

Beclouding Party Position as an Electoral Strategy: Voter Polarization, Issue Priority and Position Blurring

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Why do political parties present vague positions? We suggest that voter polarization provides them incentives to present either clear or vague positions, and the choice between these two is determined by the priority of an issue for the parties. We find that facing voter polarization, Western European political parties present clearer positions on an issue when it is a prime issue for them, but blur their positions when it is a secondary issue. Then, position blurring gives different implications to party systems with different degrees of issue dimensionality (such as American vs Western European party systems). The results also imply that political parties will respond to ongoing voter polarization on economic and immigration issues differently in the clarity of their position.

Keywords: position blurring; voter polarization; issue priority; issue salience; party supporter division

The ‘responsible party model’ of political representation argues that it is normatively desirable for political parties to represent the policy stances of their supporters because ‘citizens in Western democracies are represented by and through parties’.¹ Therefore, political parties should ‘offer distinct policy options or programs, so that voters are given meaningful electoral choice’.² Yet recent scholarship on the party–voter linkage indicates that voters are often ignorant of or misinformed about political parties’ issue positions.³ This phenomenon is typically explained by reference to voter apathy, voter bias resulting from party loyalties and/or misinformation propagated by competing political parties and the media.⁴

Another potential source of voter ignorance or misperception may be political parties intentionally blurring their own issue positions. Although such an ‘obfuscation strategy’ may have a negative electoral effect when party competition exists within a unidimensional policy space,⁵ it can be an efficient electoral strategy when party competition exists within a multi-dimensional policy space.⁶ For example, some political parties in Western Europe can maintain the support of their core voters, who have homogeneous and often extreme stances on non-economic issues, by presenting clear and strong positions on non-economic issues, and at the same time attract new voters, who have heterogeneous stances on economic issues, by presenting ambiguous positions on such issues.⁷

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¹ Sartori 1968, 471.

² Dalton 1985, 270.

³ Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2011; Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2014.

⁴ Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu 2011; Gerber and Green 1999.

⁵ Enelow and Hinich 1981; Shepsle 1972.

⁶ Rovny 2012; Rovny 2013.

⁷ Somer-Topcu 2015.

Assuming that position blurring is sometimes a useful party strategy, we examine under what conditions political parties are more or less likely to blur their own policy positions and suggest that voter polarization on an issue provides political parties incentives to present either clear or blurred positions on the issue, and the choice between these two is determined by the priority of the issue for the parties.⁸ Using data on party positions and public opinion on major political issues in Western Europe, we find that when voters are polarized, political parties present clearer positions on an issue that they primarily mobilize on, but less clear positions on other, secondary issues.

The result helps to reconcile the findings in the comparative politics literature that position blurring is electorally harmful in two-party systems (which generally compete in one issue dimension) such as in the United States,⁹ but can be electorally helpful in multiparty systems (which generally compete in two or more issue dimensions) such as is found throughout Western Europe.¹⁰ However, our research differs from previous studies on position blurring in emphasizing the role of voter polarization, which is not considered by the studies: voter polarization is found in this article to activate the effect of issue priority on position blurring.

This result is also consistent with the literature on issue competition between political parties, which argues that political parties implement dissimilar strategies for issues with different issue priorities. When an issue provides an electoral advantage, political parties emphasize and present clear positions on that issue. However, when an issue does not provide an electoral advantage, political parties downplay and present ambiguous positions on that issue.¹¹ Finally, the result implies that, if voters in Western Europe continue to grow more polarized on both economic and immigration issues, political parties will respond differently to this polarization, either by clarifying (many of the mainstream parties on economy and radical right-wing parties on immigration) or blurring their positions on these issues.

BLURRING PARTY POSITION

Position blurring is a political strategy in which a political party or politician intentionally avoids presenting a clear issue position. Political parties blur their positions by presenting only very vague and ambiguous positions without specific arguments: examples include Gerhard Schröder's 'vague pledges to reduce unemployment'¹² in the 1998 German federal election campaign and recent controversies on Donald Trump's 'amazingly vague' presidential election campaign.¹³ In these cases, despite a political party's (or a politician's) emphasis on an issue, voters are not certain about what the exact position is on the issue because the party does not present a clear stance on it.¹⁴

⁸ Issue priority in this article refers to the degree to which an issue constitutes the main identity of a party, and thus the extent to which an issue is used by a party in an electoral campaign to mobilize voters (cf. van der Brug 2004).

⁹ Enelow and Hinich 1981; Shepsle 1972.

¹⁰ Rovny 2013; Somer-Topcu 2015.

¹¹ Riker 1996; Robertson 1976; Rovny 2012.

¹² *New York Times*, 4 August 1998.

¹³ *Washington Post*, 28 September 2015.

¹⁴ Position blurring strengthens voters' uncertainty about party position in two ways. First, voters cannot assess a political party's stance (ideology) with confidence (Bartels 1986). Though it is not an unproblematic measurement of voters' inconclusiveness (cf. Tomz and van Houweling 2009), it is observed that when people are asked to estimate each party's left/right ideology in the European Election Studies (EES, 2009), more people choose 'Don't know where to place party' as their answer on political parties that have greater scores of the position blurring variable on left/right party ideology employed in this article ($r=0.6777$). Second, the variation

When party positions are vague, voters rely more on non-positional, or non-policy determinants of their voting behavior.¹⁵ Basic models on voting behavior assume that position proximity on an issue between a party and a voter, as a main determinant of voting behavior, is weighted by factors related to the issue such as its salience level¹⁶ and the clarity of the party position on it.¹⁷ Then, as the vagueness of party position increases (as well as the salience level of the issue decreases), the relative weight that a voter puts on position proximity will decrease. Consequently, ‘voters are encouraged to make decisions on some basis other than the issue, i.e., on the personalities of candidates, traditional family voting patterns, loyalty to past party heroes, etc.’¹⁸

The ‘obfuscation’ literature in American politics has conducted empirical tests of the political effects of position blurring.¹⁹ In particular, many of the studies conclude that position blurring has a negative electoral effect, particularly when voters are risk-averse.²⁰ Voters tend to dislike uncertainty, so the perceived distance between their ideal position and a party position is enlarged when voters are uncertain about the party’s policy position.²¹ Then, voters are discouraged from voting for a party whose position is vague. However, political parties that present vague positions during their election campaigns enjoy greater freedom and flexibility in implementing their policies without losing credibility if they are able to win elected office.²²

Although there is a paucity of literature on position blurring outside of the United States, there is some evidence that suggests that the electoral effect of position blurring in multiparty systems (as are often found in Western Europe) is different from that in two-party systems. Position blurring can be an effective political strategy of shifting policy positions in multiparty systems (where the entry of new parties is easier) because it does not necessarily leave a previous party position vacant and consequently deters a new party from attracting voters around the position.²³ Position blurring in multiparty systems can be an efficient electoral strategy particularly for political parties’ secondary issues. Although party supporters have relatively homogeneous positions on those issues most focused on by the party, these same supporters are often divided on those issues of secondary concern to the party. In addition,

(Footnote continued)

in voters’ estimations on the issue position (ideology) of a political party that does not clarify its position (ideology) will be largely due to the lack of the well-defined bases of their estimations. One way for political parties to blur their position is by presenting conflicting arguments on the same issue (Lo, Proksch, and Slapin 2016). Voters’ assessments of the position of the party on such an issue will depend on which of the conflicting arguments they place a heavier weight. However, a voter will still be unsure about her estimation of the party’s position on the issue because of other voters having different estimations on the party’s position on that issue. This connection between position blurring and the variation in voters’ party position estimations is also empirically supported. The correlation between the position blurring variable on left/right party ideology employed in this article and the standard deviation of people’s estimations on left/right party ideology seen in the EES (2009) is 0.3131.

¹⁵ Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005.

¹⁶ Enelow and Hinich 1981.

¹⁷ Downs 1957.

¹⁸ Downs 1957, 136.

¹⁹ Position blurring also raises normative questions because ambiguity or obfuscation of policy positions can cause confusion and uncertainty among voters and produce cynicism or anxiety among them (Shepsle 1972). Downs argues that even though ambiguity can sometimes be considered a rational political strategy for political parties (because it may help attract more moderate voters), such ‘rational behavior by political parties tends to discourage rational behavior by voters’ because voting decisions are not made on substantive policy grounds (1957, 136).

²⁰ Enelow and Hinich 1981; Shepsle 1972.

²¹ Bartels 1986.

²² Aragonès and Neeman 2000.

²³ Somer-Topcu 2015.

political parties are typically at a comparative disadvantage when it comes to their secondary issues, as they are not perceived to be particularly competent regarding them. Then, position blurring on issues of secondary concern to the party can keep voters' and supporters' attention only on the issues for which the party is perceived to have a comparative advantage and on which its supporters hold similar stances.²⁴

Thus, we assume that position blurring can be a useful electoral strategy under some circumstances and political parties are motivated to blur their issue positions in Western European politics that is more multi-dimensional than the American party system.²⁵ However, the determinants of the blurring strategy not only in Western European countries but also in any other areas are not explored in the party politics literature. Therefore, we explore what encourages political parties to present clear or vague positions in this article. In addition, though previous studies suggest that issue priority is deeply related with a party's decision on whether it clarifies or blurs its position, they do not consider another factor that creates a circumstance in which political parties feel pressure to make a difficult choice between presenting a clear position and blurring it: voter polarization. Thus, we first show how voter polarization pushes political parties into a dilemma between these two choices in the next section.

VOTER POLARIZATION AND ISSUE (IDEOLOGY) VOTING

Choosing between presenting a clear and a vague position is not easy because there is certainly a trade-off between them. On the one hand, presenting an unambiguous position will provide voters clear information that helps their party choice, but, at the same time, it restricts parties' freedom and flexibility in implementing their policies without losing credibility if they are able to win elected office.²⁶ On the other hand, position blurring constantly brings in not only normative criticism (such as confusion, uncertainty and political cynicism among voters) but also electoral risks (electoral disapproval by risk-averse voters). Then, political parties will not want to run a risk of presenting either a very clear or an awfully vague position.

However, we suggest that voter polarization commands political parties to make the difficult choice by intensifying the behavior of issue (ideology) voting: so voters consider the position (ideological) proximity between themselves and a political party in their voting decision more heavily as they become more polarized from each other on an issue (on the ideological dimension).²⁷ There are three main reasons. First, polarization implies that issue position and/or ideology become a more useful decision-making heuristic as voters come to have relatively clear and distinct positions on an issue (on the ideological dimension) and differentiate themselves better in the issue (ideology) dimension.²⁸ If voters do not clearly and easily find positional or ideological differences between them, they rely less on positional or ideological factors and more on other factors (strategic voting and split-ticket voting) in their

²⁴ Rovny 2012; Rovny 2013.

²⁵ Political parties may be more motivated to blur their issue positions in Western Europe than in the United States also because of the possibility of forming a coalition government. Position blurring expands the area of 'blind spot' in which policy position differences are not easy to ascertain (Bawn et al. 2012). Therefore, position blurring may increase the coalition potential of a political party because position dissimilarity discourages coalition government formation.

²⁶ Aragonès and Neeman 2000.

²⁷ While ideology voting in this article connotes voting behavior that follows voters' (broader) ideological orientations (between 'left' and 'right') (Lachat 2008), issue voting means voting behavior that follows voters' (more specific) positions on particular issues such as foreign policy, welfare policy, and immigration policy (Carmines and Stimson 1980).

²⁸ Van der Eijk, Schmitt and Binder 2005.

voting decision.²⁹ Then, voters' ignorance of their and parties' stances can lead to 'invalid inferences about the link between ideology and voting'.³⁰

Second, the political psychology literature suggests that concepts on issue position or political ideology 'should become more easily accessible to voters' and 'more emotionally laden in voters' mind' as polarization increases.³¹ Issue (ideological) voting requires cognitive practices of processing and organizing political information. How much voters rely on these cognitive practices is affected not only by individual factors such as political knowledge³² but also by contextual factors such as the intensity of political competition³³ and the availability of information.³⁴ It can also be determined by how much voters are polarized in their issue positions and/or ideologies: polarization makes issue-positional or ideological 'cueing information' more visible, connects voters, parties and elites through ideological correspondence more closely, and makes it easier for voters to make ideology- or value-based party choices.³⁵

Finally, the social identification literature suggests that a social feature (for example, ethnicity and income level) becomes a major fault line among people as people become more dissimilar in the feature (with rising ethnic diversity and increasing income inequality):³⁶ they find significant dissimilarity and feel a large perceived distance among them regarding the feature, and consequently social identities along the feature are strengthened (ethnic majority vs ethnic minority and the rich vs the poor).³⁷ Then, it is implied that as voters' views on an issue (on an ideological dimension) become more polarized, they perceive a larger perceived difference between people with unlike views on the issue (on the ideological dimension) and the issue (ideology) plays a more substantial role in forming political identities and groups. Because such an issue/ideology (and their own stance on the issue/ideology) comes to be laden in voters' political mind and identity more deeply, they will incorporate the issue/ideology (and position distance on the issue/ideology) more heavily in their political behavior (such as voting).³⁸

Therefore, we hypothesize that voter polarization enhances issue (ideology) voting behavior: that is, the effect of position (ideological) distance regarding an issue (regarding an ideological dimension) between a voter and a political party on her support for the party becomes larger as voters' opinion on the issue (on the ideological dimension) is more polarized.³⁹

²⁹ Jacobson 2005.

³⁰ Ensley 2007, 106.

³¹ Lachat 2008, 688.

³² Zaller 1992.

³³ Basinger and Lavine 2005.

³⁴ Fiske and Taylor 1991.

³⁵ Hetherington 2001.

³⁶ Hogg and Abrams 1988.

³⁷ Shayo 2009.

³⁸ Adams, Merrill, and Grofman (2005). The issue evolution literature also suggests that voter polarization and partisan conflicts are a precondition of issue evolution (Carmines and Stimson 1989). For an issue to evolve as a new salient issue that changes the pre-existing party-voter link, voters should recognize significant issue conflicts not only between the supporters of different parties but also between the supporters of the same political party, incorporate the issue in their voting behavior and change their association with a particular party.

³⁹ However, literature argues that the effect of political polarization on the pattern of issue (ideology) voting is limited to the more politically knowledgeable (Ensley 2007; Lachat 2008). In addition, some of these theoretical links between voter polarization and issue (ideology) voting implicitly assume that voter polarization correlates with elite (or party) polarization. See Jacobson (2011) for the discussion on the relationship between voter polarization and elite (party) polarization.

Issue (ideology) voting hypothesis: Voters' opinion polarization on an issue (or ideology) increases the support-weakening effect of position (ideological) distance between voters and political parties.

VOTER POLARIZATION, ISSUE PRIORITY AND POSITION BLURRING

Because voters consider party positions on an issue more heavily in their voting decision as their opinion on the issue becomes polarized, political parties may want to present clearer positions to voters to help them seek out and learn each party's position on that issue. Voters can utilize party positions as 'cueing information', particularly when they are able to be 'informed': as when there is a high level of media attention on an issue⁴⁰ and/or when voters are politically knowledgeable.⁴¹ Then, political parties will want to provide clear information on their own positions for voters in order to help them use it for their voting decision if political parties want them to do so.

However, if voter opinion becomes polarized but political parties do not want voters to heavily consider party position on an issue for any reason, they will want to avoid presenting a clear position on the issue.⁴² First, political parties do not want voters to consider an issue in which political parties do not have comparative advantage. For example, literature on issue ownership finds that issue ownership, particularly its competence aspect, enjoyed by a political party helps voters to support the party particularly when voters put great salience on the issue.⁴³ Then, political parties may want to present an ambiguous position on an issue regarding which they do not hold issue reputation and competence to discourage voters from paying attention to the issue and considering their and parties' positions on the issue in their voting behavior.⁴⁴

Second, a political party may not want to present a clear position on that issue if they believe doing so will create division among their core supporters.⁴⁵ While consensus will exist among political parties' core supporters on some issues, on many other issues it will not. Though there is variation between political parties (mainstream vs niche parties) and between issues (practical, socioeconomic issues vs principled, sociocultural issues),⁴⁶ political parties' 'freedom to set policy is constrained by the policy preferences of current party supporters',⁴⁷ due to party organization, formal or informal (but historical) ties with main supporting groups (such as socialist parties and trade unions) or the role of non-policy factors in voting behavior.⁴⁸ Then, political parties internally divided on an issue will want to present ambiguous positions in an effort to maintain party unity and retain voter support.

⁴⁰ De Vries et al. 2011.

⁴¹ Ensley 2007.

⁴² Page 1978; Weaver 1986.

⁴³ Lachat (2014); Walgrave, Lefevre, and Tresch (2012). While the competence aspect of issue ownership indicates voters' perceptions on parties' capacity to handle and resolve an issue, its associative aspect refers to voters' views on the degree to which parties care about an issue (Walgrave, Tresch, and Lefevre 2015). Studies find that while the support-intensifying effect of issue competence is not constrained by other factors, the associative dimension of issue ownership encourages voters to support a party only under some favorable circumstances such as position proximity and a high salience level of an issue (Lachat 2014; Walgrave, Lefevre, and Tresch 2012). De Sio and Weber (2014) also argue that emphasizing an issue (the associate aspect) can hurt a political party when the party lacks credibility on the issue (the competence aspect). The issue emphasis can be even more problematic when the issue is a positional issue on which voters are divided.

⁴⁴ Rovny 2012; Rovny 2013.

⁴⁵ Van de Wardt 2014.

⁴⁶ Han 2017.

⁴⁷ Laver 2005, 267.

⁴⁸ Adams, Haupt, and Stoll 2009.

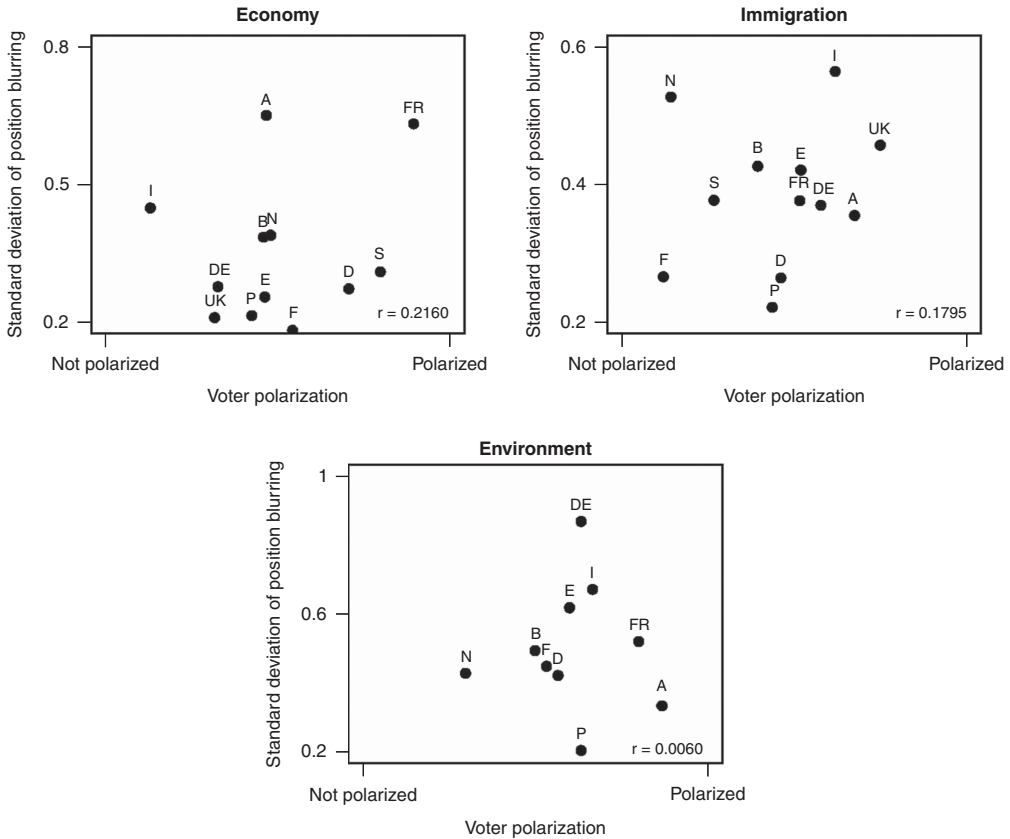


Fig. 1. Voter polarization and the variation in position blurring
 Note: Voter polarization indicates the standard deviation of public opinion on each issue area in each country. The vertical axes indicate the standard deviation of political parties' position blurring on each issue in each country (A: Austria, B: Belgium, D: Denmark, DE: Germany, E: Spain, F: Finland, FR: France, I: Ireland, N: the Netherlands, P: Portugal, S: Sweden, and UK: United Kingdom).

Therefore, voter polarization makes political parties present either clearer or more blurred positions. In other words, political parties do not want to run a risk of presenting either a very clear or an awfully vague position because of the trade-offs between the two when voters' opinion is not polarized and they do not consider party position very seriously. However, political parties feel pressure to choose between making their position clearer or more blurred when voters become divided in their opinion on an issue. The conflicting incentives confronted by political parties when voters are polarized on an issue can be inferred from the available data on public opinion and party position. Figure 1 shows that the standard deviation of the position blurring variables employed in this article within each country is increased (so some parties come to present vaguer positions while others come to present clearer ones) as voters become polarized.⁴⁹ This pattern is found regarding economy and immigration issues, but not on the natural environment issue. In other words, the graphs imply that voter polarization drives

⁴⁹ Specific details and data sources of the variables on voter polarization (the horizontal axes) and position blurring (the vertical axes) will be presented in the following section.

political parties either to make their positions clearer or to blur them more regarding economy and immigration issues.

We suggest that the effect of voter polarization on political parties' position blurring can be expected to be a function of issue priority. When political parties confront voter polarization, they present clear positions on their prime issues but blur their positions on secondary issues. Prime issues are issues that demonstrate the core ideological identity of the parties and produce most of the voter support that parties receive.⁵⁰ For example, in Western Europe, environmentalism constitutes the main identity of ecology parties and their supporters and nativism constitutes the main identity of radical right-wing parties and their supporters.⁵¹ Consequently, ecology and radical right-wing parties put much greater salience on these issues (the natural environment and immigration, respectively) than other political parties do.

Political parties selectively emphasize their prime issues because they have a relatively good reputation on these issues in terms of competence, integrity and reliability.⁵² Since issue ownership, particularly its competence aspect, and position proximity help political parties to gain electoral support, political parties want to take advantage of their reputation and competence by emphasizing their prime issues.

When an issue is a salient issue for political parties and their supporters, voters incorporate the issue more sincerely in their voting behavior.⁵³ Moreover, voters care more about how closely a political party's issue position matches their own when an issue is highly salient (the 'priming effect').⁵⁴ Then, when political parties put great salience on an issue either because the issue represents their core ideological identity or because it shows their issue competence and reputation, they need to present a clear position on the issue to emphasize the inter-party difference, help voters consider the issue and take advantage of comparative advantage they have. In contrast, they will want to blur their positions on non-salient issues that do not speak for their identity and competence in order to discourage voters from incorporating the issue in their vote choice.

Issue salience hypothesis: When confronting a polarized electorate, political parties present clear positions on issues salient for them, but blur their positions on non-salient issues.

Party supporters in Western Europe are divided more on the secondary than prime issues of their political parties. For example, mainstream party supporters are divided on non-economic issues and niche party supporters are divided on economic issues.⁵⁵ Although party supporters are divided on secondary issues, political parties can still maintain their support because of party supporters' homogeneous preferences on the parties' prime issues that cross-cut their secondary issues. For example, the two main constituencies of radical right-wing parties in Western Europe, manual workers and small business owners, disagree on traditional socioeconomic issues (redistribution and government regulation). However, the cultural threat arising from higher levels of immigration, and greater identification with nation rather than class as a result

⁵⁰ Rovny and Edwards 2012.

⁵¹ Müller-Rommel 1985.

⁵² Dolezal et al. (2014). De Sio and Weber (2014) also suggest that political parties emphasize an issue when voters acknowledge their credibility on the issue.

⁵³ RePass 1971.

⁵⁴ Krosnick and Kinder 1990; van der Brug 2004.

⁵⁵ Ivarsson (2005), Rovny (2012). In the data on party supporter division utilized here, the supporters of ecology and radical right-wing parties are statistically significantly more divided on economic issues than those of mainstream parties. Also, the supporters of radical right-wing (ecology) parties are statistically significantly less divided on immigration (the natural environment) than those of other parties.

of rising income inequality,⁵⁶ helped the two constituencies to sustain unity in putting great salience on immigration-related issues and shaping anti-immigrant positions and keep supporting the same parties.⁵⁷

Political parties know that party supporters are critical to the political survival of the parties.⁵⁸ Therefore, when party supporters are divided on an issue, political parties do not want to present clear positions on these issues out of fear that it will result in the loss of what were previously considered core voters.⁵⁹ Instead, they will try to blur their positions and prevent supporters from being disturbed by position distances between themselves and their parties.⁶⁰ For example, many radical right-wing parties consider socioeconomic issues only secondary issues and support both protectionism and anti-egalitarianism.⁶¹ Then, ‘taking positions may thus be an inappropriate strategy’ under this circumstance and ‘the question “where radical right parties stand” may not be the right one to ask’.⁶²

Party supporter division hypothesis: Facing voter polarization, political parties present clear positions on issues regarding which their supporters are not divided, but blur their positions on issues regarding which their supporters are divided.

DATA AND METHOD

Voter Polarization and Issue (Ideology) Voting

We first test whether voter polarization enhances the issue (ideology) voting behavior using the European Election Studies (EES) 2014 data.⁶³ The dependent variable is an ordered categorical variable that indicates how probable it is that a person will vote for each party.⁶⁴ The main explanatory variable we want to explore is the interaction term of voter polarization and position (ideological) distance between a person and each party not only regarding the traditional ‘left–right’ dimension but also regarding three specific major political issues (economy, immigration and the natural environment).⁶⁵

⁵⁶ Han 2016; Shayo 2009.

⁵⁷ Ivarsflaten 2005.

⁵⁸ Robertson 1976.

⁵⁹ Van de Wardt 2014.

⁶⁰ Rovny 2012; Rovny 2013.

⁶¹ Mudde 2007.

⁶² Rovny (2013, 4). Voter polarization is more correlated with the variation in the mean party supporter opinion *between* political parties than with party supporter division *within* political parties. While the correlation between voter polarization and party supporter division is low (0.0769 for economy, –0.1683 for immigration and 0.1532 for environment), the correlation between voter polarization and the standard deviation of the mean party supporter opinion within a country is high (0.4815 for economy, 0.5992 for immigration and 0.3324 for environment).

⁶³ We use the 2014 data because they contain questions on all the political issues discussed in this article (economy, immigration and the natural environment). The countries included are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

⁶⁴ The variable ranges from 1 (not at all probable) to 10 (very probable).

⁶⁵ We chose these three issues because these issues represent the main socioeconomic (or ‘old politics’ or ‘materialist’) and sociocultural (or ‘new politics’ or ‘postmaterialist’) issues that have been at the center of party competition for the last several decades in Western Europe (for example, Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002; Tavits 2007). Public opinion and manifesto data also suggest that these issue areas are more salient for political parties and the general public than other issue areas. For example, a Eurobarometer survey (2010, EB 74) shows that more than two-thirds of people indicate that an issue in one of these issue areas is the most important issue in their country, compared with 13 per cent of people indicating health care and pension, 7 per cent of people

The position (ideological) distance variable is the distance between a person's self-placed position (ideology) and either the estimated party ideology (left/right) of hers on each party or 'objective' party positions (economy, immigration and the natural environment) from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey on party position data (CHES 2014). The voter polarization variable is the standard deviation of people's positions (ideologies) on each issue (dimension) ('left/right', economy, immigration and the natural environment) in each country seen in EES 2014. The survey questions and the variables of the CHES used in the analyses are summarized in the supplementary appendix.⁶⁶

Voter Polarization, Issue Priority and Position Blurring

We then test how issue salience and party supporter division intermediate the effect of voter polarization on position blurring using the CHES (2010) data.⁶⁷ We use the round of year 2010 because only that round provides all the data needed in this article.

For the dependent variable, two measurements of position blurring are employed in this article. First, it is measured by the standard deviation of expert judgement on party position under the assumption that expert inconsistency on a party's position arises from the party's deliberate efforts to make its position vague and ambiguous.⁶⁸ Data are from the CHES (2010). For position blurring on the economy, the average standard deviation of experts' judgement on party positions on three economic issues is used. For position blurring on immigration, the average standard deviation of positions on three immigration issues is used. For position blurring on the natural environment, the standard deviation of party positions on environmental protection is used.⁶⁹

However, the use of the standard deviation of experts' judgement on party position for the measurement of the degree of disagreement among experts and position blurring of political parties is not undisputable. First, the standard deviation of responses does not necessarily correlate with the degree to which the responses concentrate on a small number of categories (which can be considered a way of measuring the degree of agreement).⁷⁰ Second, the standard deviation tends to be underestimated for political parties whose positions are located on either end of the scale because the data on their positions are basically censored. Therefore, we also use the degree of multimodality of the distribution of the experts' judgements as the second measurement of position blurring.⁷¹ This variable is calculated with the formula invented and

(Footnote continued)

indicating crime and 3 per cent of people indicating national security. The manifesto data (Volkens et al. 2014) also indicate that manifesto statements on these issues compose more than 60 per cent of a manifesto, compared with 12 per cent on the political system and 8 per cent on external relations.

⁶⁶ The analysis of testing the issue (ideology) voting hypothesis includes variables from two levels: individual/party (voting probability and position distance) and country level (voter polarization). Because observations on lower levels are nested in higher levels, each of the observations is not truly independent. Therefore, we utilize two distinct models that are useful for the analysis of clustered data: ordered logistic regression with a multilevel analysis model and ordered logistic regression with clustered standard errors.

⁶⁷ The following countries are included: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

⁶⁸ Rovny 2012; Rovny 2013.

⁶⁹ See the supplementary appendix for the CHES variables on party positions.

⁷⁰ Van der Eijk 2001.

⁷¹ Somer-Topcu 2015.

presented by van der Eijk.⁷² The two measurements of position blurring are highly correlated ($r=0.8850$).⁷³

This article argues that when voters' opinion becomes more polarized on an issue, political parties blur their positions when the issue is a secondary issue for the parties but clarify their positions when the issue is a prime issue.⁷⁴ For voter polarization, we use the standard deviation of people's opinion on each issue from the European Social Survey (ESS, Round 4 in 2008, economy and immigration) and the European Value Survey (EVS, Wave 2008, the natural environment). Answers to two questions that correspond to the economic issues used in the CHES data are used for opinion on the economy, and the average of answers to five questions on immigration are used for opinion on immigration. Finally, for opinion on the natural environment, the answers to a question on environmental protection from the EVS are used.⁷⁵

Two aspects that constitute the issue priority of political parties are measured: issue salience and party supporter division. Issue salience from the CHES data is measured for the economy with the average salience score on three economic issues (improving public services vs reducing taxes; deregulation; and income redistribution); issue salience is measured for immigration with the average salience score on three immigration-related issues (immigration policy, integration of immigrants and asylum seekers, and ethnic minorities); and issue salience is measured for the natural environment using the natural environment salience score.

Regarding party supporter division, we rely on the same data, survey questions and measurements used for the voter polarization variables, but measure the standard deviation of

⁷² Van der Eijk 2001.

⁷³ We do not propose that the magnitude of experts' (or voters') disagreement in their party position estimations is an ideal measurement of position blurring of political parties. Some alternative ways are suggested (such as counting 'Don't know' responses to the question on party position estimation (Bartels 1986), directly asking people about the clarity of party position (Alvarez and Franklin 1994) and measuring how much a political party presents conflicting positions on the same issue (Lo, Proksch, and Slapin 2016)). However, such alternative methods are also far from ideal: other factors also determine the non-response; there is no cross-country data based on responses to questions regarding party position clarity; and presenting contradictory positions on an issue is only one part of a position-blurring strategy. In addition, many of these different measurements on position blurring (our position blurring variables, the response of 'Don't know' in the EES (2009) and the frequency of conflicting positions in the manifesto data) are positively correlated ($r=0.2308-0.9816$). Therefore, though we explicitly acknowledge the limitation of the measurement, we assume that, following other prominent studies on this issue (Gill 2005; Somer-Topcu 2015; van der Eijk 2001), it is a reasonable way of measuring position blurring.

⁷⁴ It could be argued that voters' opinion becomes more polarized when parties present vague positions. Three responses to this argument are offered. First, although the effect of voters' opinion on party positions is strong (see Adams et al. 2004), the effect of party position changes on voters' stances is limited and/or conditional regardless of the clarity of party position (Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2014), as voters often perceive party position changes as opportunistic and insincere or are ignorant of such changes altogether (Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2011). Second, though we assume that voters' perceptions on party stances are correctly updated by party position (Fernandez-Vasquez 2014) and voter polarization is affected by party behaviors (Down and Wilson 2010), voter polarization will occur when political parties present clear positions and they also become polarized. Thus, party polarization is a necessary condition for the reversed causality between voter polarization and position blurring, and position blurring may not have a straightforward and independent effect on voter polarization.

⁷⁵ All of these survey questions can be found in the supplementary appendix. The answer to the opinion on the natural environment has only a four-point scale. Calculating statistics such as standard deviation with a categorical variable can be problematic when the number of categories is small (Green et al. 1997). Thus, we did a robustness check that replaced the standard deviation of the answers with their multimodality that has an advantage over standard deviation when observations have a small number of categories (van der Eijk 2001). The results, as reported in Table S9, are not significantly changed.

the opinion on each issue (economy, immigration and the natural environment) of people who voted for each political party in the previous election (ESS) or those who would vote for each party in the next election (EVS).

We also add the following control variables. As a party-specific control variable, extremism in party position may determine position blurring. On the one hand, extremism affects position blurring indirectly because political parties with extreme positions and ideologies on an issue tend to want to change the status quo enthusiastically and thus emphasize the issue.⁷⁶ On the other hand, it is difficult to blur extreme positions because of their distinctiveness and visibility.⁷⁷ In addition, the vote share variable needs to be controlled for because the accuracy of people's perception of party positions may be affected by party size: larger parties not only receive more extensive media coverage but also have more resources for communicating with voters.⁷⁸ Third, skeptics of expert studies suggest that expert judgements are more 'stable over time because they average together a broad array of evidence'.⁷⁹ Then, people's certainty about a party's position may be biased on its age. Therefore, party age in years is included in the model. Finally, while opposition parties are freer in choosing an issue agenda and focusing only on issues that are advantageous to them, incumbent parties are pressured to 'respond to issues brought up on the party-system agenda'.⁸⁰ Thus, a dummy variable of incumbent parties is included in the analysis.⁸¹

As environmental control variables, issue dimensionality can be expanded in a system that allows the development and presence of multiple parties.⁸² Then, the dynamic of issue competition (employing unlike strategies between different issues) can be limited in the party system that does not allow multidimensional issue space. Thus, the effective number of political parties is included in the analysis.⁸³ In addition, voter attention to an issue as well as voter polarization on the issue needs to be included in the analysis: political parties are pressured to present clear positions on an issue when voters put great salience on the issue. Therefore, a variable indicating the percentage of people who stated that the economy, immigration or the natural environment, respectively, is the most or the second most important issue is included in the analysis. The data are from the 'most important issue' questions from the Eurobarometer survey (2008, EB 70.1).⁸⁴

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Voter Polarization and Issue (Ideology) Voting

Models in Table 1 examine whether voter polarization enhances the issue (ideology) voting behavior. Models 1 and 2 use the ordered logistic regression with a multilevel

⁷⁶ Han 2017.

⁷⁷ Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989. Thus, party position from the CHES data and its squared term are included in the models.

⁷⁸ Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2014.

⁷⁹ Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011, 116.

⁸⁰ Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010, 273.

⁸¹ The data on incumbent parties are from the Party Government Data Set.

⁸² Lijphart 1999.

⁸³ The data on the effective number of political parties are from the Comparative Political Data Set.

⁸⁴ Since each party is nested within an election, the assumption of independent errors will be violated if there are any unobserved election-specific factors. To control for these factors, ordinary least squares (OLS) with robust standard errors clustered by election are used. In addition, all of the models include country dummies to control for unmeasured country-specific effects.

TABLE 1 Voter Polarization and Issue (Ideology) Voting

Model	1	2	3	4
	Multilevel model		Clustered standard errors model	
Left-Right				
Ideological distance	-0.18*** (0.02)		-0.17*** (0.03)	
Voter polarization	-0.04 (0.39)		-0.04 (0.09)	
Ideological distance × Voter polarization	-0.16*** (0.02)		-0.16*** (0.02)	
Economy				
Position distance		-0.04*** (0.01)		-0.05*** (0.01)
Voter polarization		0.10 (0.80)		0.06 (0.11)
Position distance × Voter polarization		-0.18*** (0.03)		-0.15*** (0.03)
Immigration				
Position distance		-0.03** (0.02)		-0.03 (0.02)
Voter polarization		-0.08 (1.08)		0.02 (0.15)
Position distance × Voter polarization		-0.19*** (0.03)		-0.20*** (0.03)
Natural environment				
Position distance		-0.04 (0.08)		-0.02 (0.09)
Voter polarization		-0.54 (3.73)		0.45 (4.20)
Position distance × Voter polarization		-0.01 (0.04)		-0.02 (0.04)
Variance components				
Country intercept	0.07***	0.08***		
Number of observations				
Individual/Parties	69,853	97,417	69,853	97,417
Countries	14	14	14	14
-2 × Log likelihood	275,437	320,230	276,722	322,076

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .1$; Estimations on cut-points are not reported.

analysis model and models 3 and 4 use the ordered logistic model with clustered standard errors. Models 1 and 3 show how voter polarization intermediates the effect of ideological distance on party support regarding the traditional ‘left–right’ dimension, and models 2 and 4 do such an interactive effect on specific issues of economy, immigration and the natural environment.

The results show that voter polarization intensifies the issue (ideology) voting behavior: as voters become polarized on an issue (on the ‘left–right’ ideological dimension), they become more probable to vote for a party whose position on the issue (‘left–right’ ideology) is close to

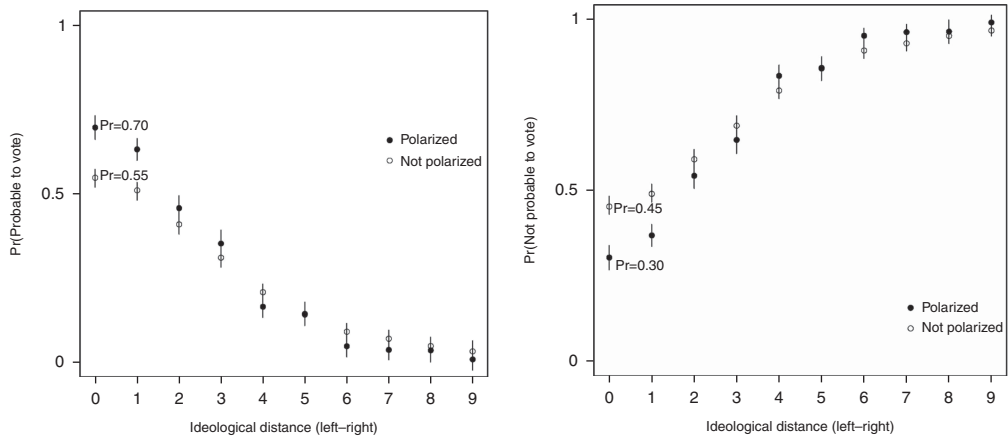


Fig. 2. Voter polarization and ideology voting

Note: Scales 6–10 in the answer to the question of ‘How probable is it that you will ever vote for the following parties?’ are coded as ‘probable to vote’, and scales 1–5 are coded as ‘not probable to vote’. ‘Polarized’ voter opinion represents the 90th percentile value of the voter polarization variable, and ‘not polarized’ voter opinion indicates its 10th percentile value. Ideological distance is the distance between a person’s self-placed left-right ideology and the estimated party ideology of hers on a party.

the voters’ ones.⁸⁵ The interactive effect is found among all the issues except for the natural environment issue.⁸⁶

Figure 2 presents the predicted probabilities of whether a person is likely to vote for a party (the answer scale 6~10 of the dependent variable) or not (the answer scale 1~5 of the dependent variable) that are determined by voter polarization and ideological distance regarding the ‘left-right’ dimension.⁸⁷ The graphs first show that as the ideological distance between a person and a party increases, the probability of ‘being probable to vote’ for the party decreases (the left-hand-side graph) while that of ‘not probable to vote’ for the party increases (the right-hand-side graph). Second, voter polarization increases people’s probability to indicate that they are probable to vote for a party (and consequently decreases people’s probability to indicate that they are not probable to vote for a party) that is ideologically very close to themselves: for example, when voters do not find ideological distance (distance = 0), their probability of ‘being probable to vote’ for the party increases from 0.55 to 0.70 as voter polarization increases (the left-hand-side graph).

⁸⁵ The following robustness checks are done, and the results are presented in the supplementary appendix. First, the issue (ideology) voting behavior may be intensified also by party system polarization, so an interaction term of party system polarization and position (ideological) distance is added (Table S1). Second, Lachat (2008) suggests the relationship between polarization and issue (ideology) voting is mediated by party identification and by political sophistication (political interest), so the three-way interactive effects are tested (party identification in Table S2; political interest in Table S3). The party identification variable is a binary variable that indicates whether a person feels close to each party, and the political sophistication variable indicates how much a person is interested in politics. Finally, the random slope model of the multilevel analysis model is utilized to see whether the interactive effect of voter polarization and position (ideological) distance varies between countries (Table S4).

⁸⁶ One plausible explanation for the absence of the interactive effect of position distance and voter polarization regarding the natural environment issue is that the issue, unlike economy and immigration issues, has a character of valence issues (van der Brug 2004), and position distance matters less for valence issues than other issues in voters’ behavior (Clark 2009).

⁸⁷ Polarized voter opinion indicates the 90th percentile value of the voter polarization variable, and not-polarized voter opinion indicates its 10th percentile value.

TABLE 2 Testing the Issue Salience Hypothesis (DV = standard deviation)

Model	5	6	7	8	9
Issue	All	All	Economy	Immigration	Environment
Voter polarization	-0.01 (0.08)	0.08 (0.09)	0.76 (0.64)	-0.52 (1.69)	-15.62 (21.26)
Issue salience	0.05 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.11)	0.08 (0.05)	0.06 (0.94)
Voter polarization x Issue salience		-0.11* (0.06)	-0.68** (0.28)	-0.26** (0.11)	0.17 (1.04)
Position	0.52*** (0.07)	0.50*** (0.08)	0.43** (0.19)	0.55*** (0.08)	0.68*** (0.18)
Position ²	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.06*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.02)
Effective number of parties	0.06 (0.65)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.01)	-0.31* (0.17)	0.07 (0.15)
Vote share	-0.005 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.005 (0.006)
Party age	-0.076* (0.045)	-0.079** (0.038)	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.012 (0.070)	-0.022 (0.125)
Incumbency	-0.13* (0.07)	-0.12 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.07)	-0.28 (0.19)
Voter attention	-0.39*** (0.11)	-0.35*** (0.12)	0.39 (0.21)	0.40 (1.21)	-26.37 (36.80)
Constant	0.46 (1.72)	-0.13 (0.54)	-4.42** (1.76)	2.81 (3.63)	14.38 (18.08)
R²	0.3442	0.3704	0.4478	0.5702	0.2716
Number of observations	250	250	87	85	78

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; ****p* < .01; ***p* < .05; **p* < .1.

All in all, as voters become polarized among them in their ‘left–right’ ideologies or issue positions, they become more likely to vote for a party whose ‘left–right’ ideology or position on the issue is very close to themselves. Therefore, these results confirm that voter polarization enhances voters’ issue (ideology) voting pattern and imply that they consider positional and ideological proximity more heavily as their opinion becomes polarized.

Voter Polarization, Issue Priority and Position Blurring

The models in Tables 2 test the issue salience hypothesis and include interaction terms consisting of the voter polarization and issue salience variables. The standard deviation of experts’ party position scores is used to measure position blurring. All the three issues (economy, immigration and the natural environment) are examined all together in models 5–6, but each issue is separately analyzed in the following models. First of all, the result in model 5 that does not include the interaction term of voter polarization and issue salience implies that neither polarization nor issue salience has an independent effect on position blurring. Instead, the result in model 6 shows that voter polarization and issue salience have an interactive effect on position blurring: as the issue salience level increases, the position-clarifying effect of voter polarization increases. However, while such an interactive

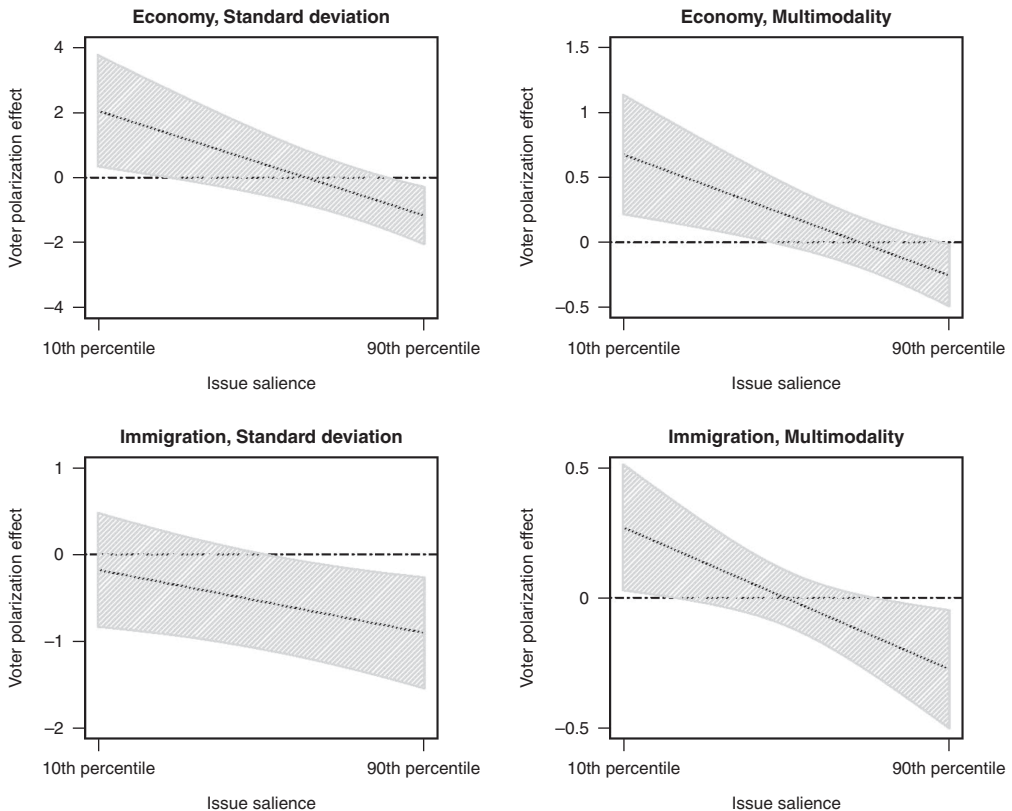


Fig. 3. Voter polarization, issue salience and position blurring

Note: Solid lines are coefficients, and shaded areas indicate 95% confidence levels. The coefficients and confidence levels of the two left-hand-side graphs are calculated using the standard deviation to measure position blurring and those of the two right-hand-side graphs are calculated using the multimodality index to measure position blurring.

effect is found regarding economy and immigration issues (models 7–8), it is not observed regarding the natural environment issue (model 9). The results from using the multimodality index, which are very similar to those from using the standard deviation, are reported in the supplementary appendix (Table S5).

The interactive effect of voter polarization and issue salience is graphically presented in Figure 3. The vertical axes of the graphs indicate the conditional coefficients and standard errors of the voter polarization variable at different levels of issue salience (the horizontal axes). The graphs show that while voter polarization makes political parties blur their issue positions (or does not have an effect on position blurring) when the issue salience level is low for the parties, it encourages them to present clear positions when the issues are salient issues for the parties. The interpretation of the cut-off points suggests that voter polarization on economic issues results in clearer positions on these issues by parties that belong to the social democratic, liberal, conservative and Christian democratic party families, but not other parties. The cut-off points also suggest that while radical right-wing parties present clearer positions on immigration when voters are polarized on the issue, this is not the case for other party families.

TABLE 3 *Testing the Party Supporter Division Hypothesis (DV = standard deviation)*

Model	10	11	12	13	14
Issue	All	All	Economy	Immigration	Environment
Voter polarization	-0.07 (0.23)	-0.24 (0.25)	0.34 (3.13)	0.40 (1.28)	21.53 (13.03)
Party supporter division	0.09 (0.23)	-0.56 (0.46)	0.37 (0.51)	0.38 (0.27)	9.65 (10.90)
Voter polarization × Party supporter division		0.58** (0.28)	4.09* (2.14)	2.82** (1.30)	-10.51 (12.29)
Position	0.42*** (0.06)	0.44*** (0.06)	0.37*** (0.10)	0.41*** (0.06)	0.32* (0.17)
Position ²	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.03* (0.02)
Effective number of parties	-0.14 (0.70)	-0.05* (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.59 (0.40)	-0.24** (0.09)
Vote share	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.006 (0.006)
Party age	-0.074* (0.043)	-0.081** (0.037)	-0.100 (0.080)	-0.034 (0.090)	0.005 (0.120)
Incumbency	-0.13* (0.07)	-0.16** (0.07)	-0.06 (0.13)	-0.16* (0.08)	-0.22 (0.20)
Voter attention	-0.38*** (0.10)	-0.32*** (0.09)	-1.61** (0.61)	11.90 (7.67)	46.08* (21.38)
Constant	1.41 (1.82)	1.99*** (0.44)	8.69*** (1.63)	11.65* (5.52)	-25.88* (12.63)
R²	0.3417	0.3843	0.5330	0.6268	0.2509
Number of observations	229	229	80	74	75

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; ****p* < .01; ***p* < .05; **p* < .1.

The models in Table 3 test the party supporter division hypothesis and include interaction terms consisting of the voter polarization and party supporter division variables.⁸⁸ Similar implications are drawn to the previous results. First, neither voter polarization nor party supporter division has an independent effect on position blurring. Second, there is an interactive effect of voter polarization and party supporter division on position blurring: the position-blurring effect of voter polarization is intensified as political parties’ supporters become more divided on an issue. Third, such an interactive effect of voter polarization and party supporter division is found only regarding economic and immigration issues.⁸⁹

The interactive effect of voter polarization and party supporter division is graphically presented in Figure 4. The vertical axes of the graphs indicate the conditional coefficients and standard errors of the voter polarization variable at different levels of party supporter division

⁸⁸ The results from using the multimodality index, which are very similar with those from using the standard deviation, are reported in the supplementary appendix (Table S6).

⁸⁹ The results in Tables 2 and 3 also suggest that, as previous literature also finds, parties with extreme positions on the economy, immigration and the natural environment present clearer positions on these issues. The following results are also found though these variables are not statistically significant in all the models: political parties in the party system with a large number of political parties, those with a long history and incumbent parties present clear party positions on an issue, particularly when the issue is considered a salient issue by voters.

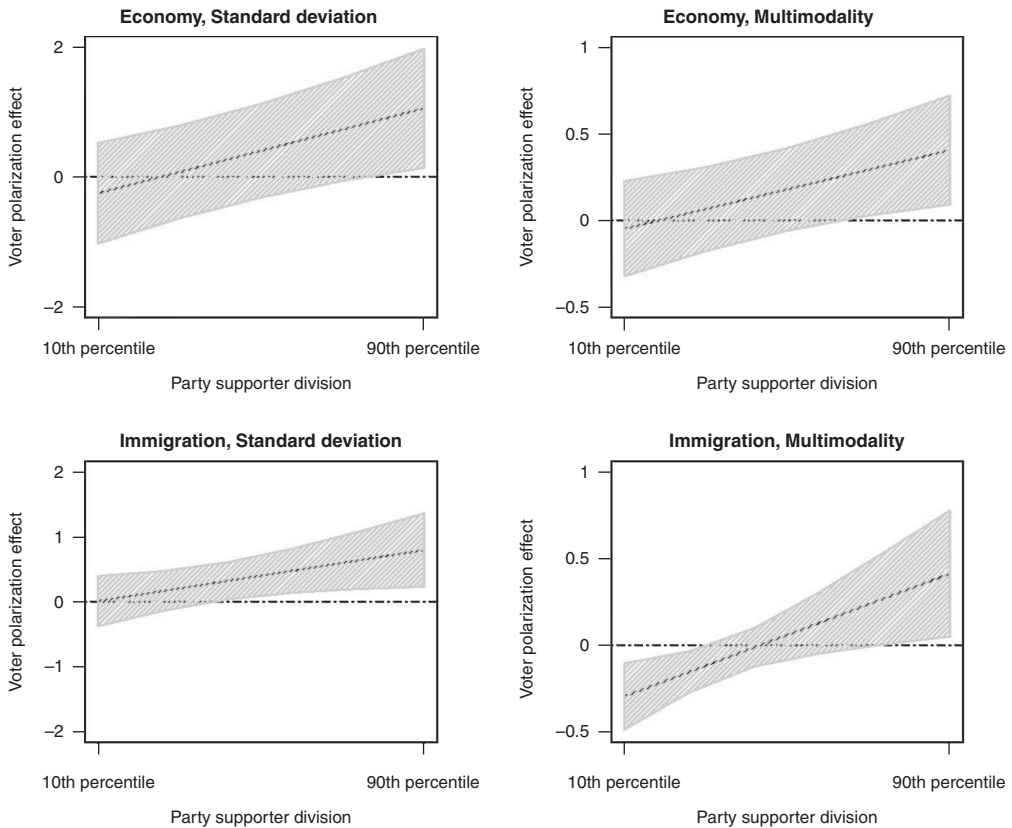


Fig. 4. Voter polarization, party supporter division and position blurring

Note: Solid lines are coefficients, and shaded areas indicate 95% confidence levels. The coefficients and confidence levels of the two left-hand-side graphs are calculated using the standard deviation to measure position blurring and those of the two right-hand-side graphs are calculated using the multimodality index to measure position blurring.

(the horizontal axes). The graphs show that voter polarization makes political parties blur their positions when party supporters are divided on the polarized issue, but not when party supporters are united on that issue. Similar implications are drawn about the cut-off points: ecology parties and radical right-wing parties typically blur their positions on economic issues when voters are polarized on these issues and political parties other than radical right-wing parties blur their positions on immigration when voters are polarized on this issue.

In sum, the results demonstrate that when political parties confront a polarized electorate, they present clear positions on those issues on which they put great salience and their supporters are not divided, but blur their positions on other issues that are secondary to the party and on which their supporters are divided.⁹⁰ However, this interactive effect of voter polarization and

⁹⁰ The results imply that one standard deviation change in the voter polarization variable causes a half standard deviation change in the position blurring variable either when an issue is a very salient issue for a party or when party supporters are not divided on the issue. More substantively, political polarization is closely correlated with income inequality (Finseraas 2008). Thus, for example, voters' opinion on economic issues is more polarized in the UK (fourth among fourteen countries included in our dataset) than in Sweden (eleventh among fourteen countries included in our dataset). Then, the difference in the voter polarization variable between

issue priority is found only for economic and immigration issues, not issues pertaining to the natural environment.⁹¹ One plausible explanation for this finding is that unlike economy and immigration issues, the natural environment issue has a character of valence issues,⁹² which ‘merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate’.⁹³ The positional evaluation of a political party is employed by voters regarding a valence issue less actively than regarding a positional issue because voters hold very similar positions on the issue.⁹⁴ Then, position blurring regarding the natural environment issue may not be determined by party competition conditions such as voter polarization and issue priority because the issue is not a positional issue like economy and immigration issues.⁹⁵

In addition, why does issue priority not have an independent effect on position blurring? Why does it need voter polarization as a pre-existing condition that activates its effect on position blurring? As was discussed earlier, political parties face a trade-off between presenting a clear position (and constraining plausible policy alternatives they can choose after winning elected office) and blurring a position (and going through electoral risks and normative criticism). Then, political parties will not want to run a risk of presenting either a very clear or an awfully vague position when voters do not consider position proximity much. However, political parties may have to make a hard choice between making their position more visible (clearer positions) and turning voters’ attention away (more vague positions) when voters find themselves more different to each other in their issue opinion and incorporate party position more heavily in their voting behavior. Then, the choice by political parties is determined by the priority of the issue for the parties.⁹⁶

(Footnote continued)

these two countries explains the difference in position blurring on economic issues between radical right-wing parties and mainstream parties: while mainstream parties present clear positions on these issues, radical right-wing parties are known to deliberately blur their positions on these issues to avoid internal division between supporters with different preferences on them (such as manual workers and small business owners) (Rovny 2013; cf. Ivarsson 2005).

⁹¹ In Figure 1, the positive correlation between voter polarization and the standard deviation of the position blurring variable on economy and immigration seems to be predominantly influenced by some single cases such as France (economy) and Finland (immigration). Thus, though statistical tests (the Cook’s distance and DFBETA) do not detect these cases as influencing cases, we repeated our analyses on the issue salience hypothesis and the supporter division hypothesis without these countries (without France for models on economy and without Finland for models on immigration). The results on main independent variables are not significantly changed (Table S7 and S8).

⁹² Van der Brug 2004.

⁹³ Stokes 1963, 373.

⁹⁴ Clark 2009.

⁹⁵ Abou-Chadi (2016) also finds that while mainstream parties’ behaviors on issues related to multiculturalism are affected by the electoral success of radical right-wing parties, those on issues related to the natural environment are not affected by the electoral success of ecology parties because the latter issues are valence issues and ecology parties dominate political discourse on the issues. De Sio and Weber (2014) also find that the issue yield effect on issue emphasis is stronger when issue ownership is less clear among parties. Therefore, voter polarization and issue priority may have unlike effects on position blurring depending on the nature of issues. More thorough research needs to be done regarding this interactive relationship between voter polarization, issue priority and the nature of issues in the future.

⁹⁶ If issue salience and party supporter division modify the voter polarization effect on position blurring, voter polarization must also modify the effects of issue salience and party supporter division on position blurring (‘symmetry of interaction’). The calculation of conditional coefficients and standard errors show that issue salience (party supporter division) makes political parties present clear (vague) positions only when voters are polarized either on economy or immigration issues (Figures S1 and S2).

CONCLUSION

This article finds that the extent to which a political party presents clear positions on an issue in the context of voter polarization is dependent on whether the issue is of primary importance to the party and the extent to which the party's core supporters are united on the issue. The findings in this article are consistent with the issue competition literature that suggests that political parties attempt to draw voters' attention to issues advantageous to the parties but attempt to move voters' attention away from issues that are unfavorable to the parties.⁹⁷ Position blurring can be used by a political party to discourage voters from paying attention to an issue that may place the party at a comparative disadvantage.⁹⁸

The findings in this article may also help to reconcile two seemingly contradictory findings in the literature on the electoral consequences of position blurring. On the one hand, the 'obfuscation' literature in American politics suggests that political parties lose votes by blurring their positions on economic issues.⁹⁹ On the other hand, the literature on Western European party politics suggests that political parties, at least some families of political parties, can gain votes by blurring their position on economic issues.¹⁰⁰ These findings may be the result of economic issues being prime issues for political parties in the United States, but the same issues composing the secondary issues for at least some political parties (niche parties) in Western Europe.¹⁰¹

Though the link between issue priority and position blurring is implicitly recognized in the previous literature on position blurring,¹⁰² the role of voter polarization that increases the functioning of the link is not considered by the literature. As is found in this article, though political parties want to clarify their position on their prime issue and blur their position on their secondary issue, the pattern of such a dual strategy gets stronger when voters are polarized on an issue and they significantly incorporate the position distance on the issue in their voting behavior. Therefore, the finding implies that we need to take voter polarization into account in the discussion on the politics of position blurring.

The 'responsible party model' of political representation suggests that it is normatively desirable for political parties to represent the policy stances of their supporters because 'citizens in Western democracies are represented by and through parties'.¹⁰³ Therefore, political parties are expected to 'offer distinct policy options or programs, so that voters are given meaningful electoral choice'.¹⁰⁴ Then, position blurring, regardless of its strategic advantages in election campaigns, will violate the norm on the role of political parties as linkage mechanisms. However, the results reported here suggest that increasingly polarized opinion on economic and immigration issues¹⁰⁵ results in some political parties presenting clearer positions on one of these issues (for example, those that focus disproportionately on economic issues such as many of the mainstream parties will clarify their position on economy more and those that focus disproportionately on immigration issues such as radical right-wing parties will present clearer

⁹⁷ Riker 1996; Robertson 1976.

⁹⁸ Rovny 2012.

⁹⁹ Enelow and Hinich 1981; Shepsle 1972.

¹⁰⁰ Rovny 2013; Somer-Topcu 2015.

¹⁰¹ Mudde 2007.

¹⁰² Rovny 2012; Rovny 2013.

¹⁰³ Sartori 1968, 471.

¹⁰⁴ Dalton 1985, 270.

¹⁰⁵ Public opinion toward both economy and immigration became more polarized in Western Europe in recent years: the average standard deviation of public opinion on the economy and immigration (by country) in ESS Round 7 (2014) is statistically significantly larger than that in ESS Round 1 (2002) at the 0.05 significance level.

positions on these issues) and others presenting vaguer positions (those that do not focus on economic issues such as many of the niche parties will blur their position on these issues more). Thus, the current political context will lead some political parties to better conform to the ‘responsible party model’ than others, but the answer on which political parties do better will depend on issue priority.

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