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

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Abstract: Scholars are increasingly interested in knowing whether voters understand party positions. However, prior work has focused on parties' own policy messages only, ignoring the fact that, in real life, parties are engaged in constant exchange with their rivals about their policy positions. This creates possibilities for rival parties to misconstrue each other's policy messages. We argue that such message distortion by rival parties undermines voters' ability to place the focal party correctly. Using observational and experimental data, we show support for this expectation. We also demonstrate that message distortion by rivals affects all voters, regardless of whether they support the rival party, the focal party, or neither. These findings have important implications for party strategies and research on comparative party politics.

A vast literature has explored whether and how voters understand party positions (Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu 2011; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014). This work has focused on parties' *own* messages about their positions. Yet, in the real world, these messages never occur in a vacuum. Instead, parties are engaged in constant exchange with their rivals about their policy positions. This is particularly true during election campaigns when parties often discuss and evaluate each other's policy offerings, and voters receive information about a focal party's positions from a mix of sources. Such exchange during campaigns creates possibilities for rival parties to misconstrue or distort each other's policy messages. Despite its prevalence in the real world, how such message distortion affects voters has not received any scholarly attention.

We explore voter reactions to message distortion. When rivals distort the focal party message, do voters listen? Does message distortion by rivals affect voters' perception of the focal party's position? We theorize that this is indeed the case: on average, message distortion by a rival party is likely to bias voter perception of the focal party's position. This happens because an average voter is likely to believe the distorted message at least to some degree. Building on the literature on partisan motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006), we further argue that this effect might be mediated by partisanship. Partisans of both parties are more likely to believe their own party's messages. Hence, while the focal party supporters and independents may ignore the distorted message, rival party supporters are likely to believe it. As a result, the latter are more likely than the former to have a biased understanding of the focal party position because of message distortion.

We test the effects of message distortion on voter perceptions with two studies. First, using novel data from nine European democracies, we cross-nationally test how voter perceptions of party policy positions change when parties distort each other's messages. The data

for this study come from the Comparative Campaign Dynamics (CCD) dataset (Debus, Somer-Topcu, and Tavits 2018). Using newspaper coverage of political events, the dataset codes how parties portray each other's policy positions during the one-month election campaign period. We combine these data with surveys to show that voter perceptions of the focal party positions are biased when its main rival distorts the focal party's message. This effect is somewhat stronger for rival party supporters but exists even for the focal party's own supporters, voters of third parties, and political independents. This cross-national analysis is important because it establishes a broad and generalizable pattern that is present across countries, parties, and elections.

We then supplement these findings with a survey experiment in the UK. In addition to offering better causal leverage, our micro level experiment also allows adding the kind of nuance that was not possible in the cross-national analysis due to data limitations. For example, we can explore message distortion by a leftist vs. a rightist party, beyond the left-right super issue, and across issues of different salience. Furthermore, the experimental design also allows us to explore a more specific type of distortion: portraying the focal party as more extreme. Given the recent findings that perceptions of extremism undermine electability (Johns and Kölln 2019), this type of distortion is theoretically the most interesting and relevant. More specifically, we focus on two different policy areas (environment and immigration) and compare the perceptions of respondents in two experimental conditions: (1) those who only read the focal party's own message about the policy (control group), and (2) those who read both the party's own message and also a rival's distortion of that message (treatment group). We again show that message distortion by rival parties biases voter perceptions of the focal party's position. This effect is present for non-copartisans (i.e., those who do not identify with the focal party) as well as for the

focal party's own supporters. It holds across both issues despite their different salience and regardless of the ideological leanings (leftist vs. rightist) of the focal and rival parties.

In short, across two very different studies, using different design and data, we find consistent evidence that message distortion matters and shapes voter perception of parties. Our findings imply that political rhetoric is a powerful campaign tool that parties can use to reach not only supporters but also those parts of the electorate that seemed out of reach: independents and even political rivals. This important insight contributes to the scholarship on voter perceptions of party positions (Dalton and McCallister 2015; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014), to our understanding of (negative) campaigning in multi-party elections (Nai and Walter 2015; Jung and Tavits 2020), and to the study of partisan motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006). We elaborate on these contributions in the conclusion.

Party Positions and Message Distortion

Prior work suggests that voters generally learn about the issue positions of candidates and parties through election campaigns (see Gelman and King 1993; see also Chaffee and Kanihan 1997; Nadeau et al. 2008). Furthermore, recent comparative work shows compelling evidence that party messages about their policy positions during election campaigns significantly affect the accuracy of voter perceptions of those positions (Somer-Topcu et al. 2020; see also Banducci et al. 2015; van der Meer et al. 2016). In short, parties can help voters acquire substantive information about their policy positions, and thereby foster voters' ability to accurately identify what these parties stand for on the left-right scale.

However, real-life campaign environments combine information from various sources, not only from the focal party itself. And information from other sources may not always be consistent with the party's own messages (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1991; Stevenson

and Vavreck 2000). A critical source of inconsistency is the campaign rhetoric of rival parties, who may be presenting conflicting information about the focal party's position. Note that differences in the message can be intentional and strategic, or they can be accidental. We call such rival party behavior (i.e., spreading messages about another party's issue position that conflict with that party's own messages about that issue) as *message distortion*.

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

As this example shows, parties may represent their rivals' issue positions differently, or they may be selective about what they cover about the focal party's messages. These distortions to the party's own message create an environment where voters hear inconsistent messages about the focal party's issue positions.

Message Distortion and Voter Response

How do these inconsistent messages about party positions affect voters' ability to understand these positions? The literature on framing appears to provide insights into the role of information distortion on voter perceptions. There is ample evidence that framing, i.e., providing alternative interpretations of an issue or event, can significantly change people's attitudes and perceptions (Chong and Druckman 2007, 2013; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Entman 2007; Hänggli and Kriesi 2010; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Sniderman and Theriault 2004). Message distortion does more than change the frame, however. It also changes the content. Still, one relatively straightforward prediction that follows from exposure to conflicting information is that the more people hear distorted or selective information, the more likely are they to misperceive the true position of the party. If voters hear the same message from the focal party itself as well as from other sources, they are more likely to correctly place the party on the ideological scale, because the information from different sources gets reinforced. If, however, they hear different and potentially conflicting information about a party's positions, their guesses about those positions are likely to be less accurate, i.e., the focal party's position as portrayed by the party itself and voter perception of that position are less likely to correspond. Even if voters are not entirely persuaded by the message of the rival (although some might be), they may be nudged in the rival's direction and believe that the "true" position of the focal party is somewhere in between what the party itself is saying and what the rival is saying. In either case, biased perceptions result. This argument leads to our first, *Accuracy Hypothesis*:

> Hypothesis 1 (*Accuracy*): The more a rival party distorts the focal party's position on an issue, the less accurate the voter perception of the focal party position on that issue.

Hypothesis 1 describes an average effect. However, some voters may be more receptive to the messages by rivals than others. More specifically, we theorize that the average effect is likely conditioned by partisanship (see, e.g., Aaroe 2012, Nicholson 2011). According to the theory of partisan motivated reasoning, voters pay more attention to the messages consistent with their partisan identity (Bolsen, Druckman, Cook 2014), and are more likely to assess their own party's message positively (see., e.g., Bisgaard 2015; Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Cohen 2003; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Taber and Lodge 2006). At the same time, partisan identity also motivates voters to distance themselves from the rival parties (i.e., the partisan out-group). Therefore, messages from those parties that the voter does not identify with are more likely to be dismissed and discounted (Aaroe 2012; Lavine et al. 2012; Nicolson 2012). This partisan motivated reasoning literature mainly draws from the social identity theory (SIT), which suggests that group identities are detrimental to how people form opinions (Green, Palmquist, Schickler 2002, Nicholson 2012). According to SIT, individuals classify people who share certain characteristics (ethnicity, race, as well as partisanship) as in-group, while perceiving those who do not share those characteristics as out-group. This classification has attitudinal consequences, whereby people feel closer and more in agreement with the in-group, and dislike and reject the opinions and preferences of the out-group.

Following the partisan motivated reasoning literature, we expect the supporters of the rival party to be most receptive to the distorted message put forth by their party. These rival partisans should then be most likely to develop inaccurate perceptions of the focal party's position: they are more likely to believe that the focal party is located not where it says it is but where the rival claims it is. This line of reasoning also suggests that supporters

of the focal party, whose message is being distorted, as well as supporters of the third parties and political independents are less likely to be swayed by the rival party's message distortion.

As an example, we discussed how the Labour Party advocated a moderate immigration position by highlighting the need for and the utility of immigrants while acknowledging the need for having some controls over immigration numbers. The Conservative Party, on the other hand, attempted to show the Labour as a pro-immigrant party with uncontrolled immigration policy. Following our argument, we expect the Conservative Party supporters to locate the Labour Party at an extreme pro-immigration position, even after hearing what the Labour Party itself advocates. This is because we expect the Conservative supporters to reject the Labour's own message and buy more into how the Conservative Party is positioning the Labour on this issue. We expect Labour Party's own supporters, supporters of the third parties, and independents to be less likely to respond to the message distortion by the Conservatives. In short, the argument above leads to our second, conditional hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 2 (*Accuracy and Partisanship*): The effect of rival party distortion of the focal party's message is stronger for the supporters of the rival party.

Research Design

We conducted two studies to test how rival party distortion of focal party's message affects voter perceptions of focal party's position. Study 1 is a cross-national observational analysis using novel data collected as part of the Comparative Campaign Dynamics (CCD) project (Debus, Somer-Topcu, and Tavits 2018). The project collected data on media coverage of party messages

during election campaigns from 17 elections across nine European countries: the Czech Republic (2010, 2013), Denmark (2007, 2011), Germany (2009, 2013), the Netherlands (2010, 2012), Poland (2007, 2011), Portugal (2009, 2011), Spain (2008), Sweden (2014), and the UK (2005, 2010, 2015).[1] This country selection allows for variance across several potentially relevant contextual factors and allows us to make generalizable inferences about the effects of party rhetoric on perceptions for all advanced democracies. The data for the dependent variable, voters' perceptions of party positions, come from surveys conducted *after* each campaign period. Most of these survey data are available via the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) modules 2-4, or through recent national election studies.[2]

Study 1 allows us to establish broad cross-national patterns that hold across countries, parties, and elections. However, the cross-national data, while novel and comprehensive, are limited in coverage, nuance, and causal leverage. We therefore supplement the observational analysis with Study 2, which is a survey experiment that we fielded in the UK between September 18 and October 11, 2019 using the online survey company, Prolific. The goal of Study 2 is to offer a more rigorous identification of the effect of party message distortions and

[1] The CCD dataset also includes two elections from Hungary and the 2010 election from Sweden but these data are excluded from the analysis here because there are no appropriate survey data for these cases. More details on the CCD dataset can be found in the Supplementary Materials (SM.1).

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

enhance the internal validity of our results. The experiment also allows us to explore the effect of message distortion in a more nuanced manner than was possible in the cross-national analysis. For example, we can look separately at message distortion by a leftist vs. a rightist party, and consider party positions beyond the left-right super issue on specific issues of different salience. Furthermore, we can explore the theoretically most interesting and relevant type of distortion: portraying the focal party as more extreme. We begin by describing the observational analysis before presenting results from the experimental study.

Study 1: Cross-National Observational Analysis

Study 1 uses cross-national individual-level data with a respondent-party dyad as the unit of analysis. We focus on the two largest parties (in terms of vote share) in each country, and each survey respondent enters the dataset once for each party.[3] The CCD reports the issue positions of more than two parties in each country (ranging from the minimum of five parties in the UK to the maximum of ten parties in Sweden). However, we focus on the two largest parties for several reasons. First, while the CCD has good country-election coverage, the data were coded using content analysis of 120-200 newspaper articles from the two highest-circulating newspapers per election campaign for each country. Therefore, the dataset is most detailed (and accurate) for the rhetoric of the major political parties and becomes scarcer and less reliable for the smaller ones. Second, and related, news media heavily focus on the top two parties in each country, even in crowded systems like the Netherlands or Sweden.[4] This suggests that voters are more likely to be

[3] SM.3 lists these top two parties used in the observational analyses.

[4] The CCD dataset codes all cover-page election related articles and 5% random sample of the remaining election-related articles for the one-month campaign period before each election.

exposed to news about how the two main rivals present their own positions and distort each other's position. Focusing on the top two parties therefore best captures what voters actually hear during election campaigns. Adding messages from third parties, which voters are less likely to hear, would increase measurement error and lead to inefficient estimates. Third, our experiment (Study 2) uses the two largest parties in the UK: the Labour and the Conservatives. By focusing on the two largest parties here as well gives us a parallel design for the observational analysis.

Variables

Our dependent variable (*Perceived party position*) is the respondent's placement of a party on the left-right dimension, which ranges from 0 to 10, where "0" is the most leftist and "10" the most rightist position.[5] To test our hypotheses, we also need information about where each party locates itself and their rival on the left-right scale (for hypotheses 1 and 2), and respondent's partisanship (for hypothesis 2).

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

According to the dataset, in the UK, more than 60% of the articles are about the Labour or the Conservative Party. Even in more crowded systems, such as the Netherlands, more than 40% of the articles are about the top-two rivals, VVD and PvdA.

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

To measure left-right positions of parties (both in terms of focal party self-placement and focal party placement according to rival party's rhetoric), we rely on the CCD. This dataset includes, among other things, data on media coverage of parties' statements about themselves and their rivals. The dataset is based on election-related coverage during one month pre-election campaign period in two major daily newspapers (one left-leaning, one right-leaning) in the country-elections listed above. The project codes all front-page articles and a five percent random sample of remaining election-related articles for each newspaper. Somer-Topcu, Tavits, and Baumann (2020) provides details of the data collection procedures, the list of the specific newspapers used, the number of articles coded, and the number of parties' issue statements included in the dataset.

The CCD is uniquely suited for our purposes. It is the only cross-national dataset that provides detailed information about what parties say about themselves and others. Specifically, it codes detailed information about party statements on several specific issues, mainly following the categories identified in the Manifesto Research on Political Representation project dataset (MARPOR) (Volkens et al. 2019). This allows us to identify, for each party, a collection of statements about their own positions, and a collection of statements that each rival party has made about their positions.

When measuring the issue positions of parties, we followed the procedures specified in Somer-Topcu, Tavits, and Baumann (2020), which were inspired by the coding of parties' left-right position in MARPOR (Volkens et al. 2019). First, we calculated the share of each party's coverage dedicated to each issue (in proportion to the total number of issue statements that the party made during the campaign). Then, we summed the shares for rightist statements and subtracted the summed shares of leftist statements to get the left-right position of each party

(*Party self-placement*).[6] After that, we repeated the same procedure with statements made by the rival party about the focal party to find the *Distorted placement* for each party on the left-right scale. Both self and distorted positions range from -1 to +1, where negative values indicate a leftist position, and positive values indicate a rightist position. For the eventual analysis, we also calculated a variable that measures the *Extent of distortion* for each party: the absolute distance between their *Party self-placement* and *Distorted placement*. Such measurement allows us to explore the most general effects of message distortion because it covers all possible deviations, regardless of their direction, from the focal party's own message. It matches our goal for Study 1 – establishing broad patterns – and is also the best measure that the limitations of the cross-national data allow. Adding more nuance to this measure is not straightforward and would require slicing the data too thin to allow for meaningful analysis.[7] As we explained above, we

[6] SM.2 lists which issues we included, how they match up with the MARPOR categories and which issues are categorized as leftist vs. rightist for the purposes of generating parties' left-right positions. As we note, the correlation between the parties' manifesto left-right positions and their CCD dataset left-right positions is 0.6. This suggests that parties use their campaigns to mostly advance their manifesto positions but also discuss additional issues and deviate somewhat from the manifestos due to different campaign dynamics.

[7] In about half the cases, leftist (rightist) party message is distorted to look rightist (leftist). Whether this counts as distortion in the direction of moderation or extremism is not clear. Furthermore, accounting for the direction of distortion requires separate analysis for each type of distortion. Given that the number of party-elections in our data is only 34, separate analyses for

added Study 2 to address the limitations of the cross-national analysis. That study allows us to complement the analysis of general deviations from self-placement and consider how voters respond when the focal party message is distorted to look more extreme.

The data have a hierarchical structure with variables being measured at different levels (country, election, party-dyad, and respondent). To control for any unmeasured party-level and election-specific factors, we run a multi-level model that accounts for these effects by incorporating a random intercept for the election and party-dyad levels. We also include country fixed effects because party positions and voter perceptions are not fully symmetric across countries, i.e., parties' and voters' mean positions may be shifted to either side of the left-right dimension.[8]

Analysis and Results

To test the accuracy hypothesis (H1), we run an interaction model, where the constituent terms are *Party self-placement* and the *Extent of distortion*. According to our hypothesis, we expect *Party self-placement* to have a positive and statistically significant coefficient. This would

(a) the ambiguous cases mentioned above, (b) distortions in the direction of moderation, and (c) distortions in the direction of extremism would be underpowered and not meaningful.

[8] Our main models do not include additional controls because there are no obvious factors that would simultaneously affect our outcome (voter perceptions of party positions) and independent variables (the party's self-placement and the extent of party distortion). That said, perception studies commonly include controls for parties' governing status and for various individual-level variables, such as gender, age, and political knowledge/education (e.g., Dahlberg 2009). In SM.4.1 we report models that include these controls. Our results stay robust.

suggest that, when there is no distortion (*Extent of distortion* is 0), voter perceptions match up with party positions. We also expect the interaction term to have a negative and statistically significant coefficient, which would mean that as the extent of distortion increases, voter perceptions start deviating from the party's self-placement. To test the partisanship hypothesis (H2), we run the same models separately for the *Focal party supporters*, *Rival party supporters*, *Third party supporters*, and *Independents*. Here, we expect these effects to be stronger for rival party supporters (i.e., the supporters of the party that distorts the focal party's position) than for the other groups.

Table 1 presents the results. Model 1 includes all respondents, while Models 2-5 show the results for the different partisans. The results suggest that *all respondents* react similarly to message distortion. While the effects are slightly stronger for the supporters of the rival party than other respondents, the effects are very similar across all groups.

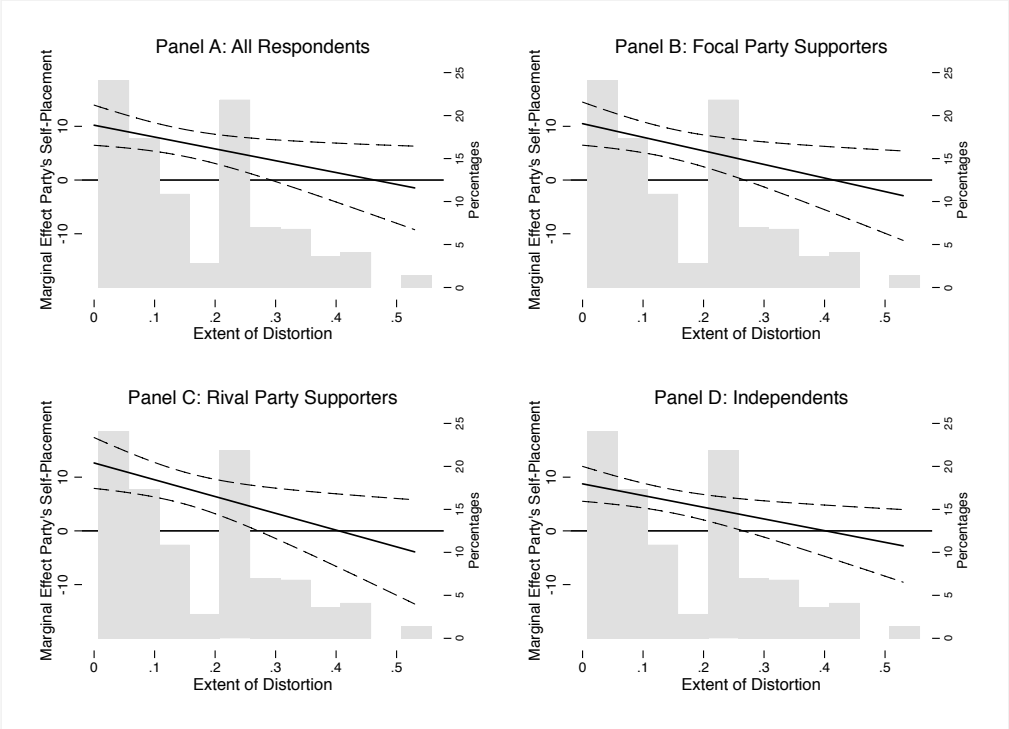
Table 1: The conditional effect of extent of distortion on voter perceptions of party positions, cross-national analysis

	Model 1 All Respondents	Model 2 Focal Party Supporters	Model 3 Rival Party Supporters	Model 4 Third Party Supporters	Model 5 Independents
Party Self-Placement	10.211* (1.908)	10.500* (2.045)	12.643* (2.414)	10.571* (1.813)	8.759* (1.657)
Extent of Distortion	3.496 (1.792)	3.213 (1.917)	4.489* (2.189)	3.097 (1.713)	3.433* (1.553)
Party Self-Placement X Extent of Distortion	-22.028* (9.757)	-25.300* (10.396)	-31.231* (12.438)	-20.805* (9.267)	-21.787* (8.473)
Constant	4.802* (1.958)	4.368* (2.091)	3.482 (2.457)	5.538* (1.865)	4.087* (1.704)
Random effect: Election	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)
Random effect: Party-Dyad	0.940* (0.248)	1.054* (0.285)	1.287* (0.350)	0.840* (0.224)	0.696* (0.195)
Random effect: Residual	4.104* (0.030)	3.648* (0.057)	4.713* (0.074)	3.471* (0.048)	4.204* (0.056)
Log likelihood	-82667.96	-17011.32	-18063.08	-22920.91	-24115.69
N	38,866	8,204	8,205	11,199	11,258

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

Figure 1 presents the marginal effects of *Party self-placement* for the different values of *Extent of distortion* for all respondents (panel A), focal party supporters (panel B), rival party supporters (panel C), and independents (panel D).[9] The x-axis indicates the extent of distortion. While the variable has a theoretical range from 0 to 2 (where 0 refers to a case when there is no distortion, and 2 refers to a case where the party locates itself at -1 while the distorted party position is at +1 on the -1 to +1 scale, or vice versa), the largest distortion value in our dataset is 0.54 (Swedish Social Democratic Labour Party's distortion of the Moderate Party's position), with a standard deviation of 0.14. Therefore, the x-axis values range from 0 to 0.54.

Figure 1: The conditional effect of *Party self-placement* on *Perceived party position* at different levels of *Extent of distortion*



Note: The solid lines represent the marginal effects of self-placement on perceptions of party positions at different values of the extent of distortion variable. The dotted lines are the 95% confidence intervals. The gray bars show the distribution of the extent of distortion variable.

[9] The graph for the third-party supporters shows very similar marginal effects. We do not present it due to space constraints.

Panel A shows that when the extent of distortion is 0, party messages about their policy positions and voter perceptions of those positions are positively correlated. This positive effect weakens as distortion increases. It loses significance altogether (i.e., the confidence interval crosses zero) at high levels of message distortion. More specifically, focal party's self-placement no longer affects voter perceptions once the *Extent of Distortion* (i.e., the difference between party's self-placement and its placement by the rival) reaches 0.3 (on the -1 to +1 scale). In short, message distortion by the rival party significantly affects voter perceptions. When the extent of this distortion is high, voter perceptions of focal party position no longer correspond with focal party's self-placement.

The effects are very similar if we look separately at the focal party supporters (panel B in Figure 1), rival party supporters (panel C), or independents (panel D). When distortion is low, both focal and rival party supporters' and independents' perception of the focal party's position corresponds with the party's own self-placement. All three groups also react similarly to distortion: the higher the extent of distortion, the more likely are the focal and the rival party supporters and independents to misplace the focal party. While the effect of distortion is stronger for rival party supporters (the marginal effects is slightly steeper), the differences are not statistically significant. These results are interesting because they run counter to the expectations from the literature on partisan motivated reasoning (our H2) according to which partisans should be more likely to listen to their own party. That is, rival party supporters should have been most (and focal party supporters least) affected by message distortion by rivals. The fact that the effect of distortion is relatively equal across all groups suggests that message distortion is a potentially powerful campaign tool because it can equally effectively reach out-partisans as it does co-partisans.

Study 2: Experimental Analysis

The cross-national observational analysis has high external validity and can provide generalizable evidence of broad patterns. Nevertheless, due to data limitations described above, the analysis remains relatively crude and does not allow us to causally identify the effect of message distortion on voter perceptions of party positions. To address these limitations, we conducted a second, experimental study. Using a between-subjects design whereby we experimentally manipulate individuals' exposure to rival party distortion of the focal party's message, we can examine how message distortion affects perceptions. As we discussed earlier, the experimental design offers other benefits: it allows us to move beyond the left-right super issue and explore message distortion on specific policy domains of varying levels of salience, examine whether distortion works differently for leftist vs. rightist parties, and focus on the type of distortion that is theoretically most interesting: portraying rivals as extremists.[10]

We conducted the experiment as part of an online survey fielded in the UK, which serves as an appropriate case for two main reasons. First, we are interested in exploring the effects of party rhetoric on voter perceptions, and therefore, need to run the study in an environment where political parties (rather than candidates) are the main political actors. The UK has a strong and majoritarian parliamentarism, which revolves around two dominant political parties: the Conservatives and the Labour. Having two dominant (one center-right and one center-left) parties is the second reason why focusing on the UK is advantageous: with most voters supporting one of the two major parties, it offers a clean way to identify partisan rivals.

[10] Study 2 received IRB approval and all of the hypotheses and tests described here have been pre-registered.

We administered the survey through Prolific, a crowdsourcing platform for researchers developed in the UK,[11] from September 18 to October 11, 2019. A total of 9,562 respondents participated in the survey. We started by recording the respondent's party identification using the following question: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or what?" Of the total number of respondents, 2,476 identified as Conservative Party supporters, 3,666 as Labour Party supporters, and 3,420 either identified with a different party or as independents. We use responses to this question to test the partisan effects (H2).[12]

Next, we collected standard demographic information for each respondent, including gender, age, education, income, ethnicity, political interest, political knowledge (based on five questions asking the respondents to match the names of various UK politicians to their roles), and media consumption.[13]

Experimental Conditions

After completing the pre-treatment questionnaire, we randomized the respondents into twelve experimental conditions, as described in Table 2. We have three main conditions: (1) baseline control group, in which respondents are not receiving any party messages (neither from the focal nor the rival party); (2) control group, in which respondents are asked to read the focal party's message about its own policy position, and (3) treatment group, in which respondents are asked to read two sets of messages: (a) the focal party's message about its own position (same as the

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

[12] For a similar experimental design, see Fernandez-Vazquez (2019).

[13] SM.5 provides further details on Study 2 design.

control group) followed by (b) the rival party's distortion of that message. These groups then get multiplied by two for each the Labour and the Conservatives serving as the focal party. The six groups are further multiplied by two because we focus on two issues: immigration and environment.

We focus on immigration and environment because both issues are relevant and often covered in political debates in the UK. Importantly, however, they have different levels of issue *salience*: while environment is a politically relevant issue, it is not as highly salient as immigration.[14] It is possible that party positions on highly salient issues are already crystallized in the minds of voters and respondents may therefore discount any additional messages from the parties on these issues (Levendusky 2010; see also Arcenaux 2008, Bartels 1993; Gaines et al. 2007; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). As a result, most studies in the motivated reasoning literature focus on relatively low salience but relevant issues (see, e.g., Chong and Druckman 2010; Druckman, Petersen, and Slothuus, 2013). Having one salient and one less salient issue in our experiment allows us to see whether issue salience matters and increases the generalizability of our findings.

[14] To check the relative salience of these two issues, we conducted a pre-test in the UK in March 2019 with the same online platform, Prolific. We asked 100 respondents to indicate how salient the immigration and environment issues are in the UK (we provided respondents with a definition of each issue). On a 1-10 scale, where 10 is very salient and 1 is not salient at all, immigration policy received an average score of 7.36 with a standard deviation of 1.99, and environment received an average score of 4.82 with a standard deviation of 1.77. These results confirm that immigration is a significantly more salient issue than environment.

Table 2: Experimental Conditions

Issue	Focal Party: Conservative			Focal Party: Labour		
	Control Condition	**Treatment Condition**	**Baseline Condition**	**Control Condition**	**Treatment Condition**	**Baseline Condition**
Environment	Group CA: Conservative's self-statement on environment	Group CB: Conservative's self-statement on environment followed by rival's distorted message about Conservative's position on environment	Group CC: No statement/ message	Group LA: Labour's self-statement on environment	Group LB: Labour's self-statement on environment followed by rival's distorted message about Labour's position on environment	Group LC: No statement/ message
Immigration	Group CD: Conservative's self-statement on immigration	Group CE: Conservative's self-statement on immigration followed by rival's distorted message about Conservative's position on immigration	Group CF: No statement/ message	Group LD: Labour's self-statement on immigration	Group LE: Labour's self-statement on security followed by rival's distorted message about Labour's position on immigration	Group LF: No statement/ message

The SM.5 presents the vignettes for all experimental conditions. We constructed the statements using the actual party programs or leader speeches. We believe that such design creates an externally valid experimental setting where voters are exposed to competing arguments (Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman and Lupia 2016). As an example, for the immigration issue, the control group received the following message about the Conservative Party's self-position:

> *Here is how the **Conservative Party** describes its own position on immigration policy:*
>
> "Throughout our history, migrants have made a huge contribution to our country - and they will continue to in the future. We will introduce a new immigration system. It will be based on what skills you have to offer, not which country you come from. Those with the skills we need, who want to come here and work hard, will find a welcome."[15]

The treatment group, in turn, received the following message (i.e., one that includes both the Conservative's self-position and the rival's distorted message about the Conservative's position):

> *Here is how the **Conservative Party** describes its own position on immigration policy:*
>
> "Throughout our history, migrants have made a huge contribution to our country - and they will continue to in the future. We will introduce a new immigration system. It will be based on what skills you have to offer, not which country you come from. Those with the skills we need, who want to come here and work hard, will find a welcome."
>
> *Here is how **a rival party** describes the **Conservative Party's** position on immigration policy:*
>
> "The 'hostile environment' policies that are designed to make it as difficult as possible for some immigrants to stay in the United Kingdom is shameful brainchild of the Conservative Party. It has led to the scandal of British citizens being deported, detained and left destitute. That is nasty, cynical politics that demeans our country."[16]

[15] Theresa May's speech at the 2018 Conservative Party Conference.

[16] Jeremy Corbyn's speech at the 2018 Labour Party Conference.

For statements about the party's own position, we intentionally chose those that are close to the center of the policy dimension. The distorted message, in turn, puts the party at a more extreme position (to the extreme pro-immigration stance for the Labour Party, and the extreme anti-immigration stance for the Conservative Party, for instance). Such a design allows us to complement Study 1, which looked at the extent of distortion in general, by focusing on a more specific type of distortion: portraying the focal party as more extreme. Given the recent findings that perceptions of extremism undermine electability (Johns and Kölln 2019), this type of distortion is theoretically the most interesting and relevant.[17]

We pre-tested our vignettes to assess whether respondents can locate the parties, on average, at the desired positions. We found with a student sample in the US that the respondents can locate each message according to our expectations. For instance, for the example above, the Conservative Party's self-immigration position was perceived at 5.71 on the 1-10 scale from pro-immigration to anti-immigration, and the distorted position was perceived at 7 on the same scale.[18]

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

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

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

Analysis and Results

Balance tests reported in SM.6 indicate that the treatment and control groups are balanced across most of our pre-treatment sociodemographic variables.[19] Our main analyses presented here include the control and treatment groups only. We will discuss the additional analyses that also include the baseline group in the next section.

In Figure 2, we present the regression results for all respondents. The first two models refer to the respondent's perceptions of the Conservative Party's position on environment and immigration, respectively. The last two models show the same results for the respondents' perceptions of the Labour Party's positions. To recap, in our control scenarios we presented the respondents with a party's own issue position, and these scenarios were always centrist. The treatment scenarios presented the respondents the control condition text together with the rival party message about the focal party position, and those scenarios were always more extreme (more pro-environment and pro-immigration than the Labour Party's own position, i.e., toward more leftwing position, and more pro-business/anti-environment and anti-immigration than the Conservative Party's own position, i.e., toward more rightwing position). Therefore, if respondents' perceptions of the party positions are influenced by the rival party distortion of

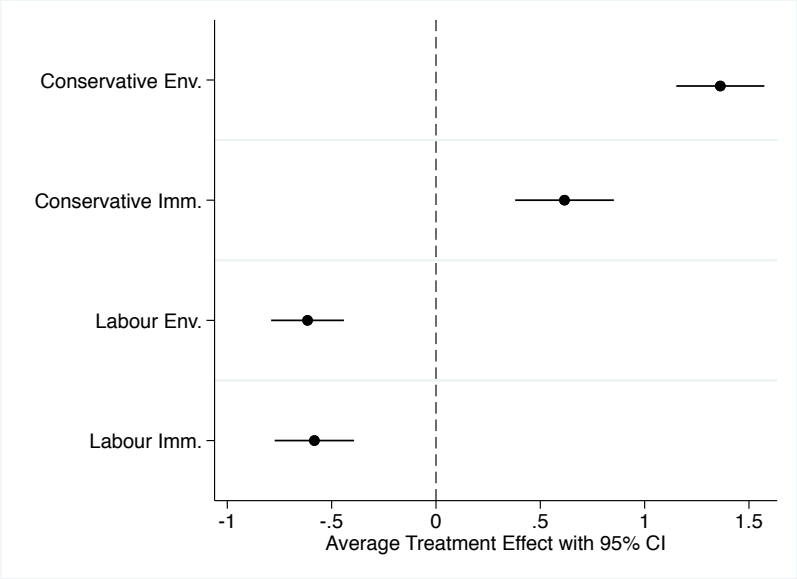
[19] In SM.7, we report models that include (a) all control variables and (b) only those few controls that appear to be not balanced across our experimental conditions. Our results stay robust.

those positions, we should see positive average treatment effects (ATE) for the Conservative Party (indicating that respondents in the treatment condition placed the Conservatives at a more anti-environment and anti-immigration position than those in the control condition), and negative ATEs for the Labour Party (indicating that respondents in the treatment group placed the party in a more pro-environment and pro-immigration position than those in the control condition).

This is precisely what we see in Figure 2. The ATEs for the Conservative Party are positive and statistically significant, and the ATEs for the Labour Party are negative and significant. For substantive interpretation, consider the second model: the ATE of 0.6 suggests that those respondents who are exposed to both the Conservative Party's own centrist position on the immigration issue and the rival party's distorted description of this position as extreme anti-immigration, perceive the Conservatives to be 0.6 points more anti-immigration than those respondents who only read the Conservative Party's own centrist message. The negative ATEs for the Labour Party similarly suggest that respondents who read both the Labour Party's own centrist statement and the rival's portrayal of them as extremists (more to the left, i.e. towards more pro-environment and pro-immigration direction), perceive the Labour Party's positions as more pro-environment and pro-immigration than those who only read the Labour Party's own centrist statement. These results support our first hypothesis: message distortion results in biased voter perceptions for both parties and on both issues.[20]

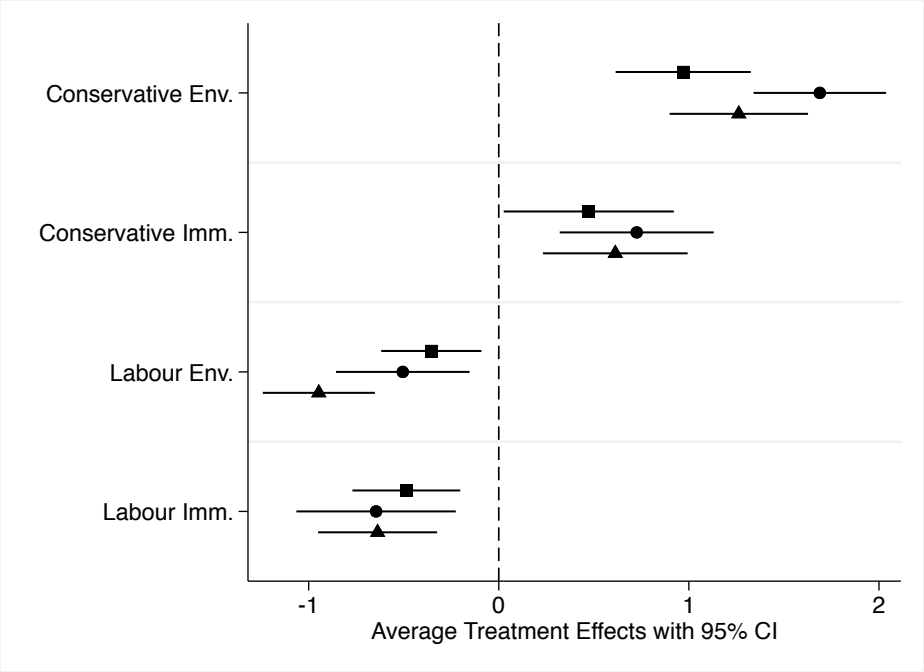
[20] Full results for the models presented in Figure 2 and 3 are presented in SM.7.1.

Figure 2: Average Treatment Effects for All Respondents



To test the second hypothesis on the conditional effects of partisanship, we ran the same models separating the respondents into focal party supporters, rival party supporters, and all others as described above. Figure 3 shows the ATEs for these three groups of respondents. The squares refer to the focal party supporters (i.e., Conservative (Labour) supporters in the Conservative (Labour) environment and immigration scenarios); the circles are the rival party supporters (i.e., Labour (Conservative) supporters in the Conservative (Labour) environment and immigration scenarios); the triangles refer to all others (i.e., all third party supporters and independents).

Figure 3: Average Treatment Effects for Different Partisan Groups



Note: For each scenario, the square refers to the focal party supporters, circle refers to the rival party supporters, and the triangle refers to all others (i.e., third party supporters and independents).

According to the second hypothesis, we expect the distortion to have a more substantial effect on rival party supporters (i.e., circles) compared to the focal party supporters (i.e., squares) or all other respondents (i.e., triangles). Evidence for this expectation is mixed. In all cases, the rival party supporters are swayed more than the focal party supporters when they read rival party's distortion of the focal party's position. This is in line with our expectations. However, in most cases, these differences are not statistically significant. That is, rival's message portraying the focal party as extreme makes supporters of both the rival and the focal party, as well as all other

respondents, perceive the focal party as more extreme than it actually is.[21] This holds regardless of whether the focal (rival) party is the Conservative or the Labour and irrespective of the issue. While contradicting the second hypothesis, these findings are in line with the results of Study 1, where we also found that rival party distortion affects all voters.[22]

Study 2 extension: accounting for baseline perceptions

One potential criticism of our analyses is that respondents' preconceptions about party positions might be biasing our experimental results. That is, if the respondents already perceive parties as more extreme than the position they take in the control vignette (i.e., if respondents' preconceived perceptions of the party positions are closer to the distorted position), then they may respond to the treatment (i.e., the distorted message) more strongly because the distorted position is more consistent with their preconceptions. We can test for this possibility with our data. As we stated above, in addition to the control and treatment groups, Study 2 also included a baseline group for each party and issue. The baseline group did not receive any party statements and was only asked to locate the party on the respective issue scale (environment or immigration). Table 3 replicates the models from Table 2 (for all respondents) and also includes respondents from the baseline group. In these models, the coefficient for the treatment variable

[21] The differences are statistically significant only in the case of the Conservative Party's environmental position across the focal and rival party supporters, and in the case of Labour Party's environmental position across the focal party supporters and all others.

[22] We also tested whether strength of partisanship conditions these effects. In SM.7.3, we show that in none of the models is there a statistically significant difference between strong or weak partisans in how they respond to the experimental condition.

(*Distortion*) shows the effect of treatment on perceptions while controlling for the baseline group's perception. The coefficient for the baseline group shows where the respondents who did not receive any party statements locate the party in comparison to the control group, who received only the focal party's self-statement.

Table 3: The effects of message distortion on perceptions, controlling for baseline

	Model 1: Conservative Environment	**Model 2: Conservative Immigration**	**Model 3: Labour Environment**	**Model 4: Labour Immigration**
Distortion Treatment	1.363* (0.109)	0.616* (0.116)	-0.616* (0.087)	-0.583* (0.098)
Baseline	1.623* (0.109)	1.264* (0.116)	-0.162 (0.087)	-0.078 (0.098)
Constant	5.024* (0.077)	5.626* (0.082)	4.535* (0.062)	4.238* (0.069)
Adjusted R^2	0.097	0.047	0.021	0.017
N	2371	2369	2365	2368

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
* $p<0.05$, two-tailed.

We see in Models 1 and 2 that the variable for the baseline group has a positive and statistically significant coefficient. This means that absent any vignettes, the Conservative Party is seen as more anti-immigration and anti-environmentalist than the centrist self-statements of the Conservative Party in our vignettes. However, Models 3 and 4 show that, for the Labour Party, the baseline and control groups are not statistically different. That is, the preconceived positions of the Labour Party (without any party prompts) are not any different from the centrist self-statements we used for the Labour Party's position in our vignettes. Given that distortion of the Labour Party's message affects respondents' perceptions even though the Labour Party is already being perceived as centrists on both issues suggests that it is the distortion and not the preconception that shifts perceptions.

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

Conclusion

We set out to explore whether rival party's distortion of focal party's message affects voter perceptions of focal party's policy position. This is a highly relevant question given that representative democracy relies on voters being able to correctly understand what parties stand for. While the literature has long recognized the importance of understanding voter perceptions, ours is the first to explore how the interactions between parties – their rhetorical tools to misconstrue each other's messages – affect voter perceptions.

We argue and find that message distortion by rivals significantly affects voter perceptions of focal party positions. Using the CCD data on media coverage of party campaigns across Europe, we provide robust cross-national evidence that the greater the rival party's distortion of

the focal party's policy message, the less likely are voters to follow the focal party's own message when placing the party on the left-right scale. We further show that while this effect is stronger for supporters of the rival party, it holds for focal party's own supporters as well. We then replicate our analysis with a different design: a tightly controlled experiment that allows for better causal identification. This design also allows us to go beyond the left-right super-issue and focus on specific policy areas – immigration and environment. A vignette experiment that we conducted in the UK directly manipulated respondents' exposure to message distortion by rivals and showed, as expected, that such distortion moves voter perceptions of the focal party position in the direction of the distorted position. In short, across the different research strategies and context we reach the same conclusion: rival parties can significantly affect voter perceptions of focal party's positions by providing an alternative description of focal party's position.

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

Second, our study also provides crucial information about how parties campaign in multi-party elections – an underexplored frontier of research in comparative party politics. Recent work has started to explore negative campaigning outside the US (Nai and Walter 2015), but not in an interactive manner and not with a focus on policy messages rather than valence (Jung and

Tavits 2020). Our study paves the way for a better understanding of how parties campaign and how far they can influence voters purely by rhetorical tools.

Third, our project has important implications for the literature on partisan motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006), which suggests that partisans follow their own party's position and ignore the messages by competitors. Our results confirm that party supporters are less likely to update their perceptions of their own party's positions in response to alternative messages from the rival party. However, we also show that they do not ignore those messages completely. All voters – focal party supporters as well as opponents – update their perception of what the focal party stands for in response to messages from rival parties. Voters are not always blind supporters of their own party and listen to what other parties are saying. This is a positive result for democratic representation. In the context of party competition, it suggests that parties cannot afford to ignore messages from rivals because such political rhetoric matters and has the power to shape opinions.

Our results also open several interesting avenues for future research. First, it would be interesting to theorize and study how voters react to more complex interactions between parties, for example, to situations where focal parties have a chance to directly respond to distortion attempts by rivals. Second, our analysis was also limited to two types of distortion: any general deviations from the focal party message and deviations that portray the focal party as more extreme. Future work could take a closer look at different types of message distortion to see how they affect voters. Finally, for both theoretical and practical reasons, it is also important to explore the limits of the distortion effects. Knowing when and why voters stop responding to distorted messages would help parties devise strategies to minimize the negative effects of message distortion.

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Supplementary Material

Message Distortion as a Campaign Strategy:

Does Rival Party Distortion of Focal Party Position Affect Voters?

The supplementary materials include the following:

1. details of the Comparative Campaign Dynamics (CCD) dataset (SM.1);
2. categorization of the CCD issues into the left-right scale and an explanation of how this matches up with the MARPOR categorization (SM.2);
3. list of top-two parties that are used in the observational data analysis (SM.3);
4. robustness test for Study 1 (SM.4);
5. details of the experimental design (Study 2) (SM.5);
6. details on balance tests for Study 2 (SM.6);
7. full results and robustness tests for Study 2 (SM.7).

SM.1: Description of the Comparative Campaign Dynamics (CCD) Dataset

The CCD dataset includes information about parties in ten European countries for two or three elections in each country: the Czech Republic (2010, 2013), Denmark (2007, 2011), Germany (2009, 2013), Hungary (2006, 2010) the Netherlands (2010, 2012), Poland (2007, 2011), Portugal (2009, 2011), Spain (2008, 2011), Sweden (2010, 2014), and the UK (2005, 2010, 2015).

Using the two highest circulation daily broadsheet newspapers from their country (one left-leaning and one right-leaning), each country team collected all the election-related content from those newspapers during a month-long pre-election period (except in Portugal, where the data cover the official campaign period of 2 weeks). From all these articles, the country teams selected all cover-page election-related articles and a 5% random sample of the rest of the articles, to include at least 60 and at most 100 articles per newspaper per election.

Three research assistants in each country then coded each of these articles. First, the assistants identified for each article, which political was the subject of it. If there were multiple subject parties in an article, the assistants coded the article multiple times, once for each subject party. For each subject party, the assistants then coded the positions that the party took on various policy issues, as well as how the subject party discussed other parties' issue positions. We use these self-issue positions and others' issue positions data from the CCD dataset for our observational analyses.

More details about the dataset can be found in Somer-Topcu, Tavits, and Baumann (2020) and at https://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/d7/en/datasets/comparative-campaign-dynamics-dataset

SM.2: Categorization of Issues into the Left-Right Scale and Comparison with MARPOR

Table SM.2.1: Left and right categories in the campaign data and the MARPOR

Category in CCD	Equivalent in MARPOR	Direction
Taxes - Increase	Equality: Positive	Left
Taxes - Decrease	Incentives: Positive	Right
Tackle with/ reduce inflation	Economic Orthodoxy	Right
Tackle with/ reduce unemployment	Economic Growth	Left
Increase spending for various social policies	Welfare State Expansion + Education Expansion	Left
Decrease spending for various social policies	Welfare State Limitation + Education Limitation	Right
More centralization/ less regional autonomy	Centralization	Neutral
More regional autonomy/ less centralization	Decentralization	Neutral
Pro-environmental policies	Environmental protection	Neutral
Critical of environmental policies	Free Market Economy	Right
More open/ supportive of immigration/asylum	National Way of Life: Immigration: Positive	Neutral
Tougher/ restrictive on immigration/asylum	National Way of Life: Immigration: Negative	Right
Stronger justice system		Right
Weaker justice system		Neutral
Strong on law and order, security, terrorism (more police/less crime)	Law and Order: Positive	Right
Support for individual liberties, less police presence, and criticism of police state	Law and Order: Negative	Neutral
Pro national way of life	National Way of Life: Positive	Right
Anti-national way of life	National Way of Life: Neg.	Neutral
Pro-traditional morality	Traditional Morality: Positive	Right
Anti-traditional morality	Traditional Morality: Neg.	Neutral

Pro- European Union	European Community/Union: Positive	Neutral
Anti- European Union	European Community/Union: Negative	Neutral
Pro- Internationalism	Internationalism: Positive	Left
Anti- Internationalism	Internationalism: Negative	Neutral
Pro- Foreign Intervention	Military: Positive	Right
Anti- Foreign Intervention	Military: Negative	Left
Support for farmers and agricultural policies	Agriculture and Farmers	Neutral
Opposing support for agriculture and farmers	Agriculture and Farmers: Negative	Neutral

Table SM.2.1 lists the CCD issues and how they match up with the MARPOR categories. Using these issue positions, Somer-Topcu et al. (2020) coded the left-right position of each party by summing the shares for rightist statements and subtracting the summed shares of leftist statements. The resulting left-right positions variable ranges between -1 to +1, where negative values indicate a leftist position and positive values indicate a rightist position. As Somer-Topcu et al. (2020) report, the correlation between the CCD and the MARPOR left-right positions is 0.6. We use the Somer-Topcu et al. (2020) approach to code parties' self-placement on the left-right scale (variable name *Self-placement*) as well as their left-right positions as described by the rival parties (variable name *Distorted placement*).

SM.3: Top-Two Parties for Observational Data Analysis

Table SM.3.1 presents the names of top-two parties from each country used in the observational analysis. We determined the list of the top-two parties using the parties' vote shares in each country/election. In each country Party 1 was the party with the highest vote share in that election, and Party 2 was the party with the second highest vote share.

Table SM.3.1: The list of countries, elections, and top-two parties

Country	Election Year	Party 1	Party 2
Czech Republic	2010	Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD)	Civic Democratic Party (ODS)
	2013	Czech Social Democratic Party(ČSSD)	ANO 2011
Denmark	2007	Social Democratic Party (SD)	Liberals (V)
	2011	Liberals (V)	Social Democratic Party (SD)
Germany	2009	Christian Democratic Union (CDU)	Social Democratic Party (SPD)
	2013	Christian Democratic Union (CDU)	Social Democratic Party (SPD)
Netherlands	2010	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	Labour Party (PvdA)
	2012	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)	Labour Party (PvdA)
Poland	2007	Civic Platform (PO)	Law and Justice (PiS)
	2011	Civic Platform (PO)	Law and Justice (PiS)
Portugal	2009	Socialist Party (PS)	Social Democratic Party (PSD)
	2011	Social Democratic Party (PSD)	Socialist Party (PS)
Spain	2008	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)	People's Party (PP)
Sweden	2014	Social Democratic Labour Party (SAP)	Moderate Party (M)
United Kingdom	2005	Labour Party	Conservative Party

	2010	Conservative Party	Labour Party
	2015	Conservative Party	Labour Party

SM.4: Robustness Tests for Study 1:Controlling for Individual Level Factors and Government Status

Table SM.4.1 replicates Table 1 from the main text by including several individual-level control variables as well as a variable for the subject party's government status. The knowledge variable (*Political knowledge*) is based on the knowledge batteries in the CSES and NES data. The number of knowledge items varies between the different election studies and ranges from 3 to 8 items. To have a comparable measure across our cases, we constructed our political knowledge variable such that it is the number of correct responses to three political knowledge questions. For NES with more than three knowledge items an algorithm randomly selected three items for each individual. *Age* and *Male* are from the CSES and NES, and the latter is coded as a dummy variable, such that 1 refers to males and 0 refers to females. Finally, *Government status* is coded 1 if the focal party was a governing party before the election.

Table SM.4.1: Table 1 with Control Variables

	Model 1 All Respondents	Model 2 Focal Party Supporters	Model 3 Rival Party Supporters	Model 4 Third Party Supporters	Model 5 Independents
Party Self-Placement	10.228* (1.908)	10.529* (2.062)	12.633* (2.393)	10.548* (1.817)	8.836* (1.651)
Extent of Distortion	3.467 (1.791)	3.119 (1.926)	4.644* (2.181)	3.108 (1.716)	3.347* (1.545)
Party Self-Placement X Extent of Distor.	-21.817* (9.755)	-25.378* (10.460)	-30.828* (12.330)	-20.393* (9.286)	-21.835* (8.439)
Age	0.004* (0.001)	0.008* (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.005* (0.001)
Male	0.040 (0.021)	0.005 (0.043)	0.040 (0.049)	0.075* (0.036)	0.015 (0.039)
Political Knowledge	0.336* (0.037)	0.061 (0.081)	0.595* (0.092)	0.402* (0.064)	0.345* (0.069)
Government	0.059 (0.375)	0.094 (0.404)	-0.290 (0.442)	0.009 (0.359)	0.151 (0.325)
Constant	4.331* (1.963)	3.903 (2.110)	3.125 (2.442)	5.050* (1.874)	3.576* (1.702)
Random effect: Election	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)
Random effect: Party-Dyad	0.931* (0.245)	1.058* (0.286)	1.262* (0.341)	0.836* (0.246)	0.683* (0.185)
Random effect: Residual	4.077* (0.029)	3.617* (0.057)	4.685* (0.073)	3.434* (0.046)	4.178* (0.056)
Log likelihood	-82304.56	-16938.58	-18014.32	-22787.43	-23979.24
N	38,754	8,186	8,194	11,163	11,211

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

SM.5: The Details of the Experimental Design

Vignettes:

Conservative Party's Environmental Policy:

"Climate change is one of the most serious threats facing the world today. Acting on climate change is also an opportunity for the UK to grow a stronger economy, which is more efficient and more resilient to the risks ahead."

Rival Party's Description of the Conservative Party's Environmental Policy:

"The Conservative Party's agenda makes an entirely vacuous contribution to the major environmental challenges of our time. There is one paltry mention of the air pollution crisis, and no mention of the jaw-dropping cost reductions in renewable energy. Fracking will be forced on local communities, whilst the dirty and expensive energy of the past will continue to receive lavish public hand-outs. The cheapest and cleanest energy once again loses out."

Conservative Party's Immigration Policy:

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

Rival Party's Description of the Conservative Party's Immigration Policy:

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

Labour Party's Environmental Policy:

"There are points of real conflict between the interest of consumption and the longer term interests of the environment, and between the politicians' need to woo the electorate as well as lead it. We should build a business case for the environment, working to harness clean technologies, seeing business as part of the answer rather than the problem."

Rival Party's Description of the Labour Party's Environmental Policy:

"The Labour Party wants to adopt green targets that damage the business sector and also supports environmental regulations that pile costs on the energy bills of households and companies. The Labour Party is trying put our country out of business, which is not the way to save the planet."

Labour Party's Immigration Policy:

"We will develop and implement fair immigration rules. We will not make false promises on immigration targets or sow divisions. We will not discriminate between people of different races or creeds. Immigration has made an important contribution to our economic and social life, but it needs to be properly controlled."

Rival Party's Description of the Labour Party's Immigration Policy:

"The Labour Party wants uncontrolled immigration, has long been supporters of free movement of people from the European Union, and is poised to let in thousands of unskilled migrants from outside the EU. Too high, uncontrolled migration puts pressure on our public services, but it also lowers wages at the lower end of the income scale."

Using the survey instrument (SM.3) we coded our variables as follows:

Outcome Variable:

- *Perceived Party Position*: Perceived party position on the 1-10 environment and immigration scales, using the answers to the questions of "where would you place the **[NAME THE PARTY]** position on environmental policy, using a 10-point scale, where 1 means "strongly supports protection of the environment, even at the cost to the business sector," and 10 means "strongly supports the interests of business sector even at the cost of damage to the environment"?" and "where would you place the **[NAME THE PARTY]** position on immigration policy, using a 10-point scale, where 1 means "strongly supports pro-immigration policies," and 10 means "strongly supports policies that restrict immigration"?"

Main Covariates:

- *Control, Conservative self environment position (C_A):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown the environmental policy message by the Conservative party and 0 for all other respondents.
- *Treatment, Conservative environment position (self and distorted) (C_B):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown the environmental policy message by the Conservative party and the distortion of this message by the rival party, and 0 for all other respondents.
- *Baseline, Conservative environment position without prompts (C_C):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown no policy message by the Conservative party and 0 for all other respondents.
- *Control, Conservative self immigration position (C_D):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown the immigration policy message by the Conservative party and 0 for all other respondents.
- *Treatment, Conservative immigration position (self and distorted) (C_E):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown the immigration policy message by the Conservative party and the distortion of this message by the rival party, and 0 for all other respondents.

- *Baseline, Conservative immigration position without prompts (C_F):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown no policy message by the Conservative party and 0 for all other respondents.
- *Control, Labour self environment position (L_A):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown the environmental policy message by the Labour party and 0 for all other respondents.
- *Treatment, Labour environment position (self and distorted) (L_B):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown the environmental policy message by the Labour party and the distortion of this message by the rival party, and 0 for all other respondents.
- *Baseline, Labour environment position without prompts (L_C):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown no policy message by the Labour party and 0 for all other respondents.
- *Control, Labour self immigration position (L_D):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown the immigration policy message by the Labour party and 0 for all other respondents.
- *Treatment, Labour immigration position (self and distorted) (L_E):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown the immigration policy message by the Labour party and the distortion of this message by the rival party, and 0 for all other respondents.
- *Baseline, Labour immigration position without prompts (L_F):* a binary variable that equals 1 for respondents shown no policy message by the Labour party and 0 for all other respondents.

Covariates (measured once per respondent, all before the treatment text is shown):

- *Female*: A binary variable that equals 1 for female respondents and 0 for male respondents.
- *Age*: Respondent age in years (using the answers to the question of "what year were you born?")
- *White*: Coded 1 if the respondent identified self as "white" and 0 otherwise (using the answers to the question of "Please choose one option that best describes your ethnic background: 1 = White; 2 = Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups; 3 = Asian/Asian British; 4 = Black/African/Caribbean/Black British; 5 = Other ethnic group)
- *Education*: Respondent's age at the time they completed their full time education (using the answers to the question of "at what age did you complete your full time education, either at school or at an institution of higher education or further education? Please exclude apprenticeships: 1 = I received no formal education; 2 = I am still in school; 3 = I completed education at the age of)
- *Party Identification_Conservative:* 1 if the respondent identified as a Conservative Party supporter (using the answers to the question of "generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or what?")
- *Party Identification_Labour:* 1 if the respondent identified as a Labour Party supporter (using the answers to the question of "generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or what?")
- *Party Identification_Other:* 1 if the respondent identified with a different party other than the Conservative and Labour parties, or indicated that they do not identify with a party (using the answers to the question of "generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or what?")
- *Strength of PID*: Respondent's party identification strength. Coded as 0=not very strong, 1=fairly strong, 2= very strong (only for those who identify with a party). (using the answers to the question of would you call yourself very strongly, fairly strongly, or not very strongly [INSERT PARTY LABEL FROM PID]? Based on this variable, we also generated a variable called,

Strong PID, which is coded 1 if the person feels very strong or fairly strong connection to their party, and 0 otherwise.

- *Ideological Self-Placement*: Respondent's ideological self-placement on a 1-10 scale, where 1=left and 10=right (using the answers to the question of "in politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 1-10, where 1 means the left and 10 means the right?")
- *Environment Self-Placement*: Respondent's self-placement on the environmental issue, using a 10-point scale, where 1= "I strongly support protection of the environment, even at the cost to the business sector" and 10 = "I strongly support the interests of business sector even at the cost of damage to the environment." (using the answers to the question of "thinking about the issue of environment, where would you place yourself, on a scale from 1-10, where 1 means "I strongly support protection of the environment, even at the cost to the business sector," and 10 means "I strongly support the interests of business sector even at the cost of damage to the environment"?")
- *Immigration Self-Placement:* Respondent's self-placement on the national security issue, using a 10-point scale, where 1= "I strongly support pro-immigration policies" and 10 = "I strongly support policies that restrict immigration." (using the answers to the question of "thinking about the issue of immigration, where would you place yourself, on a scale from 1-10, where 1 means "I strongly support pro-immigration policies," and 10 means "I strongly support policies that restrict immigration"?")
- *Income*: Respondent's gross annual income, using the following income categories: 1 = under 10,000 per year; 2 = 10,000 to 29,999 per year; 3 = 30,000 to 49,999 per year; 4 = 50,000 to 69,999 per year; 5 = 70,000 to 99,999 per year; 6 = 100,000 to 149,999 per year; 7 = 150,000 and over (using the answers to the question of "what is your gross household income?")
- *Political knowledge*: Respondent's accuracy of matching five politicians to their respective jobs. The variable ranges from 0 to 5 based on the number of correct matches. The question was as follows: Please match the following people to their jobs: (column order randomize; row order randomize) ROWS: Jeremy Corbyn; Philip Hammond; Sir Vince Cable; John Bercow; Sajid Javid; COLUMNS: 1 = Chancellor of the Exchequer; 2 = Leader of the Opposition; 3 = Leader of the Liberal Democrats; 4 = Home secretary; 5 = Speaker of the House of Commons; 9 = Don't know.
- *News consumption:* Sum of *Television*, *Newspaper*, *Radio*, *Internet*, *Talking to other people* variables. Calculated using the answers to the question: "during the last seven days, on average how much time (if any) have you spent per day following **news about politics or current affairs** from each of these sources? (row order randomize): ROWS: Television, Newspaper (including online), Radio, Internet (not including online newspapers), Talking to other people; COLUMNS: 1 = None, no time at all, 2 = Less than 1 hour, 3 = 1 to 5 hours, 4 = More than 5 hours.
- *Political Interest:* Respondent's level of political interest coded on a 4-point scale from 1=very interested to 4=not at all interested (using the answers to the question of "how interested would you say you are in politics? Would you say you are…: 1= Very interested; 2= Fairly interested; 3-= Not very interested; 4= Not at all interested")

SM.6: Balance Tests of the Experimental Data

Figures SM.6.1-SM.6.3 show the results of our balance tests for our covariates, for all respondents (SM.6.1), and separately for Conservative and Labour supporters (SM.6.2 and SM.6.3, respectively). For these balance tests, we run OLS regressions with each covariate as the outcome variable and the different experimental conditions as explanatory variables. For race, we ran a logit model where the outcome variable was coded 1 for white respondents and 0 otherwise.

In the models with all respondents, only age, income, knowledge, and white returned statistically significant coefficients for some experimental conditions. In the models with Conservative Party supporters, only the knowledge variable was statistically significant. And in the models with Labour Party supporters, none of the covariates had statistically significant coefficients. Some significant correlations are expected out of chance and do not indicate systematic issues with balance or randomization failure.

Figure SM.6.1: All Respondents

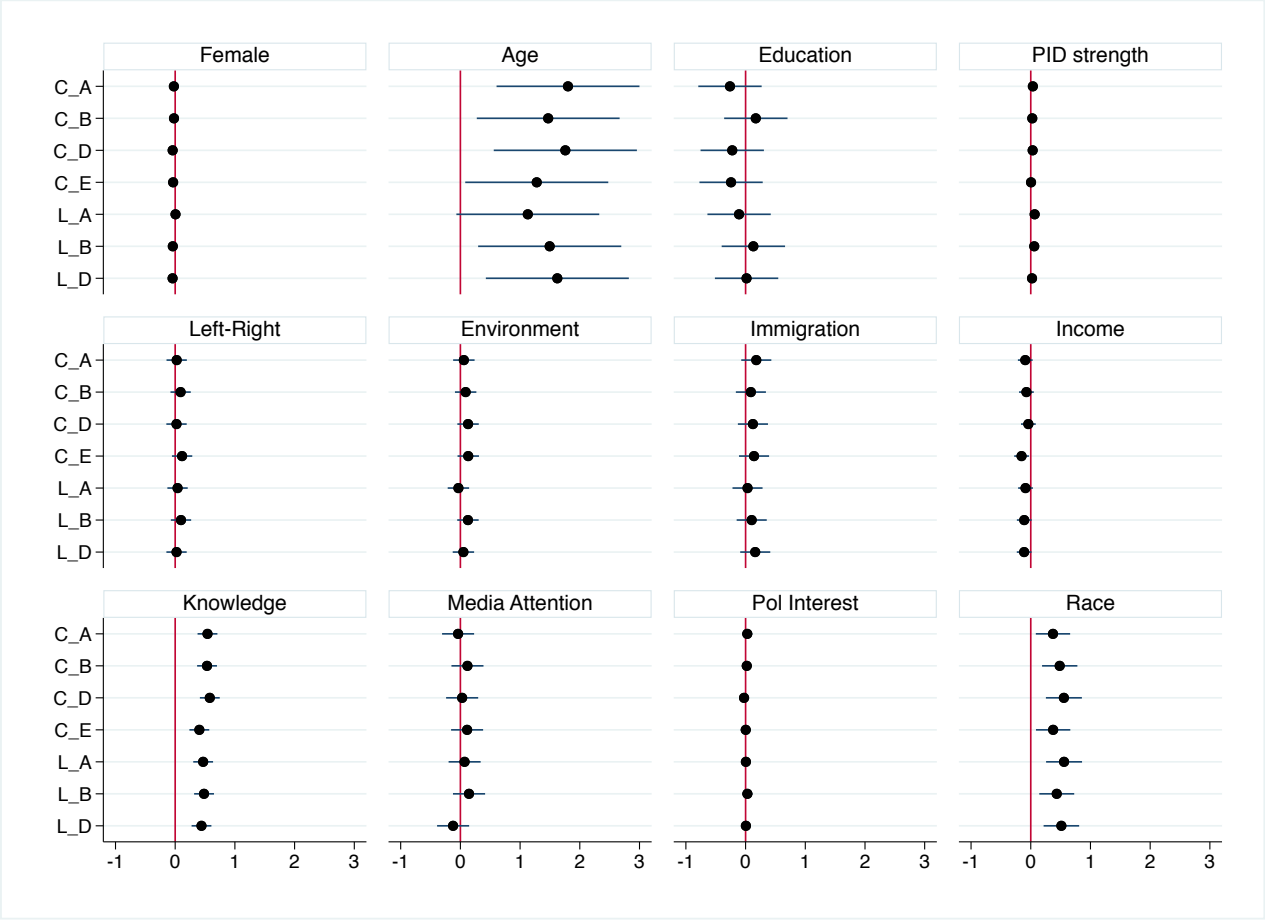


Figure SM.6.2: Conservative Party Supporters

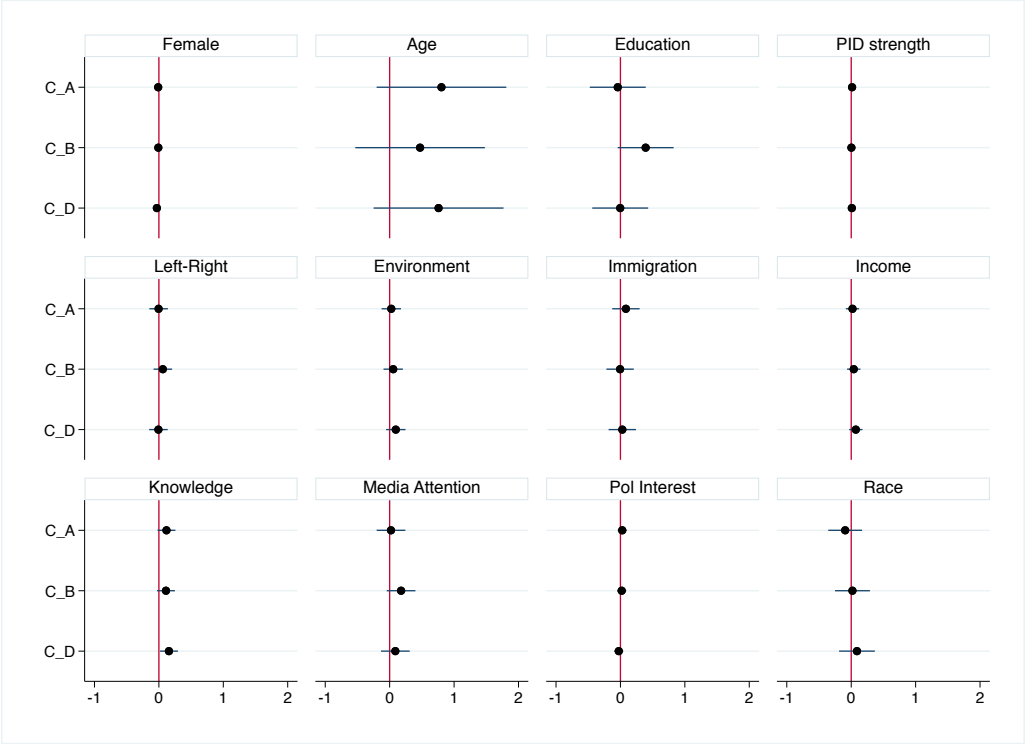
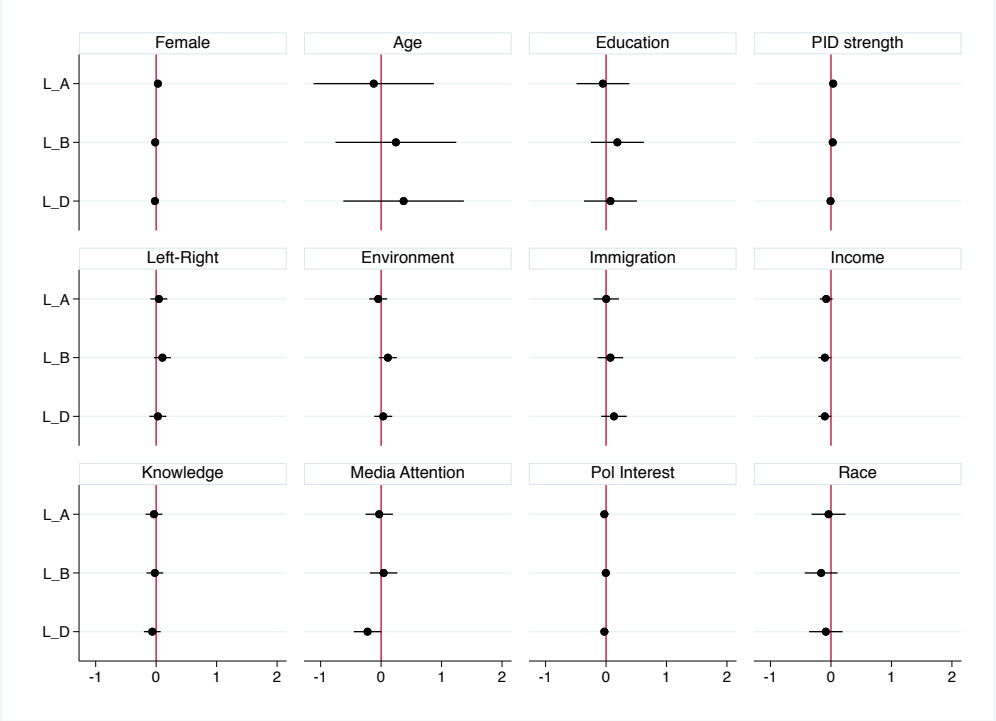


Figure SM.6.3: Labour Party Supporters



SM.7: Robustness Tests, Study 2

In this section we first present full set of experimental results from Figure 2 and 3 of the main text (Tables SM.7.1.1 and SM.7.1.2a and 2b). Next, we present two types of robustness tests. First, we check whether the results are robust to the inclusion of covariates (SM.7.2). Second, we explore whether the results vary by the strength of respondent's partisanship (SM.7.3).

Table SM.7.1.1: The effects of message distortion on perceptions: all respondents

	Model 1 Conservatives Environment	**Model 2 Conservatives Immigration**	**Model 3: Labour Environment**	**Model 4: Labour Immigration**
Distortion Treatment	1.363* (0.108)	0.616* (0.121)	-0.616* (0.089)	-0.583* (0.097)
Constant	5.024* (0.076)	5.626* (0.085)	4.535* (0.063)	4.238* (0.069)
Adjusted R^2	0.092	0.016	0.029	0.022
N	1580	1579	1576	1579

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. * $p<0.05$, two-tailed.

Table SM.7.1.2a: The effects of message distortion on perceptions by partisanship: Conservative Party

	Model 1: Conservative Partisans (i.e., focal party supporters) Environment	Model 2: Labour Partisans (i.e., rival party supporters) Environment	Model 3: All Other Respondents Environment	Model 4: Conservative Partisans (i.e., focal party supporters) Immigration	Model 5: Labour Partisans (i.e., rival party supporters) Immigration	Model 6: All Other Respondents Immigration
Distortion Treatment	0.970* (0.181)	1.689* (0.178)	1.263* (0.185)	0.473* (0.228)	0.726* (0.206)	0.613* (0.194)
Constant	4.714* (0.127)	5.138* (0.128)	5.120* (0.130)	5.438 (0.161)	5.766* (0.144)	5.610* (0.139)
Adjusted R^2	0.066	0.130	0.072	0.008	0.019	0.015
N	392	602	586	407	594	578

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. * p<0.05, two-tailed.

Table SM.7.1.2b: The effects of message distortion on perceptions by partisanship: Labour Party

	Model 1: Labour Partisans (i.e., focal party supporters) Environment	Model 2: Conservative Partisans (i.e., rival party supporters) Environment	Model 3: All Other Respondents Environment	Model 4: Labour Partisans (i.e., focal party supporters) Immigration	Model 5: Conservative Partisans (i.e., rival party supporters) Immigration	Model 6: All Other Respondents Immigration
Distortion Treatment	-0.355* (0.134)	-0.505* (0.179)	-0.947* (0.150)	-0.486* (0.145)	-0.645 * (0.213)	-0.637* (0.159)
Constant	4.062* (0.097)	4.797* (0.125)	4.817* (0.105)	3.980 (0.103)	4.495* (0.152)	4.325* (0.111)
Adjusted R^2	0.010	0.016	0.067	0.017	0.020	0.026
N	600	434	542	601	404	574

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. * p<0.05, two-tailed.

SM.7.2: Main results with covariates included

Table SM.7.2.1 shows the main results (for all respondents) from Table SM.7.1.1 above by controlling for all covariates, and Table SM.7.2.2 shows the same results by controlling for only those four variables for which the balance tests showed statistically significant coefficients (age, income, knowledge, white). The results do not change. We ran the same robustness tests separately for Conservative and Labour party supporters and for others, as in the main text. These results of these tests also confirm the findings from the main text and are available upon request.

Table SM.7.2.1: Main results with covariates included

	Model 1 Conservatives Environment	Model 2 Conservatives Immigration	Model 3: Labour Environment	Model 4: Labour Immigration
Distortion Treatment	1.334*	0.630*	-0.646*	-0.534*
	(0.103)	(0.116)	(0.087)	(0.096)
Female	-0.192	0.080	0.080	-0.105
	(0.115)	(0.128)	(0.098)	(0.105)
Age	0.009	0.011*	0.007	0.007
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.004)
White	-0.044	-0.050	-0.368*	0.025
	(0.173)	(0.199)	(0.151)	(0.171)
Education	0.020*	0.014	0.000	0.003
	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Left-right-self	-0.200*	-0.174*	0.039	0.025
	(0.038)	(0.042)	(0.033)	(0.037)
Environment-self	-0.002	0.029	0.150*	0.041
	(0.031)	(0.035)	(0.027)	(0.029)
Immigration-self	-0.012	0.059	0.038	0.151*
	(0.027)	(0.031)	(0.023)	(0.026)
Domestic Sec-self	-0.073*	-0.118*	0.020	-0.084*
	(0.032)	(0.036)	(0.026)	(0.030)
Income	0.009	-0.048	-0.041	0.021
	(0.041)	(0.047)	(0.035)	(0.039)
Knowledge	0.100*	0.113*	-0.039	-0.071*
	(0.038)	(0.043)	(0.032)	(0.036)
Media Attention	0.014	-0.031	0.036*	0.026
	(0.021)	(0.023)	(0.017)	(0.020)
Political Interest	0.227*	0.516*	-0.103	-0.143
	(0.080)	(0.088)	(0.066)	(0.075)
Constant	5.003*	5.042*	3.838*	3.718*
	(0.366)	(0.402)	(0.304)	(0.337)
Adjusted R^2	0.177	0.101	0.086	0.065
N	1565	1559	1560	1559

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. * $p<0.05$, two-tailed.

Table SM.7.2.2: Main results with unbalanced covariates included

	Model 1 Conservatives Environment	Model 2 Conservatives Immigration	Model 3: Labour Environment	Model 4: Labour Immigration
Distortion Treatment	1.354* (0.106)	0.650* (0.119)	-0.626* (0.089)	-0.554* (0.097)
Age	0.001 (0.005)	0.008 (0.005)	0.015* (0.004)	0.012* (0.004)
White	-0.070 (0.177)	-0.152 (0.202)	-0.413* (0.152)	0.067 (0.171)
Income	-0.022 (0.042)	-0.068 (0.048)	-0.012 (0.034)	0.009 (0.038)
Knowledge	0.229* (0.032)	0.257* (0.036)	-0.091* (0.027)	-0.128* (0.030)
Constant	4.337* (0.264)	4.788* (0.296)	4.706* (0.214)	4.153* (0.239)
Adjusted R^2	0.118	0.051	0.044	0.032
N	1572	1565	1569	1568

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. * $p<0.05$, two-tailed.

SM.7.3: Accounting for the strength of partisanship

Table SM.7.3.1 and SM.7.3.2 test the partisanship hypothesis by taking partisanship strength into account. One may argue that our partisanship hypothesis is more likely to work for strong partisans. For these models, which replicate Tables SM.7.1.2a and SM.7.1.2b models for Conservative and Labour Party supporters, we interacted the experimental condition with the variable *Strong PID*, which is coded 1 if the respondent's identification with the party is very strong or somewhat strong, and 0 if it is not very strong. The results show that there is no conditioning effect of strength of partisanship, i.e., the interaction coefficient is never statistically significant at the 95% level.

Table SM.7.3.1: The effects of message distortion on perceptions by partisanship: Conservative Party

	Model 1: Conservative Partisans (i.e., focal party supporters) Environment	**Model 2: Labour Partisans (i.e., rival party supporters) Environment**	**Model 3: Conservative Partisans (i.e., focal party supporters) Immigration**	**Model 4: Labour Partisans (i.e., rival party supporters) Immigration**
Distortion Treatment	1.142* (0.257)	1.947* (0.295)	0.780* (0.324)	0.284 (0.337)
Strength of PID	-0.068 (0.254)	1.169* (0.265)	0.828* (0.320)	0.648* (0.294)
Distortion X Strength of PID	-0.374 (0.362)	-0.344 (0.365)	-0.589 (0.452)	0.669 (0.422)
Constant	4.750* (0.186)	4.354* (0.217)	5.010* (0.230)	5.357* (0.233)
Adjusted R^2	0.069	0.169	0.021	0.054
N	392	602	407	594

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
* $p<0.05$, two-tailed.

Table SM.7.3.2: The effects of message distortion on perceptions by partisanship: Labour Party

	Model 1: Labour Partisans (i.e., focal party supporters) Environment	Model 2: Conservative Partisans (i.e., rival party supporters) Environment	Model 3: Labour Partisans (i.e., focal party supporters) Immigration	Model 4: Conservative Partisans (i.e., rival party supporters) Immigration
Distortion Treatment	-0.488* (0.248)	-0.221 (0.246)	-0.606* (0.249)	-0.715* (0.295)
Strength of PID	-0.346 (0.216)	-0.009 (0.249)	-0.457* (0.218)	0.182 (0.305)
Distortion X Strength of PID	0.176 (0.295)	-0.635 (0.357)	0.175 (0.305)	0.159 (0.427)
Constant	4.313* (0.183)	4.802* (0.176)	4.286* (0.178)	4.406* (0.213)
Adjusted R^2	0.012	0.026	0.024	0.019
N	600	434	601	404

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
* $p<0.05$, two-tailed.