

# Too Important to Ignore?

## Why Ambiguity and Broad Appeals Fail With Rising Issue

### Saliency

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#### **Abstract**

When do voters penalize ambiguous, broad appeals? This paper proposes a new argument by bringing saliency into existing models of projection and ambiguity. I argue that to understand the conditions under which ambiguity fails, we must focus on the issue a politician is ambiguous on: as the saliency of an issue increases for voters, they are less likely to project their own views onto ambiguous politicians and penalize ambiguity. I find evidence for this argument using a survey experiment that combines Quadratic Voting to measure saliency with a Conjoint that captures when voters prefer ambiguous politicians. The argument implies a representation challenge for mainstream parties who try to build diverse coalitions: as dividing issues become more important, broad appeals and ambiguity become less effective, making it harder to build a coalition of voters with heterogeneous preferences. Consequentially, it becomes easier for political actors at the fringes to attract voters.

**Keywords**— Ambiguity, Broad-appeals, Projecting, Saliency, Conjoint

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# 1 Introduction

Politicians often make broad, ambiguous statements about their preferred policies. Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour in Britain decided to stay ‘constructively ambiguous’ on the Brexit issue (Keegan, 2019), the Democratic Party in the United States was built on an ambiguous platform in order to appeal to a broader electorate (Aldrich et al., 1995), radical right parties are known to be deliberately vague on economic issues (Rovny, 2013), social democratic parties have traditionally tried to appeal broadly by remaining vague on religious issues (Przeworski, 1986), and Trump was vague on many issues (Loewen & Gregory, in press).

Under what circumstances is ambiguity a strategy for success? Many have tried to answer this question. Tomz and Houweling, for instance, show that the partisan identity of a politician influences whether voters accept ambiguity (Tomz & Van Houweling, 2009). Piston and collaborators argue that voters penalize ambiguity if the ambiguous politician is of a different race (Piston, Krupnikov, Ryan, & Milita, 2018). In a similar vein, Nasr (2021) focuses on motivated reasoning and shows that voters’ pre-existing positive or negative views about a party determine whether they accept or penalize ambiguity. Focusing on the risk appetite of voters, Shepsle (1972) argues that only voters who are willing to take risks accept ambiguity. Lehrer and Lin (2020) show that voters’ perceptions of how internally divided a party is matter. And Tolvanen, Tremewan, and Wagner (2021) show that ambiguity is more successful in more polarized societies.

Despite a large body of work on ambiguity, the literature has failed to consider voters’ opinions on the specific issues a politician chooses to be ambiguous on, and as a result we do not fully understand when ambiguity fails. In particular, we do not yet understand how voters’ acceptance of ambiguous statements varies by how important they find the issue itself. This is important because without doing so we can’t explain why ambiguity is successful in some situations but fails in others. For instance, imagine a voter who identifies as a Democrat. She likes a politician who is also a Democrat and therefore assumes that the politician is like-minded on a given policy issue even if the politician makes an ambiguous statement about it. Say, however, that the voter cares deeply about animal rights: if her otherwise liked politician is ambiguous on that particular issue, she might be more critical of the politician’s ambiguity and demand clarity. In this stylized example, partisanship, race, or motivated reasoning do not explain why the same politician is rewarded for ambiguity on most issues, yet is penalized for it when she is vague on the specific issue of animal rights. Existing explanations would thus fail to explain situations like this one

because the factors they consider are traits of the politician or voter that tend to stay constant for the individual.

To fill this gap, this paper posits a novel theoretical explanation that focuses on the importance of the issue a politician is ambiguous on and tests it using a survey experiment. I argue that when voters care deeply about an issue, they are more critical consumers of the information they receive from parties, are less likely to project favorable views onto politicians, and as a consequence, demand clarity and punish ambiguity. Accordingly, my argument suggests two compatible mechanisms through which salience might influence how ambiguity works. First, voters might simply punish lack of clarity on an issue they care about, leading to a utility loss for parties who are ambiguous on that issue. Second, there might be an indirect effect where voters are less likely to project their own position onto ambiguous candidates on the issues that are salient to them. Indeed, there is ample evidence from social psychological and behavioral economics that would suggest that issue salience may influence how voters react to a lack of clarity: studies in these fields have demonstrated that the importance of a decision influences how people process information related to it and determines whether people seek (more) information about the matter (Dyer & Sarin, 1982; Howe & Krosnick, 2017; Lanzetta & Driscoll, 1968).

This argument has important implications for what the optimal strategies for politicians are. Because politicians by the very nature of their profession take a *public* stance, they cannot be vague to one voter and clear to another. To assess the effectiveness of ambiguity for a given politician, one should ask whether the costs of being vague to voters who agree with her on an issue outweigh the benefits of being vague to voters who she disagrees with. Consequently, even with a divided electorate, ambiguity might not pay-off if an issue is extremely salient or only important to voters on one side of a political debate. This means that there exists a critical salience threshold at which a candidate or party should switch strategies from being ambiguous to showing color.

I test the theory and identify this threshold using a pre-registered conjoint experiment embedded in an online survey fielded on a representative sample ( $N = 1869$ ) of the Dutch electorate. The experiment randomizes hypothetical candidates' strategy (agreeing with a respondent, disagreeing with a respondent, or being ambiguous) on particular political issues, as well as their party affiliation. I measure how important these issues are to voters using 'Quadratic Voting', a new survey technique that provides a more fine-grained measure of issue salience than conventional Likert scales do (Cavaille, Chen, & Van der Straeten, 2019). The results support my hypothesis: voters penalize ambiguous politicians more strongly the more important they find an issue. The results also provide evidence on the channel

through which salience might determine how ambiguity affects voters' evaluation of political candidates. As issues become more important to voters, they are more likely to state that ambiguous candidates are positioned further away from their own position, indicating that the way voters project their opinion onto candidates depends on issue salience. For parties this implies that the gains from being vague thus outweigh the costs, except when issues becomes too salient among the electorate.

Taken together, this paper makes two contributions to the literature on ambiguity and projection. First, it introduces the role of issue salience as an important moderating variable that determines when ambiguity is effective. Second, it presents a new way to think about the overall costs and benefits of ambiguity for a party or candidate over alternative strategies, given the existing distribution of preferences and preference intensity among the electorate. The implications of my findings help us understand political developments in Europe and the US such as the failure of broad appeals and the decline of mainstream parties: in a political world characterized by conflict over salient, divisive issues (Kriesi et al., 2008), uniting voters with diverse preferences using ambiguity and broad appeals is increasingly difficult. Understanding when ambiguity and broad appeals fail thus helps us understand why mainstream parties and candidates are losing ground to extreme political entrepreneurs (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

## 2 Ambiguity, Projection, and Salience

### 2.1 The existing literature

The most self-evident way parties and candidates can appeal to voters is by paying lip service to their policy preferences: position yourself where the median voter is positioned (Downs, 1957). Most studies on issue voting have been concerned about where parties are placed along a continuum; less attention has been placed on how precise this positioning is: sometimes it might be beneficial to be ambiguous about your policy positions and create uncertainty about your preferences among voters. A party or candidate may want to steer the focus of public opinion towards other problems, for instance, or can be seen as inexperienced on a particular issue and would thus rather not talk about it (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Meguid, 2005). In addition, the voters a candidate tries to target might not have the same opinions, and taking a clear position risks alienating some of them. By being ambiguous it might even be possible to unite a otherwise heterogeneous electorate, leading to a boost at the polls (Bräuninger & Giger, 2018; Elias, Szöcsik, & Zuber, 2015; Han, 2022; Rovny, 2012; Rovny & Polk, 2020; Somer-Topcu, 2015; Tolvanen et al., 2021).

The literature has identified several different ways a politician can be ambiguous: flip flopping your position over time, being ambivalent by arguing for both sides of an argument (i.e. ‘ambivalence’), straight-out ignoring issues, attacking others as opposed to taking a stance, and by making vague statements that are hard to interpret and argue against (i.e. ‘vagueness’). In a recent experiment, Nasr (n.d.) shows that vagueness is the most successful strategy and that ambivalence works too, whereas flip flopping and attacking others is likely to backfire. All in all, obfuscating your position by being ambiguous can most easily be conceptualized by juxtaposing it to what it is not: taking a clear position. Ambiguity, in that sense, is the same as what others have called a ‘broad appeal’ strategy, defined as “aims to broaden the party’s constituency by convincing different groups of voters with diverse ideological preferences that the party would best represent their interests in office” (Sommer-Topcu, 2015, p. 842).<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I am particularly interested in ambiguity as making vague, general statements as this has been shown to be the most effective strategy of ambiguity (Nasr, 2021).

Yet how do ambiguity and broad appeals work? The most well-established theory states that ambiguity is an effective strategy because voters who are uncertain about a party’s position are too optimistic and ‘fill in the blanks’ with their own ideal positions—this process is called ‘projection’ (Sherif & Hovland, 1961).<sup>2</sup> The basis of projection theory lies in psychology, which puts forward two explanations for why voters might project their positions onto parties and candidates. First, ‘balance theory’ argues that people seek a ‘psychologically balanced state’, which is achieved through congruence between attitudes (Heider, 1946). If a citizen thinks positively about a party, she will have to believe that her preferences and those of the party align in order to achieve such a balanced state. The opposite is true if someone does not like a party, leading her to think that the party has a different position from her own. With regard to ambiguity, balance theory thus implies that voters project their own positions onto an ambiguous candidate based on their pre-existing feelings about the candidate (Bartels, 1988). Second, an alternative hypothesis argues that people are not *selectively* optimistic and pessimistic: they are *always* too optimistic in the face of uncertainty. Previous research also supports the plausibility of this theory. Psychological studies, for instance, have shown that people systematically misjudge the likelihood of preferable events (Irwin, 1953; Rosenhan & Messick, 1966). In addition, people overestimate the prospect of agreement, which is called a ‘false consensus effect’ (Krosnick, 2002). Such across-the-

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<sup>1</sup>Note that ambiguity and broad-appeal strategies are thus different from taking a centrist position because a successful ambiguous candidate appeals to voters in the center *and* at the extremes—as everyone thinks she has their position—whereas a centrist candidate is only attractive to voters who have a centrist position themselves.

<sup>2</sup>An important other explanation of ambiguity focuses on how ‘risk averse’ voters are. According to this literature, uncertain voters have a certain willingness to take the chance that an ambiguous candidate has their position (Shepsle, 1972).

board optimism would thus give *any* ambiguous candidates an advantage in competition against precise competitors. All in all, projection is argued to work through specific or general optimism among voters.

Existing evidence indeed supports the idea that voters project their own positions onto ambiguous politicians in a way that's favorable for politicians. Using a survey experiment, Tomz and Houweling show that 'partisan optimism without partisan pessimism' explains ambiguity (2009, p. 96): voters who encounter an ambiguous candidate from their own party expect the candidate to lean in their own direction whilst being neutral about ambiguous candidates from the opposite party. In a similar lineage, Spencer, Piston and collaborators show that American voters are much more accepting of ambiguous candidates if they are of the same race (2018). All in all, existing research shows that voters project their views onto parties and candidates and are more likely to do so if they have warm feelings towards a party.

Whilst these are convincing findings, the literature on ambiguity remains underdeveloped as it predominantly considers characteristics of voters and parties, such as partisanship, as the main moderating variable that helps us understand when ambiguity is effective for an individual voter. As with any voting decision, however, it is likely that the nature of the *issue* a candidate is ambiguous on is important. This is a factor that has been overlooked by the existing literature and consequentially it does not help us understand why ambiguity sometimes *stops* working: the same politician may be rewarded for ambiguity at one point in time yet punished for it at another. Even more so, on one issue a politician might be electorally rewarded for ambiguity yet not on another. The existing literature cannot explain such instances because it does not focus on the role of the *issue* a politician is ambiguous on.

## 2.2 The argument

To understand when ambiguity is effective, I focus on the salience of an issue a politician is ambiguous on as a key, overlooked variable.<sup>3</sup> Han (2022) also focuses on issue salience yet does not discuss the mechanisms as to why it might matter. My argument builds on a rich literature on salience from social psychology and behavioral economics. Studies in these fields have convincingly shown that the importance of a decision influences, first, how people process information related to that decision and, second, whether they seek (more) information (Dyer & Sarin, 1982; Howe & Krosnick, 2017; Lanzetta & Driscoll, 1968). For instance, people who care deeply about an issue will actively seek-out information on that issue at the expense of information relevant to issues they find less important, as Berent and Krosnick have shown

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<sup>3</sup>Issue salience is also known as 'preference intensity' in economics or 'attitude strength' in psychology.

(1995). The importance of attitudes has also been shown to determine how much thought people devote to them, introspecting more about their opinions if issues matter more to them (Hofmann, Gschwendner, & Schmitt, 2005; Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, & Boninger, 2005). These mechanisms apply to politics too. Falk et al. (2012), for example, asked respondents to rate their agreement on issues and candidates whilst inside an fMRI scanner. Among respondents who ranked an issue as more important, areas in the brain associated with social cognition activated more strongly when rating that issue. The opposite is also true, as Ciuk & Yost (2016) show that people rely more on party cues for information about issues that are less important to them, suggesting that salience may prompt thoughtful consideration of information. All in all, voters seek out more information about issues that are more important to them and consider the information they have more carefully.

With regard to projection and ambiguity, this implies that there are two ways the salience of an issue might influence whether a candidate is rewarded or penalized for being ambiguous. First, seeking out more information about a politician's position is harder if she is ambiguous. As voters will want to spend the least amount of time doing so, ambiguity is penalized for more important issues. This adds to earlier work by Bartels (1986), Enelow and Hinich (1981), and Rogowski and Tucker (2018), who assert that there might be a penalty for uncertainty, by arguing that this penalty can be larger for more important issues. This can be seen as a '*direct effect*', where voters project the same way but simply dislike uncertainty more when issues are more important to them.

Second, because voters who seek out more information and pay more attention become less uncertain about a party's position, they stop projecting as they simply figure out that the party is just being vague. At lower levels of salience, voters thus project; whereas as issues become more important, ambiguity on those issues works less well because voters stop projecting. This can be seen as an '*indirect effect*' where issue salience influences ambiguity through the way voters project. Indeed, because voters are generally not very attentive to begin with (Converse, 1964; Lippmann, 1946), it seems likely that voters are less unsure about a candidate's position if they suddenly start paying attention to what ambiguous politicians say.

Taken together, I expect the following:

*H1a: As issues become more salient to voters, ambiguity becomes less effective through a direct path where voters punish a lack of clarity.*

*H1b: As issues become more salient to voters, ambiguity becomes less effective through an*

*indirect path as voters project differently.*

By focusing on the characteristics of the issue a candidate is ambiguous on, this argument makes it possible to explain why the same ambiguous candidate is penalized for being ambiguous on one issue but draws votes on another issue. In addition, the theory clearly spells out what politicians have to take into consideration when they choose to be ambiguous or not: how divided are the voters you are targeting and how salient is the issue for them—can a politician get away with being ambiguous or are voters paying too much attention because they find the issue important?

## 3 Design and Methods

### 3.1 Design

I test my hypotheses using a pre-registered conjoint experiment embedded in a survey of a nationally representative sample of 1869 Dutch adults.<sup>4</sup> The experiment involves two steps. First, I measure how salient specific policy statements are to respondents using Quadratic Voting. Second, on these same policy statements, hypothetical candidates from real parties either take a clear position or are ambiguous in a two-by-two conjoint. Respondents are then asked which of the two candidates they prefer and how close they think the candidates are to their own position.

The survey uses Quadratic Voting (QV) to measure how salient policy statements are to voters. Quadratic Voting is a tool where respondents can express the intensity of their preferences, capturing salience using a scarce resource: votes (Quarfoot et al., 2017). Respondents are constrained by a fixed budget of credits that they can use to express more or less agreement on a set of policy statements by voting in favor or against them more or less often. Quadratic voting lends its name from the fact that the costs of each additional vote increase quadratically. If we assume that voters feel an intrinsic cost when they do *not* report their true preferences, then the budget constraint makes sure respondents do not express (extreme) opinions on issues they do not care about (Cavaille et al., 2019; Zaller et al., 1992). Likert scales, by contrast, do not have a cost component which means that the researcher cannot distinguish between respondents who are honest about the importance of a political issue and those who just pay lip service to their (partisan) identity or societal norms. For instance, Green voters might claim they are strongly in favor of changing the minimum wage because it is a policy their party adheres to,

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<sup>4</sup>The study has received IRB approval.



yet in reality they only care about fighting climate change. On a Likert scale, these voters would report to be strongly in favor of both issues, whereas in Quadratic voting the cost component causes them concentrate their votes on climate change, thus answering truthfully about their preferences.

In the QV exercise, respondents are asked to indicate how much they are pro or anti on six policy statements. Consequently, the scale for each policy statement derived from the QV exercise runs from a -6 (all 6<sup>2</sup> credits used to buy six votes against a single statement) to +6 (all votes in favor of a single statement). Note that voters who do not vote on an issue are asked separately whether they would be in favor or against the statement. The six issues are chosen to create enough variation in issues that matter to both the Left and the Right. In addition, there should be some issues few people, on average, care about. To meet those goals, the following six policy statements were selected:

- ‘The Netherlands should admit more refugees’
- ‘The minimum wage should be raised’
- ‘Schools should be allowed to denounce being gay’
- ‘Factory farming should be banned’
- ‘We should fight climate change harder’
- ‘There needs to be a referendum on membership of the EU’

The QV is followed by a choice-based conjoint experiment. Conjoint experiments are designed to separate the causal effects of several aspects of a treatment (Hainmueller, Hopkins, & Yamamoto, 2014; Sniderman, 2018). In the paired conjoint design used in this study, hypothetical candidates vary on the party they are from as well as on ‘recent statements’ they made concerning the six different policy statements. The method of analyzing conjoint experiments presented by Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014) allows for the simultaneously causal estimation of the effects of multiple attributes of each candidate. This means that I can test whether ambiguity on a variety of different issues has an effect on candidate choice. Conjoint experiments have become widespread in political science, with recent studies examining, for instance, attitudes towards immigrants and political parties (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015; Vivyan & Wagner, 2016), or what makes a party seem competent (Johns & Kölln, 2020). Nonetheless, to the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that the conjoint design has been used to study ambiguity and to randomize proximity between parties and voters.

The use of *hypothetical* candidates from real parties ensures that respondents are not deceived. At the same time, respondents consider candidates in the context of an actual party, ensuring that respondents

reason similarly as they would when evaluating real candidates, allowing me to capture projecting. On the six policy statements, the candidates can either be pro the statement, anti, or be ambiguous about the statement. To ensure that the candidate profiles voters see are realistic, several combinations of attributes are constrained. Hypothetical candidates from the three parties that are most focused on single issues—the Socialists (SP), Greens (GL), and Party For Freedom (PVV)—always choose a clear position on the policy statements that are at the core of the parties’ ideology. To be precise, the SP is always pro minimum wage increases, the Greens always pro fighting climate change, and the Party For Freedom always anti-immigration.

The data for this stand-alone survey, designed in Qualtrics, were collected at the beginning of March, 2021, from a non-probability sample of 1869 Dutch adults that is representative on education, age, income, and gender. The fieldwork for the survey was conducted by Lucid. Respondents were paid small incentives to complete the survey.

### 3.2 Measures

The first main *independent variable* of interest is ‘Ambiguity’, which captures whether a candidate was ambiguous on a given policy statement. Candidates can also be pro or anti on the policy statements, which is recoded as agreeing and disagreeing with the *respondent* based on a respondent’s position on these same policy statements. I thus end up with a measure of ambiguity that can be contrasted to agreeing or disagreeing with a respondent on each of the six policy statements. The second main independent variable, ‘Salience’, is the salience of each policy statement to a respondent, which is captured by taking the absolute value of the number of QV votes for each policy statement (ranging from 0 to 5 as the last two categories are combined because they had too few responses in them). The primary *dependent variable* is ‘Candidate choice’, based on the respondent’s answer to the question ‘Which candidate do you prefer?’. For each candidate, this variable is recoded to whether the candidate is chosen or not. In the last five profile comparisons, respondents are also asked ‘How close do you think this candidate is to you?’ I use the answer to this question to create a variable, ‘Perceived Distance’, which can be used to test the potential mechanism when employed as an additional dependent variable.

One additional point about these measures, which is unique to this conjoint, is worth noting. In a standard conjoint, one would compare the effect of each attribute on the outcome. In my case, this would, for instance, mean that I compare the effect of being ambiguous on the EU versus ambiguity on factory farming (the rows in the data frame would thus be candidate profiles). This is not a particularly

interesting estimate, however, as I am interested in the *general* effect of ambiguity versus policy proximity. To capture that general effect, each individual ambiguous statement will be coded as ‘ambiguous’ as opposed to using the unique ambiguous statement *per policy*. This enables me to then put the data in a ‘long’ format (also called a ‘stacked matrix’), with a single column for the strategy employed by a candidate, as opposed to one per issue. This means that each two-candidate comparison will result in  $2 \times 6$  rows in the data as the unit of analysis is the policy attribute in the candidate profile.<sup>5</sup> This creates a data frame where each row is a quote from a candidate on a single policy statement, which is nested in the complete candidate profile, in each two-candidate comparison, in a respondent. With 1869 respondents who each do 10 comparisons, this results in a data frame with  $1869 \times 10 \times 6 \times 2 = 224280$  observations.

### 3.3 Estimation

I estimate the effect of candidate ambiguity as opposed to clarity on people’s candidate choice for different levels of issue salience using the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) and marginal means (the predicted mean likelihood a candidate is chosen) (Leeper, Hobolt, & Tilley, 2020; Hainmueller et al., 2014). The AMCE is obtained by regressing the dependent variable on dummy variables for all levels of each attribute, except for one level which is the baseline for each attribute. Each respondent (indexed by  $i \in (1, \dots, N)$ ) is presented with  $K$  rating tasks ( $k \in (1, \dots, 10)$ ) of two profiles each, with every candidate in each rating task making a statement on  $P$  different policies ( $p \in (1, \dots, 6)$ ). In each one of her tasks, the respondent chooses the most preferred of the two alternatives. I estimate the AMCE using using a simple linear regression of the form:

$$\begin{aligned}
 CandidateChoice_{ikj} = & \alpha + \beta_1[party_{ikj} = VVD] + \beta_2[strategy_{ikjp} = ambiguity] + \\
 & \beta_3[salience_{ikjp} = 4] + \beta_4[Issue_{ijk} = immigration] + \\
 & \beta_5[party_{ikj} = VVD \times strategy_{ikjp} = ambiguity] + \\
 & \beta_6[salience_{ikjp} = 4 \times strategy_{ikjp} = ambiguity] + \dots + \epsilon
 \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where  $CandidateChoice_{ikjp}$  is coded as 1 if a candidate is selected. The regression equation shown here only contains the coefficients for one level of each attribute and does not show the additional coefficients for all the different levels of the conjoint attributes for clarity purposes. In the final model, all levels

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<sup>5</sup>Note that in a normal conjoint each two-candidate comparison results in just two rows, one for each profile.

are included minus the reference categories. Saliency is fully factorized. The reference category for the strategy of a candidate is ‘agreeing’, for issue saliency ‘0’, for party the ‘CDA’, and for the issue ‘climate change’. This estimation controls for the issue a politician was ambiguous on, as captured for immigration by  $\beta_4$ , as well as the party that was ambiguous. Because of the restrictions in the randomization for the three issues that the three challenger parties in the design are predominantly campaigning on (the Greens and the environment, the PVV and immigration, and the SP and the minimum wage), the distribution of parties is not balanced. Each of the three mainstream parties have a 3/12 probability of being the party in a profile and the three challenger parties a 1/12 probability each. To make sure the estimation is valid, I allow treatment effects to vary by the strata of the parties (e.g.  $\beta_5$ ), as described in Hainmueller and collaborators (Hainmueller et al., 2014). I do not, however, weigh by strata size, as the final distribution of parties is actually closer to real-life politics—with more attention going to the bigger mainstream parties—which means that the results have more external validity without weighing (De la Cuesta, Egami, & Imai, 2019). The coefficient of interest is  $\beta_6$ , which captures whether the causal effect of ambiguity as opposed to agreeing is different at different levels of saliency. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

Using this formula, I capture two effects of interest. First, the marginal means (the predicted mean likelihood a candidate is chosen) for being ambiguous or disagreeing with a voter as opposed to agreeing with her at different levels of issue saliency. Of course, the difference between agreeing and being ambiguous does not take into consideration that it is not possible to agree with the entire electorate at the same time. In fact, if a politician tries to do so, the strategy she would use is being ambiguous. The great strength of ambiguity thus lies in the fact that it is not a strategy that only applies to a certain proportion of the electorate, but one that you use to address *all* of the electorate. Simply put, if you agree with some voters, you automatically disagree with some others. Even if ambiguity is thus less effective than simply agreeing with voters, it might still be the most effective strategy overall depending on how divided the electorate is. The effectiveness of ambiguity thus depends on the proportion of the electorate a politician could hypothetically agree with if she sides with the majority opinion. It is possible to calculate this value—a threshold at which it is more effective to simply agree with the largest share of voters—based on the marginal means of each strategy. This is the second quantity I will calculate based on the marginal means from Model 1. This concept is formalized in the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned}
& \textit{ambiguity} > \textit{agree} \times a + \textit{disagree} \times (1 - a) \\
& \textit{ambiguity} = a(\textit{agree} - \textit{disagree}) + \textit{disagree} \tag{2} \\
& a^* = \frac{\textit{ambiguity} - \textit{disagree}}{\textit{agree} - \textit{disagree}}
\end{aligned}$$

where ( $a$ ) captures the proportion of the electorate that has the majority opinion. E.g., if 60% of people are pro-Brexit,  $a$  equals 0.6. Ambiguity is the most effective strategy as long as the first inequality in Equation 2 holds. Simply put, if the total utility in the electorate when a party is ambiguous is larger than the total utility if a party agrees with the largest majority (and therefore disagrees with the rest), then ambiguity is more effective. Simplifying this equation leads to a value ( $a^*$ ) which captures the proportion of voters that a party needs to agree with on an issue for ambiguity to be inferior to simply agreeing these voters. I call this proportion the ‘*threshold effectiveness of ambiguity*’. This threshold can be calculated at different levels of issue salience.

## 4 Results

The results from the main analysis using salience are presented in Figure 1. The left panel of the figure shows the AMCE of being ambiguous as opposed to agreeing by each salience level. The black line indicates the baseline level—agreeing with a voter—for the strategy a candidate can pursue. If the theory outlined above is correct, then there should be little difference between ambiguity and agreeing at lower levels of issue salience, whereas there is a difference at higher levels of issue salience. The panel on the right shows the marginal means of candidate selection for each strategy by the level of issue salience (as candidate selection is binary, the marginal means simply calculate the predicted probability a candidate is chosen given her strategy with the data stratified by salience). The marginal means are calculated based on the model from Equation 1. Both panels clearly show that the effect of each strategy, particularly agreeing and disagreeing, depend on the salience of an issue. For instance, disagreeing on an extremely salient issue as opposed to agreeing makes a candidate about 30% less likely to be selected by a voter. Recall that this is for a *single* issue, indicating that positional congruence—even on a single issue—can strongly influence vote choice as long as issues are salient to voters. Furthermore, according to my expectations, ambiguity is very similar to agreeing at lower levels of issue salience. For more salient issues, by contrast, being ambiguous is positioned somewhere in-between agreeing and disagreeing, and

agreeing with voters is clearly superior. Taken together, this shows that voters who find issues less important are barely distinguishing ambiguity from agreeing, whereas those who find issues important can.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1: Effects of Candidate ambiguity on Profile Choice by Salience

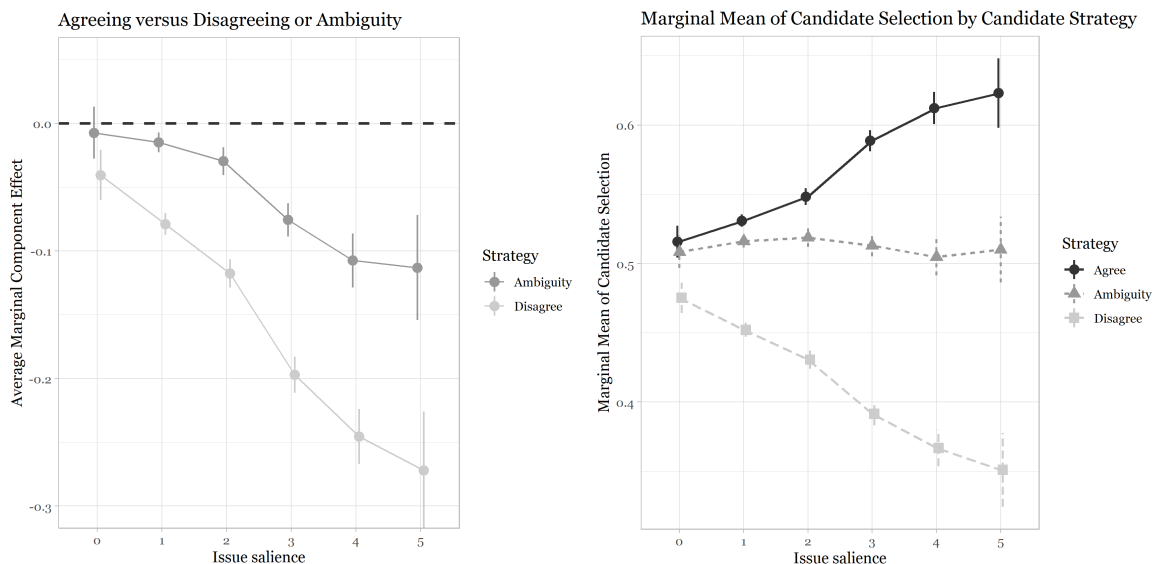
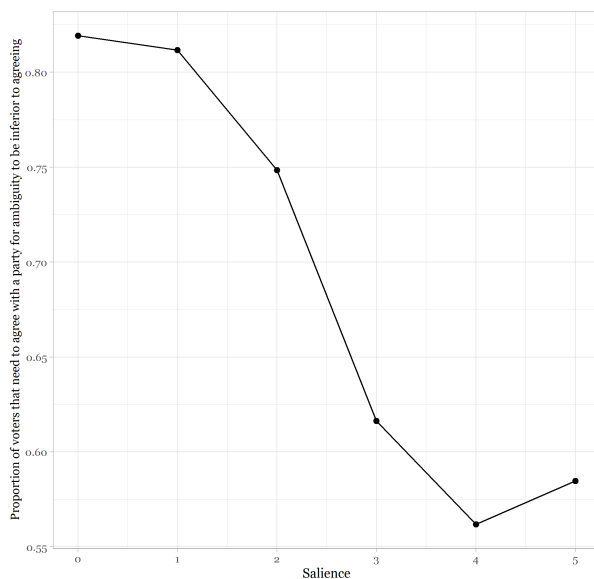


Figure 2: Threshold Effectiveness of Ambiguity



Of course, simply looking at the average difference between ambiguity and agreeing does not take into consideration that in reality it is impossible for a party to agree with all voters at the same time if people have different opinions. In fact, being able to *appear* to do so is the big strength of ambiguity. In the

<sup>6</sup>Furthermore, these figures also show that respondents who do not find an issue very salient do *not* interpret ambiguity as moderation and like it because they are moderates themselves. If this were the case, then ambiguity should be liked *more* than agreeing at lower salience levels. This is not the case: respondents still slightly prefer candidates they agree with.

Figure 2, I take this into consideration by looking at the threshold effectiveness of ambiguity. The y-axis in this plot shows the proportion of voters a party needs to be able to agree with for ambiguity to be a less-effective strategy than simply agreeing with that proportion of voters (as formalized in Equation 2). The results are based on the marginal means shown in Figure 1 based on Model 1. The plot shows that at lower levels of salience, ambiguity remains the most effective strategy unless, at 0 salience for instance, about 80% of the electorate has the same opinion and the party can agree with them. As the salience of an issue increases, this proportion changes. For example, for very salient issues (4 or 5 on my salience scale), ambiguity is only the most effective strategy if a party cannot agree with at least 55% of the electorate at the same time. As issues become more salient, it is thus increasingly attractive to pick a side.

Taken together, both Figures 1 and 2 provide support for the argument put forward: At low issue salience, ambiguity as a strategy has effects very similar to agreeing and is extremely effective; yet when an issue becomes more salient, ambiguity becomes increasingly less effective.

#### 4.1 Mechanisms: the direct and indirect effects of ambiguity

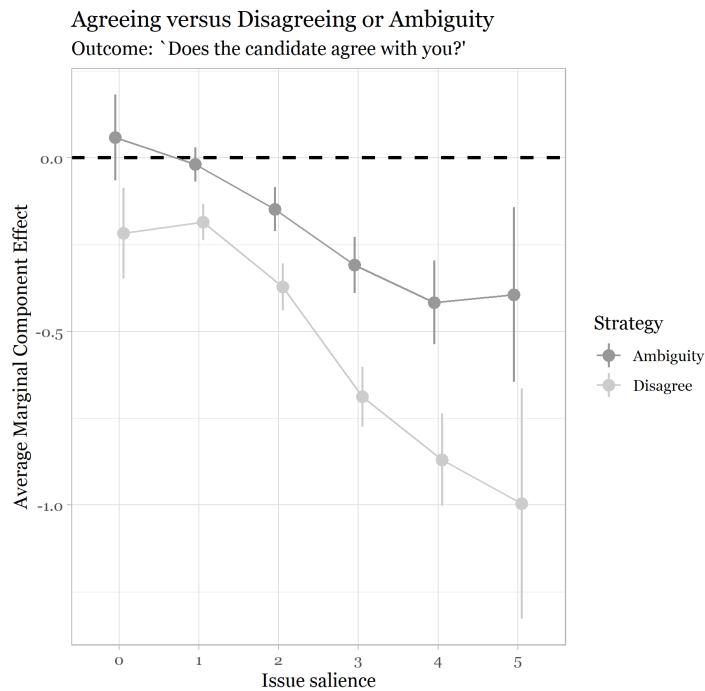
Salience might influence the effectiveness of ambiguity because on more salient issues, voters project differently and thus perceive ambiguous candidates as further away from their own position. Alternatively, a direct effect of ambiguity is also possible where voters simply dislike ambiguity on important issues. In the first mechanism test, I focus on the former mechanism.<sup>7</sup> To test this mechanism, respondents rank the candidates in the final five profile comparisons on the question ‘How much does this candidate agree with you?’. Higher values indicate that a candidate is close and clear enough for a voter. The results from this test are shown in Figure 3. The black line indicates the estimate for agreeing, and the gray lines show how the other strategies are different from agreeing.

The results clearly indicate that salience influences whether ambiguity as opposed to agreeing causes voters to perceive candidates as having their position. At lower levels of salience, there is no difference between ambiguity and agreeing: voters who do not find issues important, perceive the position of an ambiguous candidate to be the same as that of a candidate they agree with. At higher issue salience, an ambiguous candidate is still perceived as much closer to the voter than a candidate she disagrees with, but less than a candidate she agrees with. To be precise, with five votes for 25 credits, an ambiguous

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<sup>7</sup>The experiment included an additional question to test the direct effect of ambiguity in the same way; however, respondents did not understand the question so the results are not insightful.

Figure 3: Effects of Candidate Strategy on Perceived Closeness



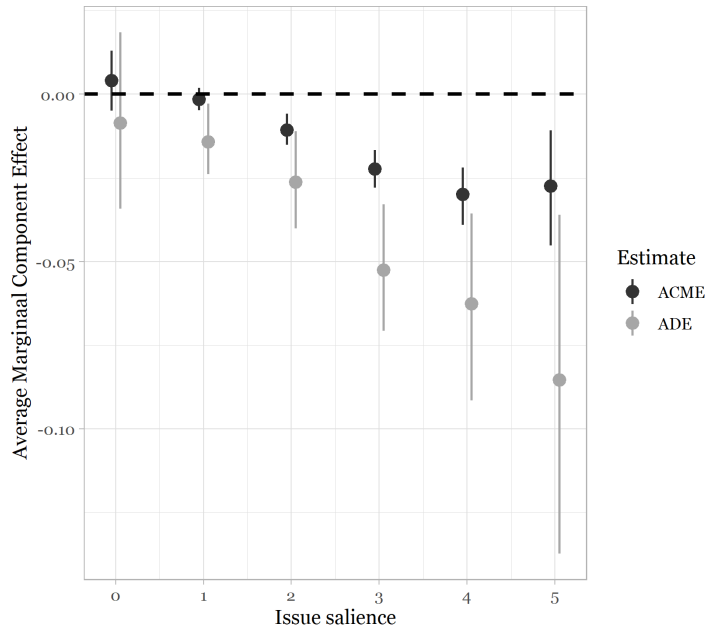
candidate is perceived as 0.4 steps less close than a candidate a voter agrees with whereas a candidate a voter disagrees with is perceived as 1 step less close on a 10-step Likert scale. All in all, this provides evidence that issue salience influences whether an ambiguous candidate is seen as having a position that is close to a voter. *Issue salience thus influences how voters project their views onto politicians.*

As a second test of the potential mechanisms, I use mediation analysis methods developed by Imai and collaborators to unpack the effect of being ambiguous as opposed to simply agreeing with a voter into its direct and indirect effects (2011)—called the ‘Average Causal Mediation Effects’ (ACME) and ‘Average Direct Effect’ (ADE).<sup>8</sup> Simply put, the ACME captures how much of the total effect of being ambiguous runs through perceiving a candidate as projecting differently (captured by whether a respondent thinks she has her position). Figure 4 shows the results of this analysis. At lower levels of salience, there is no difference between agreeing and ambiguity. At higher levels of salience, both the indirect (ACME) effect and the direct effect are significantly different from simply agreeing with a voter (as in the previous figures, captured by the black line). On average, 25% of the total effect is mediated through a voters’ perception of a candidate, providing strong evidence that both the indirect and direct effect are important. On more salient issues, voters thus penalize ambiguity because they think ambiguous politicians are further away and because they simply dislike a lack of clarity.

<sup>8</sup>Note that the Average Treatment Effect, in this case the AMCE, is the sum of these two effects.



Figure 4: Mediation Analysis: Decomposing by Direct and Indirect Effects



## 5 Counterfactual Electorates: what are the optimal strategies for parties?

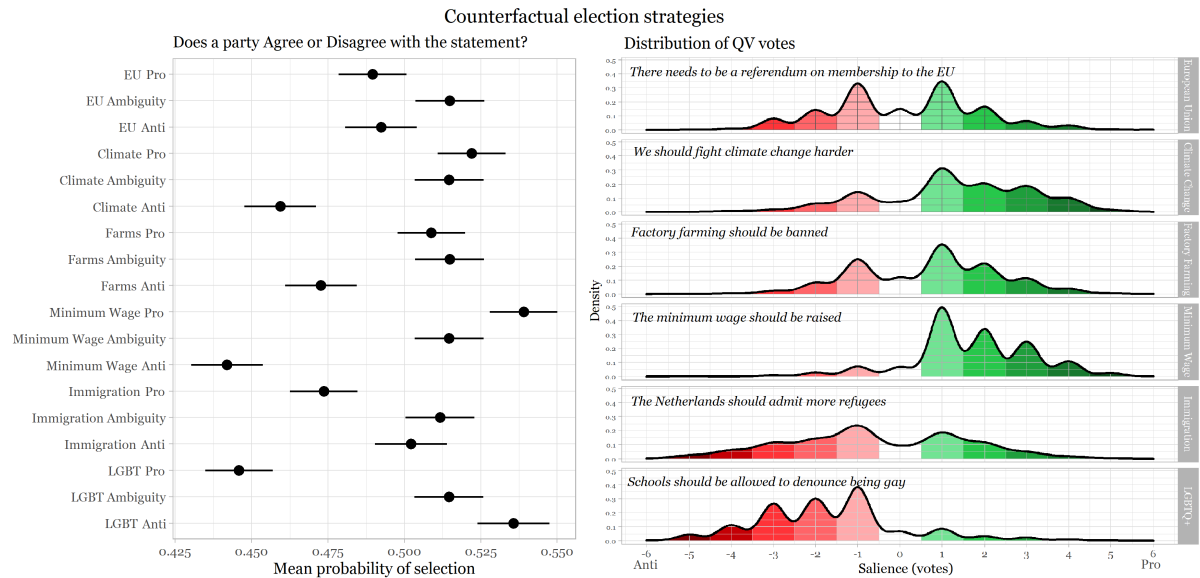
The previous results have indicated that the average effectiveness of ambiguity depends on the salience of an issue to a voter. Whether being ambiguous is the most effective strategy for a politician therefore depends on the composition of the electorate: ambiguity will pay off if voters are divided and issues are not extremely salient. A similar argument is made by Han (2021) and Han (2020) who show that mainstream parties use ambiguity if Radical Right parties are successful and their base is internally divided. Parties thus have to take the proportion of voters who are pro or anti on a given issue, as well as how salient those opinions are, into consideration.

To illustrate this point, I use the results from the QV—which captures the real distribution of opinions in the Dutch electorate—and show what the mean selection probability for a given party would have been on each issue, had they been pro on the policy statement, anti on the statement, or ambiguous on the statement. One can think of the mean selection probability as the ‘total utility’ for a party had they used a specific strategy on a particular issue. It is possible to calculate these utilities because the marginal means from Model 1 tell us the effect of each strategy at each salience level on the probability an individual voter would choose a party.<sup>9</sup> As the survey measures the opinion of respondents and how

<sup>9</sup>These are simply the marginal means as reported early in Figure 1, and I thus interpret these as the utility for each

salient these opinions are, the effect of a strategy for each respondent can thus be calculated. The mean probability of selection is then simply the mean of all these effects over all respondents. The resulting mean selection probabilities for each strategy using the actual distribution of opinions in the Dutch electorate based on the representative survey are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Counterfactual election strategies



The right pane of the plot shows the distribution of opinions and their salience on the six different policy statements. The direction of votes, positive or negative, indicates whether some is pro or anti, and the number of votes how salient an issue is. The left pane shows the mean selection probability for a party if they are pro or anti on the statement or if they are ambiguous. The results clearly show that the distribution of opinions and their salience on a given policy statement heavily influences which strategy is most important. Considering the minimum wage, for instance, being pro on the statement clearly leads to the highest mean selection probability because almost all voters are pro themselves and quite some have strong opinions on it. For divisive issues, such as the referendum on the European Union, ambiguity is the superior strategy. A party in the Netherlands who wants to appeal to all of the electorate should be ambiguous on the EU, factory farming, and immigration, yet take a clear position on climate change, the minimum wage, and LGBTQ+ rights. All in all, what the most effective strategy for a party on a given issue is thus depends on the distribution of opinions on that issue and how salient those opinions are.

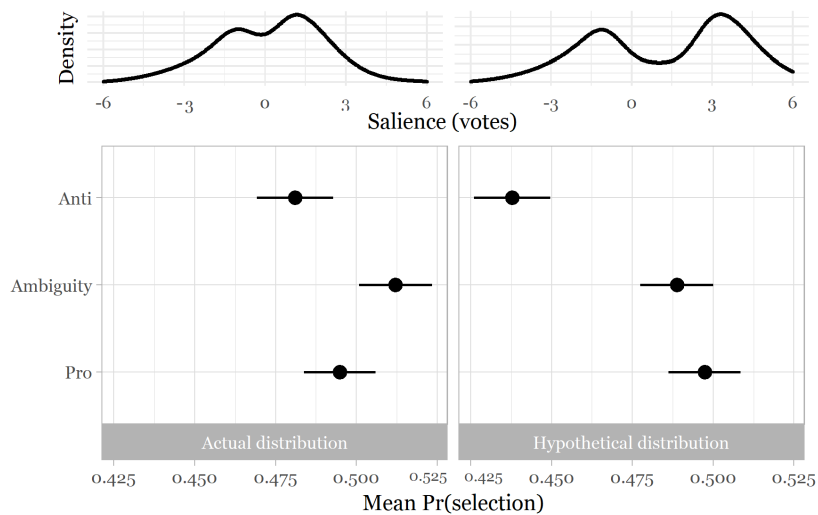
Of course, parties generally do not try to appeal to all of the electorate at the same time. Instead, they

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strategy

aim to attract voters who already think of them favorably—their core constituents—as well as undecided voters who hold them in high regard. What the optimal strategy for a party is thus depends on the part of the electorate they try to target. To further illustrate this point, in Figure 6 I look at those voters in the Netherlands who hold the Social Democrats in high regard (they indicate a propensity to vote for more than 6 on an 11-step scale), and look at the most effective strategy on the issue of immigration.

Figure 6: The Electorate of the Social Democrats



*We should admit more refugees*

The density plot at the top left shows that actual distribution of likely Social Democratic voters on the question ‘we should admit more refugees’. Based on this distribution and the estimates for each strategy from above, the optimal strategy for the Social Democratic party is to be ambiguous on immigration, and being pro on immigration is better than being anti. This is indeed contradicts the results in Figure 5, which shows that it is most effective to be anti immigration in the whole electorate. The effectiveness of ambiguity for a given party is thus determined at the aggregate level.

These results speak against popular claims that the decline of Social Democratic parties is caused by globalization’s ‘losers’ moving to the radical right because Social-Democratic parties do not take anti-immigration positions (Kitschelt et al., 1994). Indeed, the results presented here confirm that the core supporters of Social Democratic parties are nowadays progressive middle-class voters who are more progressive (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). These results thus partly support existing research which has pointed out that the actual vote share of Social-Democratic parties is *lower* if they adopt conservative positions (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2020). That said, the results also indicate that ambiguity might be a better strategy than taking a clearly progressive position as the Social Democratic

electorate is not single minded.

What happens, however, if those Social-Democratic voters that are progressive on immigration find the issue more important? The right panel considers this hypothetical scenario and shows that being clearly progressive would be the most advantageous strategy. A shift in issue salience might thus change what the most effective strategy is, even if voters' positions stay the same. In addition, in spite of an electorate that is divided, ambiguity might be an inferior strategy if an issue is more important to part of the electorate.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper has shown that voters' evaluation of politicians who make ambiguous statements depends on issue salience. As a consequence, the effectiveness of ambiguity and broad appeals for parties depend on two factors: how divided a party's base is and how salient the issues they are divided on are to their base. At lower issue salience, voters see a politician who is ambiguous as being positioned very similarly to one who they agree with. With low salience, ambiguity is thus a very effective strategy, only inferior to agreeing with voters in situations where close to the entire electorate has the same opinion. As issues become more salient to voters, however, they see ambiguity and broad appeals as increasingly different from agreeing. With rising issue salience, it becomes increasingly beneficial for parties to simply pick a side.

These results thus provide a more positive note about role of ambiguity in democracy. [Tolvanen et al. \(2021\)](#), for instance, argue that in more polarized societies, a majority of voters will be disappointed because they elect an ambiguous politician who will not implement their favored policy. The argument presented here, by contrast, shows that voters see through strategic ambiguity as long as issues are salient enough to them.

There are some potential limitations to this study that future work can address. First, whilst the conjoint randomizes candidate strategy, the salience of issues to voters was not determined by treatment. As a result, the causal interpretation is not certain. To address this potential weakness, [Table A3](#) in the online appendix presents a balance test based on respondents' background characteristics comparing whether certain respondents are more heavily represented among a given salience level. The groups are relatively balanced and any imbalance has a small sign, making a—careful—causal interpretation possible. Nonetheless, only an experiment where issue salience is randomized can provide true causal

evidence beyond the interaction effects presented here. The problem with such experiments, however, is that it is difficult to control the exact level of issue salience, whereas the hypotheses tested here required a very fine-grained measure. Future work could further explore the relationships described here by varying issue salience experimentally. In addition, this study did not discuss the effects of partisanship or motivated reasoning, as much of the existing work on ambiguity has done (Nasr, 2021; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2009). Whilst partisanship was included in the experiment (the results are shown in the online Appendix), I find that it does not matter for ambiguity in the European context. Whilst interesting and plausible as most work on partisan identity is done in the US,<sup>10</sup> the results are not discussed here because they are potentially caused by pre-treatment bias. As respondents completed the attention-intensive QV task before the conjoint, it is possible that they were primed to focus more on issues than they normally would. Whilst it is an interesting finding that partisanship does not seem to matter, it is thus not possible to rule out that this result is particular to this specific experiment. That being said, it would be interesting for future work to consider how partisanship and salience work together.

What do these results tell us about changes in the politics of advanced democracies in the past decades, such as the increased importance of the second-dimension of conflict (Kriesi et al., 2008), rise of challenger parties (Hobolt & Rodon, 2020), the decline of mainstream parties (Benedetto, Hix, & Mastrorocco, 2020), the ‘Dutchification’ (many small parties but no bigger ones) of party systems, and the rise of outsider candidates such as Donald Trump (Loewen & Gregory, in press)? As ambiguity and broad appeals are important strategies to form broad catch-all coalitions of voters with diverse backgrounds and preferences, understanding when ambiguity fails explains why such coalitions are becoming rarer and rarer. This paper shows that in a political environment that is characterized by increasing polarization and the politicization of dividing conflicts, ambiguity stops working, and consequently it becomes harder to form broad coalitions of voters. As a result, party systems fragment and opportunities open up for niche parties on the fringes of politics. The results presented here thus help us understand part of the story about the rise of radical parties in Europe and outsider candidates such as Trump and Sanders in the US: as dividing issues become more important to voters, mainstream parties and moderates see their broad appeal strategies fail, making it easier for political actors at the fringes to attract voters (Buisseret & Van Weelden, 2020). The rise of radical parties and outsider candidates is thus as much

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<sup>10</sup>One exception is a recent study by Mohamed Nasr (2021), who finds that motivated reasoning is important in Europe too.

a story about how mainstream parties failed to keep their coalitions together, as it is a story about the capacity of political entrepreneurs to carve out a niche for themselves using clear positions.

This interpretation of the rise of political challengers, however, also means an opposite scenario is conceivable in which mainstream parties experience an electoral comeback. Consider the possible political aftermath of the Covid crisis as an example. It seems plausible that the pandemic will be followed by renewed attention to and increased salience of the economy. If the economy and jobs are on everyone's mind again, then those parties that are ambiguous on economic issues because their base is divided on it—the Radical Right (Rovny, 2013)—will likely lose votes. On the other hand, political actors with a united base on economic issues—the mainstream establishment—will likely win. Contrary to what some pundits might predict, the epidemic can thus lead to *losses* among the Radical Right. Another example can be found in the rising importance of climate change in the public debate. In the US, many Republican politicians have made due by simply ignoring the issue or being ambiguous. If climate change becomes more important to their base, however, it may result in a split among their ranks. Ultimately, voters would punish Republican politicians' lack of clarity on climate change. As new—and old—topics rise to the top of voters' minds, parties will have to take a stance as such issues become too important to ignore.

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# A Online Appendix

## A.1 Further details on design

### A.1.1 Conjoint

I depart from previous experimental work on ambiguity, most notably by Tomz and Houweling (2009), by using (adjusted) quotes from politicians out of speeches and manifestos to make politicians seem ambiguous. To ensure that the statements voters see are realistic, the policy statements in the experiment were taken directly, or phrased similarly to, statements used by the biggest Dutch Voting Advice Application (‘Stemwijzer’). The survey was fielded around the election when the VAA was running, which saw 4.85 million unique visitors, or about 1/3 of the people eligible to vote. Many respondents had thus likely seen these statements or heard about the political debate surrounding them before. The benefit of the approach applied here—using ‘real’ quotes and policy statements—is that the experiment has higher external validity. In the study by Tomz and Houweling, respondents were shown a Likert scale on a policy statement with either an arrow indicating a precise candidate’s position (e.g. the candidate wants to increase taxes a lot) and a bracket indicating the ambiguous candidate’s position (e.g. the candidate is somewhere between increasing taxes a lot and keeping them the same).

This study uses a paired conjoint design in which two party profiles are compared side by side with a forced choice between the two candidates. Figure A1 illustrates what the choice task looked like for respondents. Each profile includes the party of the candidate as well as several ‘recent quotes’ on six policy statements. Respondents undertook ten such choice tasks where they had to choose their preferred candidate.<sup>11</sup> In the last five choice tasks, respondents were asked to rate each of the candidates on an additional scale running from 0 to 10 in response to the question: ‘How close do you think this candidate is to your own preferred policy positions?’ This scale provides a measure of the mechanism (the degree of projection).

The complete lists of attributes and values in the conjoint is shown in Table A1. All in all, the strategies a party can take are thus randomized per issue and per party (except for the constrained attributes), creating random variation in strategies per issue and per party.

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<sup>11</sup>Recent research has shown that there is no serious decline in response quality if respondents do more choice tasks (Bansak, Hainmueller, Hopkins, & Yamamoto, 2018).

Figure A1: Illustration of Conjoint in the survey

Which candidate do you prefer?

	<b>Candidate A</b>	<b>Candidate B</b>
<b>Party</b>	<i>CDA (Christian Democrats)</i>	<i>VVD (Party for freedom and Democracy)</i>
<b>We should fight climate change harder</b>	<i>We have to fight climate change now</i>	<i>There might be a climate problem but people who deny it are allowed to do so</i>
<b>Schools should be allowed to denounce being gay</b>	<i>Schools should care about the mental and physical well-being of their students</i>	<i>Schools are not allowed to denounce being gay</i>
<b>The minimum wage should be raised</b>	<i>The minimum wage should not go up</i>	<i>We will introduce a law to raise the minimum wage</i>
<b>Factory farming should be banned</b>	<i>Factory farms should be allowed</i>	<i>We will test existing laws based on districting rules and will adjust based on health criteria.</i>
<b>The Netherlands should admit more refugees</b>	<i>We should stop immigration</i>	<i>We should allow immigration</i>
<b>There needs to be a referendum on membership to the EU</b>	<i>There should be a referendum about the EU</i>	<i>There should be a referendum about the EU</i>
Candidate A		
Candidate B		

Table A1: Levels and attributes

<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Possible levels</b>
<i>Party</i>	CDA; VVD; PvdA; PVV; GL; SP
<i>Immigration</i>	Pro; Anti; ambiguity
<i>Minimum wage</i>	Pro; Anti; ambiguity
<i>EU referendum</i>	Pro; Anti; ambiguity
<i>Climate change</i>	Pro; Anti; ambiguity
<i>Factory farming</i>	Pro; Anti; ambiguity
<i>LGBTQ+ acceptance</i>	Pro; Anti; ambiguity

## A.2 Further explanation on the QVSR

The survey uses Quadratic Voting to measure how salient political issues are to voters. Quadratic Voting (QV) is a tool where respondents can express the intensity of their preferences, capturing salience, using a scarce resource: votes (Quarfoot et al., 2017). Respondents are constrained by a fixed budget of votes that they can use to express more or less agreement on a set of political issues by voting more often in favor or against them. Quadratic voting lends its name from the fact that the costs of each additional vote increase quadratically. If we assume that voters feel an intrinsic cost when they do *not* report their true preferences, then the budget constraint makes sure respondents do not express (extreme) opinions on issues they do not care about (Cavaille et al., 2019; Zaller et al., 1992). Likert scales, by contrast, do not have a cost component which means that the researcher cannot distinguish between respondents who are honest about the importance of a political issue and those who just pay lip service to their (partisan) identity or societal norms. For instance, Green voters might claim they are strongly in favor of changing the minimum wage because it is a policy their party adheres to, yet in reality they only care about fighting climate change. On a Likert scale these voters would report to be strongly in favor of both issues, whereas in Quadratic voting the cost component causes them to vote only on climate change, thus answering truly to their preferences.

In the QV exercise, respondents are asked to indicate how much they agree or disagree with six political issues. Consequentially, the scale for each policy issue derived from the QV exercise runs from a -6 (all 6<sup>2</sup> votes against a single statement) to +6 (all votes in favor of a single statement). The six issues are chosen to create enough variation in issues that matter to both the Left and the Right. In addition, there should be some issues few people on average care about. To meet those goals, I have selected the following six political issues (all the statements for each issue are shown in the questionnaire below):

- the Netherlands needs to admit more refugees.
- The minimum wage needs to be raised.
- Schools should be allowed to reject LGBTQ+ students.
- Factory farming should be banned.
- Climate change should be fought.
- There needs to be a referendum on membership to the EU.

To make Quadratic Voting work, additional votes — to signal intense preferences — increase in price. Table A2 shows the total costs of voting under QV. Note that the costs of each additional vote are

quadratic. With six policy positions, respondents get a total of  $6^2 = 36$  credits allowing them to cast 6 votes one one statement as the most intense preference. As a result, the scale for each policy issue derived from the QV exercise runs from a -6 (all votes against a single statement) to +6 (all votes in favor of a single statement). See Figure ?? for an example of what the QV tool I use looks like. After the QV exercise, respondents see the same statements and are asked what they would choose if they were forced to choose between statements.

Table A2: Costs in QV voting

<i>Votes</i>	<i>Total cost</i>
1	1
2	4
3	9
4	16
5	25
6	36

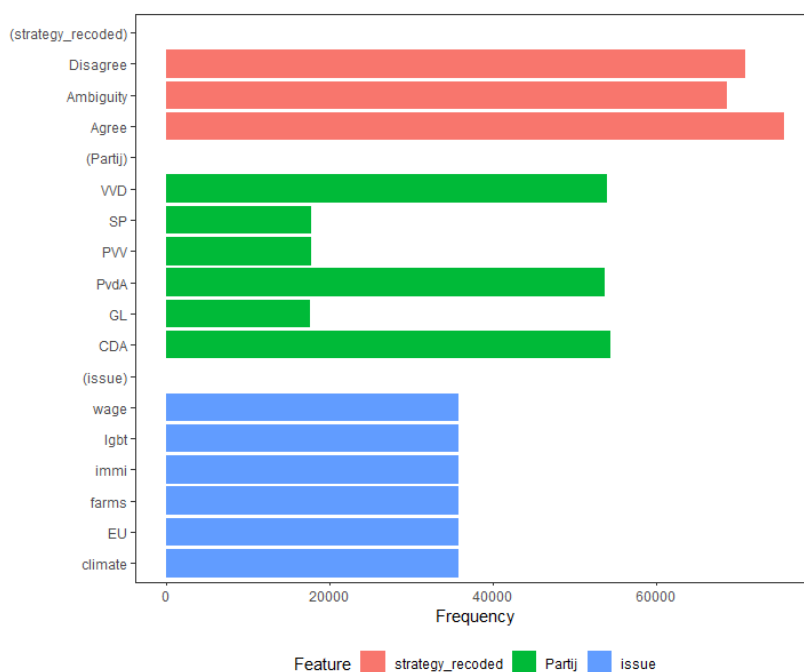
### A.3 Distribution of the attributes

Figure A2 shows the distribution of the conjoint attributes. The differences in the party are due to the restrictions to the randomization. As explained above, the parties that occur less often are the niche parties that respondents will have fewer interactions with. As such, the distribution of parties respondents see in the conjoint is closer to the real-life distribution respondents would encounter during a Dutch campaign.

### A.4 Deviations from the Pre-Analysis-Plan

There are several small deviations from the PAP. First, in the PAP I proposed to estimate a full model with a triple interaction including partisanship. I am instead presenting the initial results in a model without partisanship because the model would have been too complex. In addition, the lack of effect for partisanship may be caused by pre-treatment bias. This model is, however, reported in the appendix. Second, in the PAP I initially wanted to present the results by three buckets for issue salience (low, medium, and high), I am instead modeling the results for five buckets of issue salience. I made this modeling choice because it means the results are less sensitive to the way I code-up the three buckets. It is thus a more conservative way to present the results. Third, in the PAP I proposed to measure partisanship in a different way (using the ranking of parties on the thermostat measure). I am using a

Figure A2: Distribution of conjoint attributes



different way to model partisanship in the paper because I am finding a null result and this alternative coding makes finding something more likely. I am thus modeling this differently to show that the null result for partisanship is credible (even though the results are not reported in the main paper as they may be due to pre-treatment bias). Fourth, I am not presenting the results for the clarity channel as respondents failed to comprehend the question. Respondents seem to have equated ‘clarity’ with ‘my position’.

### A.5 Differences in population subgroups stratified by issue salience

As the salience of different issues is not randomized, it might be that different types of voters find issues more important, creating bias. Whilst a common flaw in any heterogeneous treatment effect, in this study it is likely to be a smaller problem as much of the variation in issue salience comes from within individuals as each voter is asked how important they find six different issues. As the workhorse models in the paper use a ‘stacked’ version of the data, much variation in issue salience comes from within individuals. Be that as it may, the between voter variation might nonetheless be due to differences between voters. To test whether this might be the case, I compare whether voters at different salience levels differ based on their age, education, income, gender, interest in politics, self-reported risk appetite, and left-right placement. I run a multinomial regression model where a salience of ‘1’ (the most common salience level) is the baseline. The standard errors are clustered at the individual level. The results

are reported in Table A3. Generally, the different groups, as compared to a salience of 1, are relatively balanced, especially considering the large number of variables that are being tested. Nonetheless, there are some strong outliers. For instance, among those who reported a salience level of five or four, as compared to one, there are relatively more younger people. For example, there are six age categories, meaning that being in salience category five as opposed to one is associated with a  $exp(0.16) = 1.17$  decrease (17% decrease) in the odds of a one-unit increase in age. Furthermore, those with a salience level of three, as compared to one, are comparatively more left and higher educated. All in all, the different salience groups are relatively balanced, implying that the heterogeneous treatment effects could carefully be interpreted as causal.

Table A3: Balance test

	<i>Dependent variable (issue salience levels – ‘one’ is the baseline):</i>				
	Five	Four	Three	Two	Zero
Age	−0.155*** (0.042)	−0.092*** (0.025)	−0.018 (0.026)	−0.013 (0.023)	−0.048 (0.039)
Gender	0.068 (0.144)	0.035 (0.087)	−0.121 (0.085)	−0.103 (0.074)	0.140 (0.134)
Education	0.005 (0.025)	0.011 (0.014)	0.057*** (0.014)	0.029** (0.012)	0.037 (0.024)
Income	0.040 (0.027)	0.036** (0.017)	0.009 (0.017)	0.025* (0.015)	0.007* (0.028)
Interest	0.064 (0.090)	0.043 (0.057)	0.060 (0.051)	0.010 (0.046)	−0.038 (0.088)
LeftRight	0.017 (0.030)	−0.041** (0.019)	−0.059*** (0.016)	−0.046** (0.015)	−0.055* (0.029)
Risk	0.042 (0.074)	−0.055 (0.046)	−0.046 (0.042)	−0.051 (0.039)	0.003 (0.071)
Constant	−3.319*** (0.475)	−1.626*** (0.287)	−1.057*** (0.267)	−0.450*** (0.228)	−1.614*** (0.441)

Note:

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

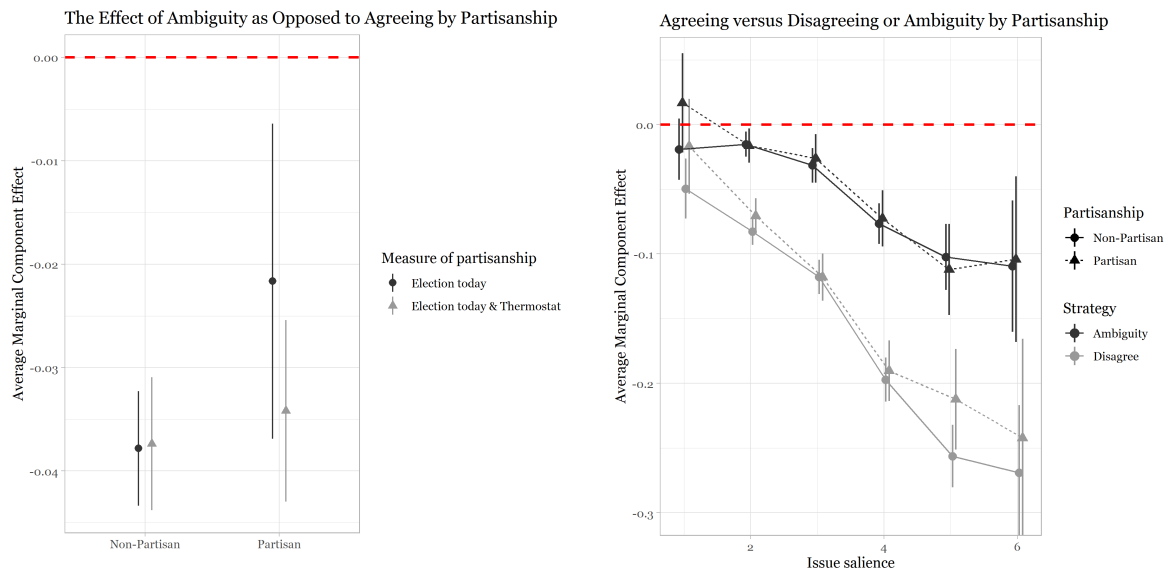
## A.6 Do the effects differ by partisanship?

To estimate whether the effects differ by partisanship, as much of the existing literature would predict (Tomz & Van Houweling, 2009; Nasr, 2021), I run two models. First, I run the model in Equation 1, with partisanship as the interaction term instead of salience. I use two different measures for partisanship. First, a variable that codes a respondent as a partisan if they answer to the question ‘if the elections were today, what party would you vote for’ with the same party as the party shown in the profile. Because this results in relatively few ‘partisans’, I also use a second partisan variable that codes a



respondent as partisan if respondents would vote for the party shown in the profile or rank it as higher than 6 on an 11-step Likert scale for ‘warm feelings’ towards the party. Both variables are measured pre-treatment. Second, I run the same model as in Equation 1, yet this time with a triple interaction between partisanship, candidate strategy, and salience. The results from these models are presented in Figure A3.

Figure A3: Effects of Candidate ambiguity by Partisanship



The plot on the left shows the Average Marginal Component Effect for ambiguity as opposed to agreeing for partisans and non-partisans, using the two measures of partisanship. Whilst the sign of the coefficients are in the expected direction—with ambiguity being more similar to agreeing for partisans—the results are not significant. The plot on the right shows how the each strategy at different salience levels for partisans and non-partisans differ from agreeing—the red line. There is clearly no difference between partisans and non-partisans, especially for ambiguity. All in all, both plots tell us that in this artificial setting, all that matters is ambiguity versus dis/agreement—and not partisanship. These findings stand at odds with the general consensus in the literature, which predicts that ambiguity works better when targeted at co-partisans (Nasr, 2021; Piston et al., 2018; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2009). These puzzling findings might be unique to the European context where partisan identities are weaker than in the US, which is where most existing research has been conducted (Piston et al., 2018; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2009). The null-effect for partisanship in combination with the clear results for issue salience thus imply that in the European political context, *ambiguity works because voters project their position onto candidates based on general optimism without non-partisan pessimism, yet only for*

*non-salient political issues.*

## **A.7 Questionnaire**

### **A.7.1 Background questions**

- What is your age?
- What is your gender in years?
- What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- Are you an ethnic minority?
- What is your household income in these 10 brackets?
- Do you like to take risks?

### **A.7.2 Political questions**

- How interested are you in politics? (5-step Likert)
- In politics we often talk about left and right, where would you place yourself on this scale? (11-step scale).
- In so far as you identify as left or right, how do you feel about people on the other side of the political spectrum? (11-step scale).
- What do you feel towards these political parties? (10-Step thermostat)
- If there were an election today, what would you vote?
- How capable do you think you are to make political decisions? (5-step Likert)
- Are you a party member?
- For which party?
- Do you like to take risks? (5-step Likert)
- Have you ever participated in campaign activities?
- For which party?
- If you think about what makes you enthusiastic about the activities of a political party, how would you rank the following matters? (ideology of the party, focus of the party on healthcare, the competence of the leadership, the impact your participation has, the opportunity to get a full-time position, the fact that many people from your social circle participate, and because the party focuses on the working class.)

### **A.7.3 Attention check**

- True or False? If I find a statement very important, I have to vote in favor more often
- True or False? If I agree with a statement, I have to vote in favor

### **A.7.4 Conjoint**

- Which candidate do you prefer?
- How close to you do you think the candidate is?
- Is the candidate clear enough for you?

## **A.8 All Conjoint values**

All ambiguous conjoint values are statements from real Dutch politicians, as far fetched as some of them might seem. It is unfortunately not possible to use commas in sentences in the conjoint.

#### **Candidate's party:**

- 'PVV'
- 'VVD'
- 'CDA'
- 'PvdA'
- 'GL'
- 'SP'

#### **Immigration needs to be stopped:**

- 'We have to stop immigration'
- 'We have to accept immigrants'
- 'Schengen can be in danger, or not, but solidarity is a fundamental agreement in the EU.'

#### **We need to have a Nexit referendum**

- 'We want a referendum on the EU'
- 'A referendum is not the right tool'
- 'I am proud of democracy and the results from a referendum need to be accepted'

#### **We have to fight climate change harder**

- 'If we don't start fighting climate change now we will leave a destroyed planet'
- 'We don't have to start fighting climate change'

- ‘It is of course true that there are climate problems. Yet people who deny that are in their right too’

#### **Schools can refuse LGBTQ+ students**

- ‘Refusing LGBTQ students should be allowed’
- ‘Schools cannot refuse LGBTQ students’
- ‘Schools are required by law to take care of the social, psychological, and physical safety of all their students’

#### **The minimum wage should be raised**

- ‘We come with a law to raise the minimum wage’
- ‘The minimum wage shouldn’t go up’
- ‘In the current situation we should aim all our attention at limiting the recession and maintaining as many jobs as possible. There are grounds for a debate’

#### **Factory farming should be banned**

- ‘We have to stop with factory farming’
- ‘Factory farming should be allowed’
- ‘We will test the zoning laws for the construction of factory farms based on health requirements. If needed laws might be adjusted.’