

VOTER POLARIZATION AND STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Catherine de Vries and Christina J. Schneider¹

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ABSTRACT

European voters have become polarized over many policy issues. Voter polarization has posed a serious dilemma for political parties. Even if parties want to be democratically responsive to their core supporters, they find it increasingly challenging to take policy positions that are supported by many of their core constituents for being responsive, without being rejected by many others for being unresponsive at the same time. We argue that polarization increases incentives of political parties to remain ambiguous about polarized policy issues. In the paper, we analyze the conditions under which parties are able to remain strategically ambiguous about their positions. We argue that political parties are more likely to (a) blur their positions and (b) divert attention from issues on which their core party supporters are polarized, especially if the issues are considered important. To test the empirical implications of our argument, we collect data on the strategic ambiguity of over 200 political parties in 14 European countries from 2002 to 2014 on left-right and EU issues. We find that polarization on high stakes issues makes political parties more likely to remain ambiguous, especially with respect to the strategy of attention diversion.

¹ Catherine de Vries (c.e.de.vries@vu.nl) is Westdijk Chair and Professor of Political Behaviour in Europe at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Christina Schneider (cjschneider@ucsd.edu) is Jean Monnet Chair and Associate Professor at the University of California, San Diego.

The responsiveness of political parties to their citizens is a central feature of representative democracy (Dahl 1973; Lijphart 1984). A feature that has also made it all but impossible for the British government and opposition parties to find agreement over the scheduled exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union. British voters have become increasingly polarized on the European question. Even though discussions of polarization have focused on the polarization of political parties, the divergence of political attitudes to ideological extremes about EU membership has not confined itself to increasing cleavages of voter attitudes across parties. Cleavages on the European Union cut across party lines, and core voters of most political parties in the UK have found themselves defending opposite views about the value of EU membership as well as the terms under which the UK should leave the EU. Party leaders, confronted with a polarized core electorate, have faced a serious dilemma: by agreeing to any deal proposed in the British parliament, they would reap support by many of their core voters for being responsive to their attitudes, but would also be sanctioned by many other core constituents for being unresponsive to their attitudes. Even if they wanted to be responsive to their core electorate, the increasing polarization of opinions has rendered it less clear what positions and outcomes responsiveness would entail.

The current dilemma of British parties is shared by many parties all across Europe. Many mainstream parties are increasingly split when it comes to European integration (Marks and Wilson 2000; Hooghe et al. 2002, Van der Wardt et al. 2014), and that these divisions may have considerable electoral consequences (De Vries 2010; Evans 2002; Rovny 2013). Voters hold polarized opinions on a number of important issues, including issues related to European integration and left-right policies. The polarization of opinions (which we will document below) occurs amongst voters both across parties and within parties. As a consequence, political parties find it increasingly difficult to represent the highly polarized opinions of voters. Taking explicit positions on policy issues is a common strategy for opportunistic politicians to signal their responsiveness to voters' interests and concerns. But parties that are confronted with a polarized electorate fear serious political repercussion: taking clear stances on issues that their voters are polarized on at the very least increases the political uncertainty for political parties. Although they can expect more support from some of their core constituents, they may lose support by many other core voters (Schneider 2019, 2020). The dealignment of voters from political parties

increases the fear that by taking clear positions on polarized issues, core supporters may decide to vote for other parties that better represent them on those issues.

How do parties respond to these challenges? We argue that parties have incentives to respond to voter polarization with strategic ambiguity. We suggest that parties can be strategically ambiguous in two ways. First, they can engage in *position blurring* by taking vague broad positions on an issue, or present a mixture of positions rather than taking a clear position (see also Rovny 2012). Second, they can engage in *attention diversion* by choosing to place more emphasis on one policy issue over another. By reducing the clarity of their stances on polarized issues or placing less emphasis on these issues, voters may (they hope) be more optimistic that their parties are closer to their opinions than they are *de facto*. The incentives for politicians to appeal to their voters more broadly by remaining strategically ambiguous about their policy positions and attention to those issues depend crucially on voter polarization. Whereas strategic ambiguity is more likely to hurt politicians when their voters hold relatively homogenous positions on the issue, voter polarization increases politicians' incentives to remain strategically ambiguous because any positions they take will be more likely perceived as unresponsive by many of their core voters.² In this case, politicians would prefer to pay no attention to these issues in order to avoid political costs.

We test the empirical implications of our argument using data on the strategic ambiguity of over 200 political parties in 14 European countries from 2002 to 2014. We analyze the effect of core voter polarization on left-right and EU issues on strategic ambiguity and find evidence suggesting that parties engage in strategic ambiguity as voter polarization increases. They do so especially by diverting attention away from the polarized issue, and less so by confiscating their issue position. What is more, our findings suggest that political parties are strategically ambiguous when both voter polarization and the importance of the issue in the party system are high.

The findings offer new insights into the communicative strategies of political parties. Much research has focused on whether and how political parties take positions that favor their electorates. Yet, we know very little about why some parties remain ambiguous about their policy positions while others are very explicit and precise in their positions (Glazer 1990; Rovny 2012, 2013; Callander and Wilson 2007). Whereas some scholars argue that voters prefer ambiguous

² This is particularly problematic if challenger parties with alternative positions exist.

candidates especially if they find themselves between two candidates (Campbell 1983; Tomz and Van Houweling 2009; Somer-Topcu 2015), others argue that voters dislike ambiguity (Shepsle 1972; Dewan and Myatt 2008; Hinich 1981; Bartels 1986; Franklin 1991; Alvarez 1998). The literature generally considers strategic ambiguity as costly strategy, both on formal and empirical grounds, unless multiple issue dimensions are taken into account (Rovny 2012; 2013). Our work contributes to these findings by analyzing the conditions under which political parties have incentives to remain strategically ambiguous about their policy positions, and when they decide that it is politically expedient to be precise.³

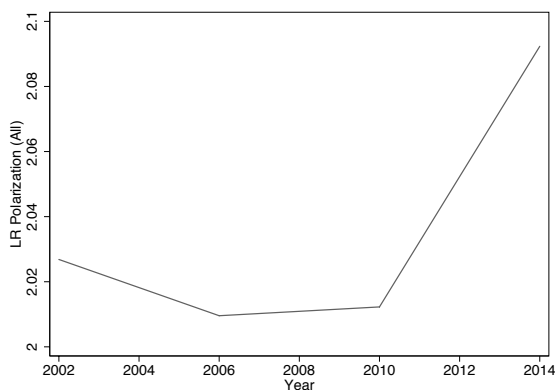
Our findings also contribute to a better understanding of the important concept of ‘rhetorical responsiveness’ (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008), that is, the extent to which government’s selective policy emphases reflect public issue preferences. Even though polarization has increased the demands to place more emphasis on issues on which electorates are divided on (Spoon and Kluever 2015), our results indicate that politicians attempt to appear responsive to their party supporters by either remaining strategically vague on the exact positions they take on these issues or downplaying their importance relative to other issues.

VOTER POLARIZATION AND STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

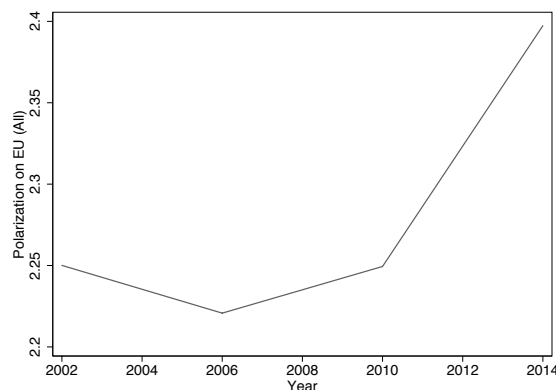
European voters have become increasingly polarized on many issues both on the European integration and the left-right dimension. Figure 1 illustrates that European voters on average have become more heterogenous with respect to their trust in European institutions and their self-placements on a left-right scale.⁴ While others have documented a historical polarization of the European Union over time (Rauh 2016), even our more limited data (which starts in 2002) indicates a trend toward greater voter polarization over time. The European debt crisis is likely to have played an important role in these more recent developments. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that the crisis put support for and opposition towards austerity and European integration front and central in political debate and electoral campaigns (Costa Lobo and Lewis-Beck 2012; Hobolt and Tilley 2014; Hobolt and De Vries 2016).

³ Shepsle (1972: 567) argues that position ambiguity can be a winning strategy only when the majority of voters are risk-acceptant and possess strong preferences on an issue.

⁴ Voter Polarization is measured as the standard deviation of voter opinions on their (i) self-placement along the left-right dimension and (ii) trust in the European Parliament for each country and year. For the purpose of illustration, we aggregate the country-year level data across all European countries in the survey.



(a) Left-Right

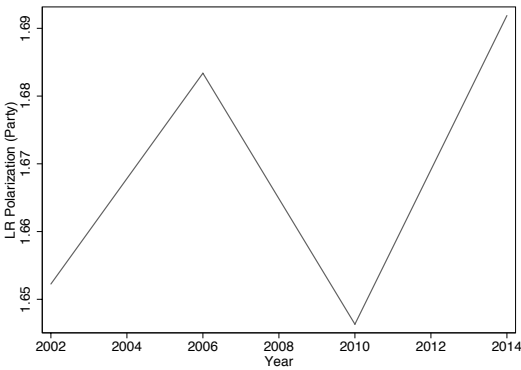


(b) European integration

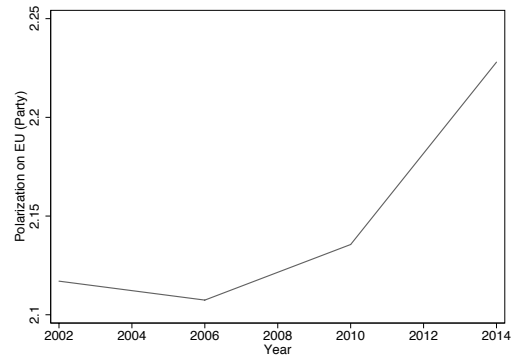
Figure 1: Voter Polarization in European Countries. Voter Polarization is measured as the standard deviation of voter opinions on left-right and EU issues for each country and year. *Source:* European Social Survey

This trend in polarization of voters in Europe is mirrored by a similar, but for parties much more challenging, trend: the polarization of party supporters especially on the European integration dimension. Measuring the heterogeneity of voter positions by partisan affiliation, Figure 2 indicates very similar trends, albeit on an expectedly lower scale.⁵

⁵ Party Voter Polarization is measured as the standard deviation of voter opinions on their (i) self-placement along the left-right dimension and (ii) trust in the European Parliament for the party they voted for in the last election. Party voter polarization varies by political party and year. For the purpose of illustration, we aggregate the party-year level data across all European countries in the survey.



(b) Left-Right



(b) European integration

Figure 2: Party Voter Polarization in European Countries. Voter Polarization is measured as the standard deviation of party voter opinions on left-right and EU issues for each country and year. *Source:* European Social Survey

This polarization has been especially challenging for political parties who struggle to minimize the distance between their positions and their voters’ positions in order to compete with other parties for political office. The polarization of voters has rendered it much more problematic for parties to emphasize or take positions on issues that appeal broadly, even amongst their core supporters. Traditionally, parties could rely on strong voter identification with parties. Partisanship, however, has been in decline throughout Europe, with citizens feeling less aligned with, and attached to, any particular party (Franklin, Mackie, and Valen 1992; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Dalton 2004; Mair 2008a; Kayser and Wlezien 2011; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012). In nine European countries, the fraction of nonpartisans among the population went from 30 percent in 1976 to 40 percent in the 1990s (Dalton, 2000 , pp. 25–28). The process has even accelerated in subsequent years:

“West European electorates, on average, now approach a point where almost half of the electorate (45 percent) does not identify with any party. This group is even larger in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) where slightly over half of citizens evidently hold no long-term party loyalties (53.7 percent).” (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012, p. 26)

The effect of this partisan de-alignment cannot be overstated in our context as it has made politicians much more vulnerable electorally. The dealignment has made it easier for voters to cross party lines (or favor new parties) when their evaluations of a politician's responsiveness and competence shift. This has produced more electoral volatility and larger uncertainty over the voting outcomes, especially for political parties that deal with an increasingly polarized supporter base.

How do parties respond to the challenges induced by voter polarization? We argue that in times of increasing voter polarization parties have an incentive to engage in strategic ambiguity. Specifically, we suggest that political parties can be strategically ambiguous in two ways. First, they can engage in *position blurring*. This implies taking vague broad positions on an issue, or present a mixture of positions rather than taking a clear position (see also Rovny 2012). Second, they engage in *attention diversion* by choosing to place more emphasis on one policy issue versus another. We argue that under certain conditions, parties can use strategic ambiguity to appeal more broadly and to retain the support of their core supporters.

Position blurring implies that parties remain vague about their positions on particular issues, either by not paying much attention to it or by obfuscating their stances through multiple, slightly different statements on different sub-issues, or by different party politicians. To understand this, consider spatial theory that provides a classical understanding of political competition by conceptualizing it as issue dimensions (Downs 1957). On these dimensions, political parties take positions in order to maximize voter support, thereby minimizing the distance of their positions to as many voters as possible. If voters are more polarized on any given issue, then taking clear stances on this issue may significantly increase the parties' support from some voters, but it is very likely to lead to a significant decline of support from other voters, who might even decide that another party is more responsive to their concerns. The further voters move away from each other on political issues, the greater the tradeoff for the political party. This dilemma is even more pronounced when core supporters of the political party become more polarized.

The main goal of position blurring is to mask a party's actual distance from voters to either attract broader support, or at least not to deter their core supporters. This strategy can be particularly beneficial under polarization because voters tend to become more optimistic that their party is closer to them if that party is ambiguous about its platform (Somer-Topcu 2015). If the

core supporters of a party hold increasingly polarized views on important issues, then strategic ambiguity will help parties lose support from core voters who might otherwise decide to vote for alternative parties. Experts of European party politics suggest that exactly this has been the fate of social democratic parties over the past decades in dealing with the polarization over immigration (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2019). When it comes to the immigration issue, social democratic parties find themselves in a dilemma between their social progressive stance and their protectionist stance. These parties are often trapped between appealing to centrist voters who support cosmopolitan policies, and to parts of their core constituencies who often fear immigration and demand the party to be tough on immigration. In this case, strategic ambiguity will be a very attractive strategy.

Based on this discussion, we can formulate a first testable hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Parties are more likely to remain ambiguous about their policy positions on an issue, the more polarized their core supporters are on this issue, *ceteris paribus*.

A second way in which political parties can be strategically ambiguous is by engaging in attention diversion, that is to say to divert attention away from the polarizing issue to other issues. Political parties are more than the set of policy positions that they promote in their campaign or political manifestos; they are also associated with certain issue and not with others. In general, political parties oftentimes aim to compete with competitors by highlighting certain issues and not others (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). The prevailing consensus is that parties mobilize policy issues that might benefit them while ignoring issues that may benefit their competitors. In doing so, they selectively emphasize those issues on which they have a competence advantage, while ignoring issues on which they do not hold such an advantage. The idea of attention diversion is at the core of the notion of “issue ownership” developed by John Petrocik (1996). Here, ownership refers to a situation in which the electorate, or at least large parts of it, views a political party to be better and/or more credible at handling policy problems in a particular issue area. When it comes to the economy, for example, left-wing parties in European countries are traditionally associated with the expansion of welfare state policies, while right-wing parties with economic growth (Budge et al. 1987).

While political parties may generally be very willing to emphasize the issues that they “own,” recent scholarship suggests that they are strategic in their issue emphasis based on their

expectations about voter responses. Tavits and Potter (2015) show that as economic inequality rises, right-wing parties have a strategic incentive to place more emphasis on socially conservative issues in order to avoid losing votes to left-wing competitors. This is because inequality increases the proportion of the population falling in lower socio-economic strata, thus expanding the share of voters who could be receptive to the economic message of left-wing parties. De Vries and Solaz (2019), in turn, show that incumbents, when faced with deteriorating economic conditions, shift attention away from economic issues to social values in order to skirt responsibility for the worsening economic conditions in the eyes of voters. Government parties have a strategic incentive to redirect attention away from economic to non-economic issues when economic conditions worsen because economic performance is one of the most important issues for voters when deciding to re-elect an incumbent or not. Pardos-Prado and Sargazazu (2019) show that government parties in Spain are more likely to stress nationalist conflicts at times of economic downturn. In sum, these studies suggest that political parties strategically divert attention towards away from some issues in order to distract voters and enhance their electoral prospects.

Building on this work, we suggest that political parties may also aim to strategically divert attention away from issues on which voters are polarized to issues that they own. They can do so through a strategy of ambiguity that downplays their importance (Shepsle 1972, Rovny 2012). Experts of European party politics suggest that this is exactly what the mainstream parties did with the issue of European integration. As voter polarization on the issue grew, mainstream parties aimed to shift attention away from the issue towards more traditional left-right issues on which they held more favorable positions in the eyes of voters (Steenbergen and Scott 2004; Gabel and Scheve 2007; Hobolt and De Vries 2015).

Hypothesis 2: Parties are more likely to divert attention away from an issue towards another, when their core supporters are more polarized on the issue, ceteris paribus.

It is important to consider possible scope conditions for the use of strategic ambiguity by political parties. Even though voters may be fooled about the distance between themselves and the party they are supporting, strategic ambiguity can backfire for political parties because voters dislike it. If they found out that their political party uses strategic ambiguity to retain (or even gain) votes, they would likely punish the party by withdrawing their support, especially if other parties offer more precise positions or pay more attention to their own concerns. Experts of Dutch party

politics suggest that this is exactly what happened to mainstream parties in the Netherlands who traditionally downplayed the immigration issue. Whereas this strategy worked well in the 1980s and 1990s, after 9/11 they looked increasingly out of touch to Dutch voters (Pellikaan et al. 2007). This contributed to the so-called electoral “earthquake” in 2002, when a new anti-immigration party won 26 seats out of nothing and became the second largest party in Dutch parliament (Pellikaan et al. 2003; Van Holsteyn and Irwin 2003).

Strategic ambiguity is indeed be a risky strategy as the media and rival parties may capitalize on the ambiguity of the party, depicting the party as flip-flopping or opportunistic (Tomz and van Houweling 2012). In order to avoid electoral costs, political parties will only take this risk when the stakes are high. Unfortunately (from a party perspective), polarization usually implies greater and more passionate disagreement between voters, which oftentimes leads to greater importance of the issue within the party system. If issues are politicized, voters will pay more attention to those issues, leaving political parties more vulnerable.

Because voters are expected to dislike strategic ambiguity and politicians thus expect to be penalized for it, they will only do so when they think revealing their actual issue positions or emphasis would be even more costly. Politicians are more likely to obfuscate positions and divert attention away when the importance of the issue within the party system as a whole increases (see also Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). The greater the importance of the issue, and the more voters pay attention to what politicians are saying about them on different occasions, the more willing politicians are to remain ambivalent about their own positions and talk less about the issue in order to seem more appealing to their core voters more broadly. We expect that politicians are therefore more likely to pay less attention to or remain strategically ambivalent about issues when these are of higher importance in the system. For low salient issues, politicians are likely to use position-taking strategies and increase issue emphasis even when voter polarization is great.

Hypothesis 3: The effect of polarization on strategic ambiguity depends on the issue importance. The greater the importance of the policy issue, the more likely that parties will remain strategically ambiguous under voter polarization, *ceteris paribus*.

DATA, OPERATIONALIZATIONS AND METHODS

To test the empirical implications of our argument, we collect data on the strategic ambiguity of over 200 political parties in 14 European countries from 2002 to 2014 on left-right and EU issues. The countries included in our analysis are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. We rely on three rich data sources that allow us to empirically capture our key theoretical concepts in many European countries over time, position blurring, attention diversion and voter polarization, namely the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (henceforth, CHES), the Comparative Manifesto Project (henceforth, CMP) and the European Social Survey (henceforth, ESS). For the importance that voters attach to issues, we rely on the European Election Survey (henceforth ESS). The similar time frame covered in these data sources not only allows us to connect party-level with voter-level data in our analyses, but also provides us with ample variation in position blurring, attention diversion and voter polarization, which is crucial for the empirical examination of our three key hypotheses. The CHES and CMP data are two of the most valuable data sources for party issue positioning and emphasis and cover many European countries. We connect these party data sources to the ESS that allow us to capture polarization at the voter level. The ESS is one of the most methodologically rigorous regional cross-national survey projects. It was initiated in 2002 and has conducted many rounds since then. Using these data sources, we are able to capture position blurring and attention diversion on two key issues in European party politics, the left-right and EU issue, where we have witnessed increasing voter polarization.

Dependent Variables

Our dependent variables capture the degree to which political parties blur their position (Hypothesis 1) and the extent to which political parties divert attention (Hypothesis 2).

Position Blurring. Although it is difficult to directly measure position blurring, we follow previous studies that have used standard deviations of expert judgments on the positions that parties take as a proxy (see for example Rovny 2012). The measure takes advantage of the CHES dataset that includes measures both on expert positioning of political parties on different issues and issue dimensions, and also on expert uncertainty over this positioning in the form of expert standard deviations. It is important to note that the CHES data explicitly ask about the positioning of party leadership. The standard deviations of expert placements thus reflect expert uncertainty

over the leadership positions, rather than uncertainty over the positions of the entire party that may reflect backbench defections. Specifically, we use the standard deviations in the placement of experts of party positions on the left-right and EU issues.

Attention Diversion. In order to test Hypothesis 2, we need to develop a measure of attention diversion. We construct this measure by subtracting the emphasis a party places on the European integration issue from the emphasis they place on the left-right dimension.

The emphasis that parties place on these issues is measured using the CMP data (Volkens et al. 2013). CMP data is based on the coding of election manifestos provide data over time on the importance parties attach to issues in a wide range of democracies going back the Second World War. This data source provides us with empirical measures of the importance parties attach to policy issues across countries and over time. Party manifestos provide an invaluable source for comparing the issue emphasis of parties over time and across countries, as all parties produce manifestos ahead of parliamentary elections. For the EU salience we use a log transformation measure of two categories, *per108* and *per110*: $\log((per108 + per110 + 1)/total)$. These dimensions capture favorable and unfavorable mentions of the European Union (European Community), including references to the desirability of joining/remaining in the European Union, the desirability of further enlargement and further European integration and evaluations of specific European Union policies and institutions. To capture the emphasis parties place on the left-right issue, we use the standard and cross-validated RILE measure based on all 57 categories of the CMP coding (see Budge and Meyer 2013). The left-right position is calculated by taking the difference between the sums (percentages) of the references of the issues associated with the right (e.g. free enterprise, pro-military, social services limitation, law and order) and those associated with the left (e.g. regulate capitalism, anti-military, social services expansion, nationalization). The resulting left-right scale runs from extreme left (-100) to extreme right (+100). Following recent methodological advice, we use a log transformation of this measure (Benoit et al. 2012; Mikhaylov et al. 2012).

Explanatory Variables

To capture the polarization of party's core supporters on the left-right and EU issues, we rely on the ESS data. ESS is a great data source that especially aims to reduce the heterogeneity in survey practices across countries. This harmonization of standards is important as it allows us to reduce

the likelihood that different results between countries are driven by alterations in how the survey is conducted within each country. It reduces our uncertainty about the extent to which differences between countries reflect actual substantive differences. In order to harmonize survey practices, the ESS developed strict guidelines for consistent methods of fieldwork, including contacting and coding, and the implementation of random sampling. This data source includes a question asking respondents which party they voted for in the previous national election that allows us to identify the core supporters of a party. To capture core voter polarization on the left-right and EU issues, we rely on the standard deviations of two items that capture voter positions on these issues. The left-right item asks respondents to place them on a left-right scale, and the EU item asks them if how they would place themselves on a scale where one pole indicates that European unification should go further, and the other indicates that it has already gone too far. Our measure of core *Voter Polarization* then measures the standard deviation of core voters of each party on each issue.

To test Hypothesis 3, we rely on the importance attached to the economic left-right and EU issues within the party system. We capture this *Issue Importance* by taking the average of the attention given to the left-right or EU issue respectively within the party system as a whole, that is to say the average of all political parties in the system. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) suggest this as a measure of varying degrees of importance of issues on the party system agenda.

Finally, our analysis also includes a set control variables. Following other work (Rovny 2012; Hobolt and De Vries 2015; Somer-Topcu 2015), we include a party's ideological position on the left-right or EU issue (based on CMP), a party's government participation (time office since 1945 based on the parlgov database) and their overall size (vote shares in previous elections based on the parlgov database).

Model Specification

The unit of observation in our party-year level analysis is a party who blurs its position on an issue or place more emphasis on one issue over another in a given time-point in a given country. Due to the natural hierarchies in the data, parties are nested in countries and in time, we employ a regression model with both country and time fixed effects. This allows us to account for the fact that parties within a country in a given year may be more likely to share common characteristics (and errors) compared to parties in other countries. Overall, our regression models facilitate the exploration of the generalizability of findings across different country and time contexts.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The models we present in Table 1 provide an empirical examination of Hypotheses 1 and 2. They aim to explore if political parties that face increasing levels of voter polarization on an issue are more likely to (1) blur their issue position, and (2) divert attention away from the issue. The table presents the results of these two sets of analyses for the left-right and EU issue respectively. The analysis based on the left-right issue includes voter polarization on the left-right and a party's left-right position as a control, while the analysis based on the EU includes the same information but based on the EU issue.

Table 1: Strategic Ambiguity and Voter Polarization

	Position Blurring		Attention Diversion	
	Left-Right	EU	Left-Right	EU
Voter Polarization	.012 (.067)	-.027 (.144)	-0.066** (.034)	0.184** (.079)
Position	.021 (.032)	-.067* (.033)	.122** (.014)	.006 (.019)
Time in Government	-.003 (.002)	-.004 (.003)	-0.004** (.001)	-0.003* (0.002)
Party Size	-.000 (.003)	-.004 (.005)	-.002 (.001)	-.001 (.003)
Intercept	.829 (.145)	1.157 (.350)	.174 (.070)	.292 (.184)
Country Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
R^2	.10	.20	.44	.25
N	222	99	312	143

*Note: The dependent variable in the second and third column is position blurring based on the standard deviation in expert placement of party positions on the left-right and EU issues, while the dependent variable in the fourth and fifth column is attention diversion based on the difference between the level of emphasis a party places on the left-right and EU issues. Standard errors appear in parentheses below coefficient estimates. * significant at the $p \leq .05$ level, ** significant at the $p \leq .01$ level.*

Turning to the results presented in Table 1, exploring political parties' use of strategic ambiguity with increasing voter polarization, we find statistically significant effects only for attention diversion. Recall that *Attention Diversion* measure subtracts the attention given by a party to the EU issue from its attention to the left-right issue. Hence, we would expect to find a negative

coefficient for increasing voter polarization on the left-right issue and a positive coefficient for the EU issue. This would indicate that when faced with more polarized core supporters a political party shift attention away from the polarizing issue to another issue. The findings of our analysis suggest that these expectations are indeed borne out by the data. In line with our second hypothesis we find that as voter polarization increases parties are more likely to be strategically ambiguous by diverting attention away from the issue that polarizes their base.

We do not find a similar empirical pattern when it comes to *Position Blurring*. Increasing voter polarization does not seem to coincide with more position blurring of political parties on the left-right and EU issues. Our first hypothesis finds little empirical support. One reason for this result, we think, might be that using the uncertainty in expert placements is not an ideal way to capture position blurring of parties. In a next iteration of the paper, we wish to explore additional measures that are like our attention diversion measure based on text analysis of actual documents provided by political parties. Lo and his colleagues (2014) for example have developed a measure of ideological clarity based on manifesto data that we could extend.

Turning now to Hypothesis 3, Figures 1.A-B through 2.A-B show the results of an interaction between voter polarization and the overall importance of an issue. We expect political parties to engage in strategic ambiguity when they perceive the stakes to be high. This is because there is little incentive for political parties to obfuscate their issue stances when voters are most likely going to pay little attention to them anyway. In order to test this expectation, we re-analyze the data in the way presented in Table 1 but now include a measure of the overall importance of the left-right and EU issue within the party system and interact it with our voter polarization measure.

The results of our analysis are displayed in Table 2, but given that we are interacting two continuous variables it is more informative to graphically explore these interaction results which we do in Figures 3.A-B and 4.A-B.

Table 2: Strategic Ambiguity, Voter Polarization and Issue Importance

	Position Blurring		Attention Diversion	
	Left-Right	EU	Left-Right	EU
Voter Polarization	-.060 (.110)	-.100 (.167)	0.032 (.050)	0.012 (.097)
Issue Importance	-.592 (.569)	-13.908 (28.033)	1.168** (.270)	-20.455** (12.320)
Voter Polarization* Issue Importance	.260 (.354)	8.332 (10.308)	-.363** (.162)	13.009** (5.128)
Position	.022 (.032)	-.064* (.033)	.120** (.013)	.024 (.018)
Time in Government	-.003 (.002)	-.004 (.003)	-0.003* (.001)	-0.003* (0.002)
Party Size	-.000 (.003)	-.003 (.005)	-.002 (.001)	-.001 (.003)
Intercept	.950 (.195)	1.126 (.407)	-.005 (.090)	.048 (.220)
Country Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
R^2	.11	.22	.52	.43
N	222	99	312	143

*Note: The dependent variable in the second and third column is position blurring based on the standard deviation in expert placement of party positions on the left-right and EU issues, while the dependent variable in the fourth and fifth column is attention diversion based on the difference between the level of emphasis a party places on the left-right and EU issues. Standard errors appear in parentheses below coefficient estimates. * significant at the $p \leq .05$ level, ** significant at the $p \leq .01$ level.*

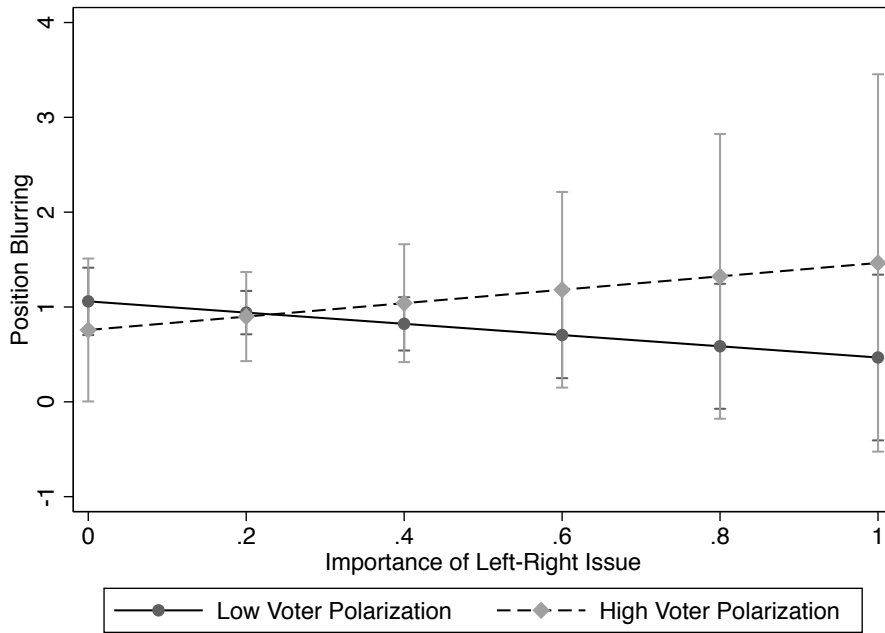


Figure 3A: Position Blurring and Voter Polarization on the Left-Right Issue, by Issue Importance

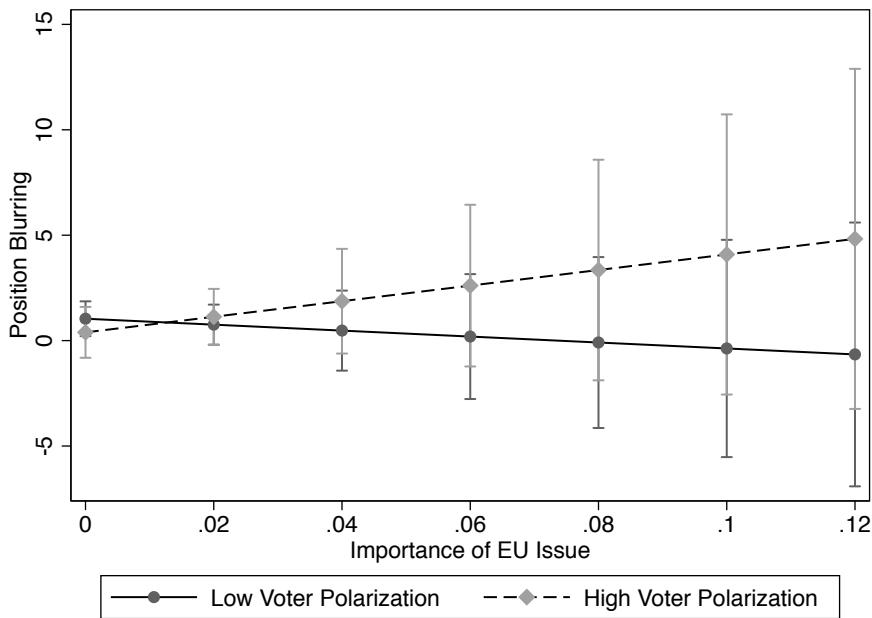


Figure 3B: Position Blurring and Voter Polarization on the EU Issue, by Issue Importance

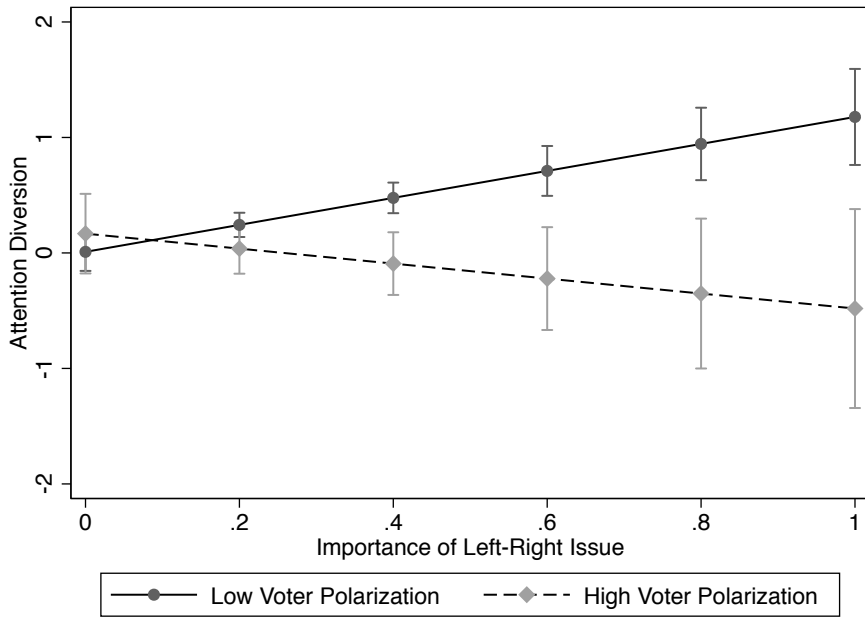


Figure 4A: Attention Diversion and Voter Polarization on the Left-Right Issue, by Issue Importance

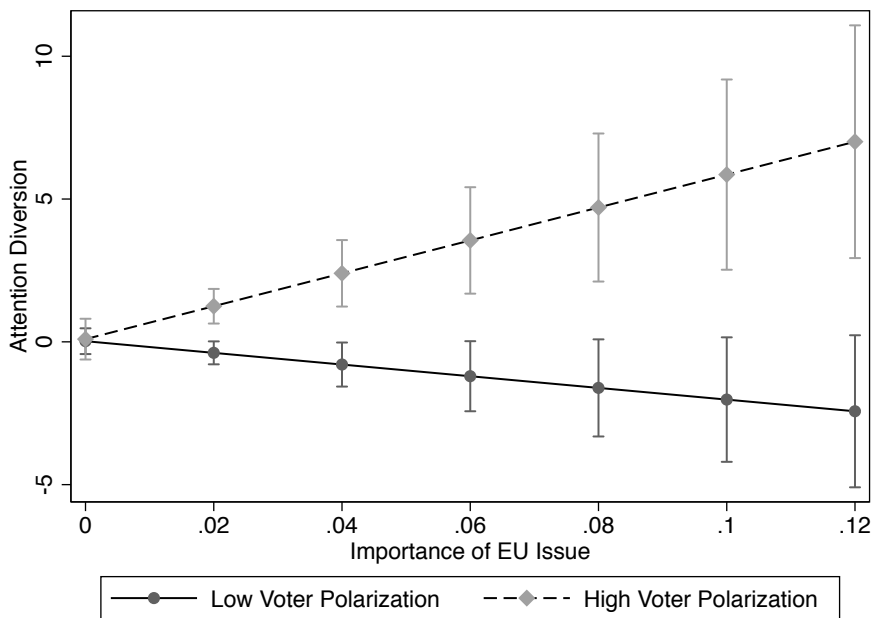


Figure 4B: Attention Diversion and Voter Polarization on the EU Issue, by Issue Importance

The results in the figures all display a similar pattern, although it is most pronounced and again only statistically significant for our second measure of strategic ambiguity, namely attention diversion. The pattern that emerges from these interaction effects is that strategic ambiguity is more pronounced as the importance of the issue increases. We witness a larger degree of position blurring and attention diversion when voters are very polarized and the issue is important within the party system. Yet, the differences are again only significant in the case of attention diversion. Both Figures 4A and 4B suggest that when the importance of the issue is low within the party system as a whole, political parties pay a similar amount of attention to issues, but when the importance of the issue increases they attention given to polarizing issue starts to diverge. Let's take the example of the left-right issue displayed in Figure 4A, when voter polarization is low, political parties start paying more attention to the left-right issue vis-à-vis the EU issue, yet when voter polarization is high the opposite pattern emerges and the party pays less attention to the left-right issues on which their base is conflicted. Figure 4B shows a similar pattern for the EU issue. Political parties pay more attention to the EU issue at the expense of the left-right issue when the issue becomes more important and voter polarization is low. Yet, when their core supporters polarize on the EU, parties pay less attention to the EU issue and more to the left-right issues with increasing importance of the EU issue within the party system.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we analyzed how political parties have responded to the increasing polarization of their core supporters on a number of vital issues on the left-right and the European integration dimension. We argued that parties that want to be responsive to their voters but are less able to appear responsive to an increasingly polarized core constituency tend to be strategically ambiguous about their positions, especially when the issues are considered important in the domestic party system. Strategies of ambiguity incorporate position blurring as well as attention diversion.

Using a dataset on the strategic ambiguity of over 200 political parties in 14 European countries from 2002 to 2014 on both left-right and EU policy issues, we find that polarization has in fact incentivized parties to remain ambiguous about issues, especially when the political stakes are high. The dominant strategy appears to be attention diversion. Our analysis indicates that

parties are more likely to divert attention away from the polarized issue to a less polarized issue; polarization has not affected position blurring on either left-right or EU policy issues.

Our results speak directly to one of the core dilemmas that many political parties face. The responsiveness of political parties to their constituents is a central feature of democratic representation, and the demands for responsiveness (especially over demands for responsibility) have increased in recent years. Polarization severely constrains the ability of political parties to respond to these demands. With their core supporters polarized on political issues, they fear that whatever position they take they will be sanctioned by at least some of their constituents especially when the issues are salient. Our findings show that parties have tried to navigate these pressures by remaining ambiguous on issues over which their voters are polarized in order to minimize the political costs of appearing unresponsive.

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