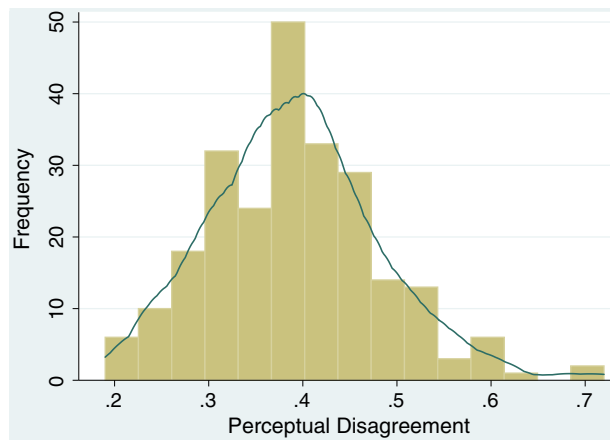
Perceptual disagreement about party positions is coded using the survey question that asks respondents to locate each political party in their country on the left-right scale. I use the perceptual agreement measure developed by van der Eijk (2001). van der Eijk proposes his measure for ordered rating scales, such as the left-right scale of election surveys. Using the distribution of respondents' placements of parties (the frequencies for each category) on the left-right scale, the original measure is bound between -1 and +1, where higher numbers indicate more

<sup>6</sup>In this article, I show that the broad-appeal strategy helps parties electorally in the short term, that is, in the election immediately following the broad-appeal strategy campaign. However, it is possible that the broad-appeal strategy may fail in the long term when the party in office fails to deliver its diverse campaign promises.

<sup>7</sup>The main constraint is the availability of National Election Studies for multiple consecutive elections in which voters are asked to locate political parties on the left-right scale. Post-Communist European countries are also excluded because elections, party campaigns, and voter decision-making still work differently in this region compared to Western Europe.

**TABLE 1 Countries and Election Periods Covered**

Countries	Elections
Denmark	1994–2005
Finland	2003–2011
Germany	1983–2009
Iceland	1999–2009
Netherlands	1981–2006
Norway	1985–2009
Portugal	2002–2009
Spain	1986–2008
Sweden	1982–2006

**FIGURE 1 The Distribution of Perceptual Disagreement Scores**

Note: The bars show the frequencies of perceptual disagreement scores, and the curve is the kernel density curve.

agreement.<sup>8</sup> I converted the variable so that 1 means full disagreement about the party position (a uniform distribution of perceptions for party X across the range of values on the left-right scale) and 0 means full agreement (all voters locate party X at the same location). Figure 1 shows the distribution of perceptual disagreement scores in the data. While the lower and upper bounds of the disagreement scale are 0 and 1, respectively, the values in my data of 60 parties across 43 elections in nine Western European countries range from 0.19 (the Swedish Left

Party VP in 1985) to 0.72 (Portuguese CDS-PP Alliance in 2009), with a mean of 0.40.<sup>9</sup>

My focus on the left-right scale, as opposed to more specific issue dimensions, is mainly a consequence of data limitations. The election surveys I use in this research consistently ask respondents to locate parties on the left-right scale, and there is no other issue dimension that is asked as commonly across countries or over time.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, I argue that, while the reliance on the left-right scale might be limiting to some extent, the use of it is appropriate to analyze the electoral consequences of the broad-appeal strategy. Party competition in Europe still takes place mainly along a left-right dimension (Budge et al. 2001; Fuchs and Klingemann 1989; but see Kitschelt 1994 and Marks et al. 2006), and the left-right scale still provides the summary view of politics in Europe (Aldrich, Dorabantu, and Fernandez 2009, 2010; Carkoglu 1995). Voters, politicians, and media alike define and utilize the left-right scale to simplify the communication between politicians and voters (Hinich and Munger 1997). While the meaning attributed to this “super-dimension” and the list of issues that map onto it differ between countries and across time (Gabel and Huber 2000), research shows that this dimension absorbs many issues beyond economic policies (e.g., environment and immigration) and is an important heuristic device voters use to understand complex politics and to decide on their vote choice (van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie 2005; van der Eijk, Franklin, and van der Brug 1999).

One may question the use of the perceptual disagreement variable as the proxy for the broad-appeal strategy because perceptual disagreement scores of parties may be artificially high/low due to some party or voter characteristics unrelated to party strategy. Given the lack of data on actual party strategies, we cannot directly test whether the broad-appeal strategy increases voter disagreement. However, we can rule out other potential factors that may artificially increase perceptual disagreement. First, one may argue that disagreement may be artificially high if voters, who locate the party on the left-right scale, do not know where the party is located. However, if voters are not politically informed, we should see similar disagreement scores for various parties in the same election and

<sup>8</sup>van der Eijk (2001) shows that using standard deviations around a party’s average perceived position is a more intuitive yet possibly biased measure for agreement (see the supporting information and van der Eijk 2001 for details). I also note that the correlation between the disagreement scores and the standard deviations in my data is 0.7.

<sup>9</sup>CDS-PP Alliance in Portugal in 2009 and the Basque Nationalist Party in 2000 are outliers, but the results are robust to dropping these cases from the analysis.

<sup>10</sup>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.

country. This is not the case in the data. Moreover, the main results from below stay robust across subgroups of voters when we calculate the disagreement scores separately for high and low politically interested voters.<sup>11</sup>

Second, certain party-level characteristics, and not necessarily party broad-appeal strategies, may affect perceptual disagreement scores. Specifically, given my focus on the left-right dimension, political parties that do not compete on this dimension (i.e., single-issue parties) may have artificially high disagreement scores because voters would not be able to locate them correctly on the left-right scale. Governing and large parties (in terms of their vote share) may have lower disagreement scores because of their high visibility, and not because of their strategy. At the same time, one may argue that given that governing parties in multiparty systems work in coalitions and hence adopt ideologically wide-ranging policies due to their coalitional structure, voters may have higher disagreement about their positions. Finally, one may argue that disagreement scores would be artificially smaller for parties at the extremes due to the ceiling effects of the ordered-rating scale (i.e., because the left-right scale cannot take values smaller/higher than certain values). The supporting information document shows that only the single-issue parties variable has a statistically significant effect on perceptual disagreement.<sup>12</sup> Single-issue parties have higher disagreement scores, possibly not because of an intentional broad-appeal strategy but because voters cannot locate these parties on the left-right scale. As a result, in the analyses below I ran the models first with the full sample and then with single-issue parties omitted.

A final check of the appropriateness of the disagreement measure for the broad-appeal strategy is a close examination of the data. Indeed, we see that the CDU Party in Germany, for instance, has higher disagreement scores (ranging from 0.4 to 0.6), and the quote from the party elite above in the theory section shows that the party consistently aims to appeal broadly to the German electorate. A more specific example is the Swedish Moderate Party. The party's disagreement scores were consistently low between 1982 and 2002 (e.g., 0.23, 0.21, and 0.21 for the 1994, 1998, and 2002 elections, respectively), but

the disagreement score jumped from 0.21 to 0.3 in 2006 when the new leader Fredrick Reinfeldt decided to appeal to centrist voters with a U-turn in the party's economic policy while keeping a right-wing stance on the party's energy policy in favor of continued support for nuclear power (Aylott and Bolin 2007).<sup>13</sup>

## Analyzing Aggregate Electoral Effects

Because I am interested in whether parties gain votes as they appeal more broadly, I calculated the change in perceived disagreement scores for the aggregate-level analysis ( $\Delta Disagreement_j$ ), where  $j$  is a political party. A positive value for this variable denotes an increase in perceptual disagreement about the party's position between elections  $t-1$  and  $t$ , that is, a more broad appeal by the party. The dependent variable is the change in vote share of political parties between election  $t-1$  and election  $t$  ( $\Delta Vote_j$ ).

Beyond perceptual disagreement, the aggregate model includes six additional variables. As I explained above, ideological moderation has been the focus of extensive scholarly work aimed at explaining parties' election performance (see, e.g., Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Ezrow 2005), yet it is a risky strategy for parties. To see how moderation fares compared to the broad-appeal strategy, I created a variable that codes party movement toward the mean voter position. To measure mean voter positions, I calculated the average left-right self-placements of voters from each survey. I then created a variable and coded it 1 if the party's perceived average position between election  $t-1$  and  $t$  moved toward this mean voter position, and  $-1$  if it moved away. Finally, I multiplied this variable by the absolute perceived party policy change. If a party moved 2 points on the 10-point left-right scale toward the mean voter position, for instance, the *Party Moderation<sub>j</sub>* variable is coded  $+2$ , and if it moved 2 points away, the variable is coded  $-2$ .

I also included a dummy variable that identifies governing party status (*In Government*), the gross domestic product per capita growth rate (*GDP Growth*), and their interaction (*Government*  $\times$  *GDP Growth*). Rose and Mackie (1983) show that the vote shares of governing parties are twice as likely to decrease relative to the last election than they are to increase, and the extensive economic voting literature suggests that governing parties are punished for their economic performance (see, e.g., Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000). The model also includes a single-issue party variable for those parties that do not

<sup>11</sup>These results, and all subsequent robustness checks, are reported in the supporting information document.

<sup>12</sup>I used the Comparative Manifesto Project data set to code the single-issue party variable. Using the 26 issues the project employs to locate parties on the left-right scale, I calculated the percentage of each election manifesto dedicated to these left-right issues. I then coded the single-issue party dummy variable 1 if a party had less than 38.82% of its manifesto dedicated to left-right issues (the mean value minus one standard deviation). These parties include many Green and anti-establishment parties.

<sup>13</sup>Given that the average absolute change in disagreement scores is 0.04, a change of 0.08 in the party's disagreement score is quite substantive.

compete on the left-right scale (see note 12 for information on the measurement of the variable). Finally, party fixed effects are included because there are many party-level factors that may affect parties' vote gains/losses that we cannot measure. These unmeasured factors can be related to party competence/valence evaluations (Clark 2009), party leadership, and party organizations (Tavits 2012).

The aggregate analysis encompasses 241 changes in party vote shares in 43 elections, across 60 parties in nine European countries. These data should be regarded as time-series cross-sectional. Estimating a simple regression on the pooled data may lead to erroneous conclusions if there are unobserved differences between elections (Hsiao 2003) and serially correlated errors (Beck and Katz 1995). The lagged dependent variable (LDV)  $Vote\ Change(t-1)$  ensures that the serially correlated errors are accounted for, and election clusters control for contemporaneous correlation across elections. In addition, LDV is included because a party that lost votes between  $t-2$  and  $t-1$  may be expected to gain votes between  $t-1$  and  $t$ , and vice versa (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009).

### Findings for the Aggregate Model

Table 2 presents the ordinary least squares regression results for the effects of changes in perceptual disagreement scores on changes in vote shares. To the extent that parties gain votes by appealing broadly, we should observe a positive and statistically significant coefficient estimate on the  $\Delta Disagreement_t$  variable. The first column presents the results using the full sample. In the second column, I drop single-issue parties, following the finding above that single-issue parties have larger disagreement scores (likely because they do not compete on the left-right scale). The coefficients for the disagreement variables are positive (23.09 and 26.41, respectively) and demonstrate that the broad-appeal strategy helps parties.

Substantively, this effect indicates that if the change in perceptual disagreement is 0.16 (i.e., highest disagreement change in the data) compared to -0.16 (i.e., the lowest disagreement change), the party vote share increases by 7.39% (8.45% in the second model). Given the values of the change in disagreement variable in my data, if the change in disagreement is 0.06 compared to -0.04 (one standard deviation below and above the mean change of 0.01 in the data), the party is expected to increase its vote share by about 2.31% (2.64% in the second model). The mean (absolute) vote change in the data is 3.3%, suggesting that the strategy substantively helps political parties.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Indeed, in the multiparty democracies of Europe, even less than 1% vote change may drastically change the political scene. In the

While there is a substantive and significant effect of perceptual disagreement on election results, policy moderation does not help parties, and in fact, it hurts them electorally, as expected. The coefficient for *Party Moderation*, -2.44, suggests that, controlling for the change in disagreement, a 1-point shift toward the center decreases the party vote share by 2.4%. The other control variables show that if the party was in the last government, and especially if the economy was weak, it loses votes, supporting the extensive economic voting literature. The LDV is in the expected direction and statistically significant, but the single-issue dummy variable does not have an independent effect on electoral performance.

In additional analyses, I tested the sensitivity of the results by replacing the membership of parties in the last government variable with a measure of parties' membership in the longest serving government in between two elections and by dropping the outlier parties, the Basque Nationalist Party in 2000 and the Portuguese CDS-PP Alliance in 2009, from the analysis. To check for potential country-level effects, I dropped one country at a time and ran the model on the remaining countries (i.e., jackknifing by country). I also checked the robustness of the results by including party extremeness as a control variable, operationalizing the variables using logarithmic transformations of parties' vote shares to account for interdependencies between party vote shares, measuring the disagreement variable using the perceptions of party supporters and not all voters, replicating the models with Tobit analysis, and dropping the LDV. None of these alternative specifications, reported in the supporting information document, affected the main results.

### Testing the Individual-Level Mechanism

I have argued that for the broad-appeal strategy to help parties electorally, parties should successfully target different groups of voters, convincing them the party is close to them ideologically. While the aggregate results indicate that this strategy helps parties electorally, they do not tell us whether parties are successful in persuading a broad set of voters about their ideological stances. I test this individual-level mechanism using the CSES data from

2013 German federal elections, FDP needed only 0.3% more votes to gain seats in the parliament. In addition, a closer look at the Swedish 2006 election confirms the importance of the party strategy for party performance. While the Moderate Party increased its vote share by 11% following a change in its disagreement score of 0.08 and formed the government, the Social Democrats lost 5% of their vote share after their disagreement score decreased by 0.05.



**TABLE 2 The Effect of Broad-Appeal Strategy on Election Results**

	All Sample	No Single-Issue Parties
$\Delta$ Disagreement ( $t$ )	23.091* (7.081)	26.411* (8.118)
Party Moderation	-2.443* (0.744)	-2.340* (0.886)
In Government (1: in govt.; 0: in opp.)	-4.205* (1.095)	-4.239* (1.225)
GDP per Capita Growth ( $t$ )	-0.248 (0.141)	-0.308 (0.159)
Government $\times$ GDP Growth	0.589 (0.331)	0.523 (0.370)
Single-Issue Party	-0.531 (0.851)	
Vote Change ( $t-1$ ) LDV	-0.401* (0.073)	-0.391* (0.075)
Constant	1.346* (0.350)	1.591* (0.394)
N/Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	241/0.23	215/0.19

Note: Dependent variable is *Change in Party Vote Share*. The numbers in parentheses are the election-clustered standard errors. The model also includes political party fixed effects, which are not reported.

\* $p < .05$ .

the same nine countries. The CSES data set includes nationally representative post-election surveys since the late 1990s and combines the individual-level survey data with data on systematic characteristics of countries and expert evaluations of political parties.<sup>15</sup>

The mechanism I test at the individual level is whether voters perceive political parties as closer to their own left-right position when they appeal to a broader set of voters. The dependent variable measures the absolute distance between the survey respondent's left-right self-placement and his or her placement of each party, *Perceived Distance<sub>ij</sub>*, where  $i$  is a voter and  $j$  is a party. Hence, each survey respondent enters the data as many times as the number of parties in that country. This type of data is called stacked data, where the unit of analysis is a party-voter dyad (Dahlberg 2009; van der Brug, Franklin, and Toka 2008) and where individual-party dyads are nested within higher levels of data, such as countries.

<sup>15</sup>The election surveys available in the CSES data for the countries under analysis are as follows: Denmark (1998–2005), Finland (2003–2011), Germany (1998–2009), Iceland (2003–2009), Netherlands (1998–2006), Norway (2001–2005), Portugal (2002–2009), Spain (1996–2008), and Sweden (1998–2006). I use the CSES surveys and not the whole set of election surveys I used for the aggregate analysis because the CSES project has comparable question formats across surveys. In addition, the CSES data publish expert locations of political parties, which I use as a proxy measure for actual party positions.

As in the aggregate data analysis, I use perceptual disagreement scores as a proxy for the party strategy. The appropriate test of whether voters perceive parties as more proximate as the parties' disagreement scores increases is not to test the direct effect of disagreement on perceived distances but to examine how perceptual disagreement affects the relationship between actual and perceived distances. That is, if voters perceive a broad-appealing party (i.e., a party with a high level of disagreement) closer to their own ideological position compared to the party's actual distance from them, this would support the argument that voters perceive these parties as closer than they actually are.

To construct this interaction effect between disagreement and actual distance of the party to the voter, I first calculated the absolute distance between each voter's self-rated position on the left-right scale and the actual position of the party, as perceived by political experts (*Actual Distance<sub>ij</sub>*), and then interacted this actual distance with the perceptual disagreement variable.<sup>16</sup> The CSES data include expert perceptions of a party's left-right positions.

<sup>16</sup>One may argue that the broad-appeal strategy may also affect expert perceptions, and hence their perceptions may not reflect the actual party position. However, if the strategy affects experts and voters similarly, then the actual distance variable underestimates the actual distance. Therefore, the results I report are conservative estimates of how voters perceive broad-appeal parties in comparison to the actual party position. In addition, a more accurate

I use the position of each party as perceived by the CSES experts to measure the actual position of the party.<sup>17</sup> In order to show that voters perceive these broad-appeal parties as closer to their own position, the perceived distance should become smaller compared to the actual distance as perceptual disagreement increases (a negative coefficient for the interaction variable between the *Actual Distance* and *Disagreement* variables).

The dyad-level data I use have a hierarchical structure because the main variables in the stacked data are measured at different levels (i.e., disagreement is measured at the party level, whereas the dependent variable is measured at the individual-party dyadic level). In total, there are six levels in the data, each of which may impose measured and unmeasured effects on the dependent variable (for a similar data structure, see Fortunato and Stevenson 2013). These six levels are the country level, survey/election level, party level, respondent level, election-specific party level, and party-specific respondent level. The main independent variables, *Disagreement<sub>ij</sub>* and *Actual Distance<sub>ij</sub>*, are measured at the party and the party-specific respondent levels, respectively. I include control variables from different levels and election/survey fixed effects to control for election-specific factors. In the supporting information, I explain why each variable is included and how I measure these variables. I use a multilevel model to account for the hierarchical data structure and run the models while accounting for the unmeasured effects in the party and election-specific party levels.

## Results for the Individual-Level Mechanism

Do voters perceive broadly appealing parties as more proximate to their own positions than where the parties actually are? Table 3 presents the results for the multilevel model. Column 1 presents the results using data from all respondents. To recap, in order to conclude that voters

measure of party position is not available. Manifesto data may be an alternative. However, because broad-appeal strategy is a campaign strategy that goes beyond the manifesto position of the party (see the definition of the German SPD's 1998 and 2013 strategies above) and because of the different scales used in both projects, I report the results with the expert placements.

<sup>17</sup>One problem with the CSES expert perceptions is that the data often use only one expert's coding (i.e., the country expert who is responsible for collecting and sharing the data). To ensure that the results are not driven by a single expert's perceptions, I replicated the models by replacing the expert perceptions from the CSES data with the Chapel Hill expert data. The two experts' data correlate at 0.95, and the results continue to support the main findings (see the supporting information). However, because Chapel Hill data do not include Iceland or Norway and because the years of the surveys do not match in many instances, here I report the results with the CSES data.

perceive parties to be closer to their preferred positions compared to parties' actual positions as parties follow a broad-appeal strategy (i.e., as perceptual disagreement increases), we should see a negative and statistically significant coefficient on the interaction variable. There is support for the hypothesis. The second column replicates the same model but drops single-issue parties (consistent with the analyses above). These results still show robust effects of disagreement on voter perceptions.<sup>18</sup>

To better interpret the effects of perceptual disagreement on voter perceptions, I present Figure 2. The figure shows the marginal effect of perceptual disagreement (along with its 99% confidence intervals due to the large number of data points) for different values of *Actual Distance* using column 1 in Table 3.

When a voter is at the party's actual position (i.e., at 0 on the x-axis), disagreement does not have a significant effect on her perception. This suggests that parties can still keep their ideologically core supporters attached to the party. The negative marginal effect for disagreement suggests that as disagreement increases, voters perceive parties as closer to their ideal positions. When the actual distance to the party is 2.5, for instance (the average distance in the data), the marginal effect of perceived disagreement is about -1.8, suggesting that when perceived disagreement changes from 0 to 1, voters who are 2.5 points away from the party perceive the party as only 0.7 point away, on average. Given the disagreement score values in my data, if disagreement changes from 0.2 to 0.6, voters who are 2.5 points away from the party would perceive the party at around 1.8, on average.

These results support the individual-level mechanism outlined above. However, one may argue that the results are driven by party supporters' perceptions. As I stated above, according to the projection literature, party supporters may perceive a party as closer to their position because they identify with the party. However, for the broad-appeal strategy theory to be feasible, the party should also be able to convince other voters that the party is ideologically closer to them. If we see consistent effects of disagreement on those respondents who are not the supporters of the party, then this would support the argument that parties are successfully convincing other voters that they are representing their interests. To

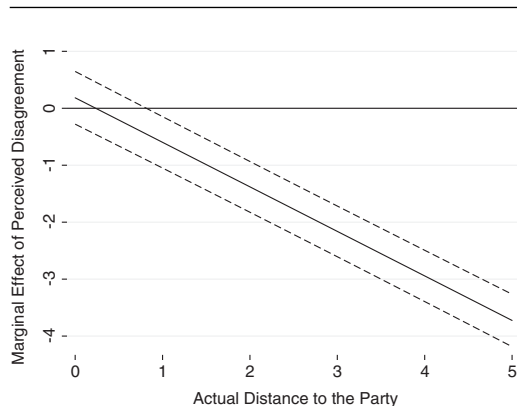
<sup>18</sup>While I hypothesized and tested the effect of perceptual disagreement on party vote shares at the aggregate level, I do not test whether it affects vote choice. Disagreement should affect perceived distance and motivate *some* voters to change their votes in favor of the party. But not all voters will change their votes. They may have other reasons to vote for a different party (e.g., party identification or habit), or there may be other parties that they perceive as closer than the broad-appealing party. But some will change their vote choice, and I argue that this group of new voters explains the positive effect of the strategy on aggregate electoral performance.

**TABLE 3 Analysis of the Individual-Level Mechanism**

	Model 1: All Voters	Model 2: No Single-Issue Parties	Model 3: Other Voters
<b>Actual Distance</b>	<b>1.140*</b>	<b>1.159*</b>	<b>1.162*</b>
	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.009)
<b>Disagreement</b>	<b>0.184</b>	<b>0.229</b>	<b>−0.117</b>
	(0.179)	(0.195)	(0.196)
<b>Disagreement × Actual Distance</b>	<b>−0.782*</b>	<b>−0.834*</b>	<b>−0.757*</b>
	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.021)
Party Supporter	−0.866*	−0.841*	
	(0.012)	(0.012)	
Education	0.002	0.002	0.003
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Single-Issue Party	0.056		0.043
	(0.033)		(0.035)
In Government	0.145*	0.162*	0.164*
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Vote Share	0.009*	0.007*	0.009*
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Intercept	0.598*	0.598*	0.601*
	(0.170)	(0.168)	(0.188)
Random Effect: Party	0.080*	0.081*	0.100*
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.031)
Random Effect: Party-Elect	0.073*	0.066*	0.088*
	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.021)
Random Effect: Residual	2.660*	2.596*	2.714*
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Log Likelihood	−455,014.92	−418,311.21	−410,299.68
N	238,341	220,526	213,793

Note: Dependent variable is the absolute distance between self position and perceived party position. The numbers in parentheses are standard errors. The results are based on multilevel analyses with random intercepts for the party and party-election levels of the data. The models also include election/survey fixed effects, which are not reported.

\* $p < .05$ .

**FIGURE 2 Marginal Effect of Perceived Disagreement on Perceived Distance**

Note: The solid line is the marginal effect of perceived disagreement on perceived absolute distance. The dashed lines show the 99% confidence intervals. The marginal effect is calculated based on the coefficients from Model 1 in Table 3.

ensure that the effect is not due to supporters' projection bias, I ran the model only for those voters who do not identify with the focal party in column 3 of Table 3. The results show that they are robust even when we drop the party's supporters from the analysis. Other respondents, on average, perceive a party's position to be closer as disagreement increases. The interaction coefficient shows that voters who do not support the party still perceive it to be closer to their preferred position as perceptual disagreement increases. These robust results suggest that projection effects on the part of party supporters do not drive these results.

## Conclusion

Parties may be criticized for not taking clear and distinguished positions. However, when political parties aim to increase their vote shares, appealing broadly to attract different groups of voters with diverse preferences may

be a winning strategy in the short term. If parties can successfully convince different groups of voters that they are ideologically close to them, they can win the hearts and minds of a broader electorate. Using survey and electoral data from nine Western European democracies, I demonstrated that this strategy helps parties gain votes in elections. The individual-level analysis suggests that voters perceive these parties to be, on average, closer to their own position. These findings contribute to the growing literature examining the electoral consequences of party strategies (Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012; Tomz and van Houweling 2009).

While parties appear to benefit from this strategy as long as they can convince voters that they are a good choice, the findings I present depict a rather depressing story for voters, one that tells us that parties may be able to beguile voters with their strategies. Is V. O. Key right when he says that “the voice of the people is but an echo” (1966, 2)? The answer to this question requires more detailed research on what affects voter perceptions and how fragile those perceptions are. However, regarding the effects of party strategies on perceptions, we may conclude on a potential positive note. Just because the current data tell us that parties appear to convince voters that they are ideologically close to them does not mean that there are no limits to the effects of this strategy. Parties may in fact be punished for their broad appeals. The media and rival parties may attack the party and depict it as insincere or opportunistic. This in turn may alienate some voters. I have checked the data for this possible curvilinear effect of the broad-appeal strategy, but because of the limits of the observed data, there does not appear to be an upper threshold. The negative effect may also manifest itself over the long run if parties continuously adopt the strategy but fail to deliver broadly appealing policies when in office (see also note 6). The question about the limits of this party strategy may require either a formal model with comparative statics or a more qualitative or expanded analysis. Survey questions asking voters to evaluate party strategies would also open new avenues of research.

The electoral consequences of the broad-appeal strategy across issue dimensions also demand attention. Due mainly to the limited survey data, I relied solely on the left-right positions of political parties as perceived by voters to test the hypotheses. However, the broad-appeal strategy might also be multidimensional when parties take one position on the left-right dimension and another position on a different, orthogonal dimension to appeal to different groups of voters with diverse interests. Existing survey data unfortunately do not allow us to effectively

test the electoral consequences of this multidimensional strategy.

There almost certainly are other consequences of appealing to different groups of voters that are beyond the scope of this research. As an example, in multiparty systems elections are important, but equally important are government formations. One may argue that parties with broader appeals are more likely to be included in coalition governments, given that their broader stances can be seen as attractive for potential coalition partners. Additional questions regarding the effects of this strategy on coalition duration, satisfaction with democracy, trust in parties, and so on await scholarly attention.

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## Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

**Table S1:** Descriptive Statistics

**Table S2:** The Effects Party Characteristics on Changes in Perceptual Disagreement (DV: Change in Perceptual Agreement)

**Table S3:** The Effects of Political Interest (DV: Change in Party Vote Share)

**Table S4:** Aggregate Model Sensitivity Checks I (DV: Change in Party Vote Share)

**Table S5:** Aggregate Model Sensitivity Checks I (DV: Change in Party Vote Share)

**Table S6:** Jackknifing Results (DV: Change in Party Vote Share)

**Table S7:** Sensitivity Check for the Individual-Level Models (DV: Absolute Perceptual Distance)