Too Important to Ignore? Why Ambiguity and Broad Appeals Fail With Rising Issue Salience*

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Abstract

When do voters penalize ambiguous, broad appeals? This paper proposes a new argument by bringing salience 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 salience of an issue increases for voters, they are less likely to project their own views onto ambiguous politicians and will penalize ambiguity. I find evidence for this argument using survey-experimental and observational evidence. The argument implies a representation challenge for mainstream politicians who try to build diverse coalitions: as dividing issues keep growing in importance, broad appeals and ambiguity become less effective, making it harder to build a coalition of voters with heterogeneous preferences.

Keywords— Ambiguity, Broad-appeals, Projecting, Salience, Conjoint

Word count: 9900

*Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop). The empirical analysis has been successfully replicated by the JOP replication analyst. The Pre-Analyis Plans for this study can be found at: https://osf.io/gq68s/registrations. All studies in this paper have received approval from the European University Institute's Institutional Review Board.

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1 Introduction

Politicians often make broad, ambiguous statements about policy. Jeremy Corbyn's Labour in Britain decided to stay 'constructively ambiguous' on the Brexit issue (Keegan, 2019), and Donald Trump was known to be vague on a range issues (Eady & Loewen, 2021). 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). Across continental Europe, Radical Right parties are known to be deliberately vague on economic issues (Rovny, 2013), and Social Democratic parties have traditionally tried to appeal broadly by remaining vague on religious issues (Przeworski, 1986).

Under what circumstances is ambiguity—defined as deliberately avoiding talking about and taking a clear position—a strategy for success? Many have tried to answer this question. Tomz and Van Houweling (2009), for instance, show that the partisan identity of a politician influences whether voters accept ambiguity. Piston, Krupnikov, Ryan, and Milita (2018) argue that voters penalize ambiguity if the ambiguous politician is of a different race. 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. And Lehrer and Lin (2020) show that voters' perceptions of how internally divided a party is matter.

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. In particular, we do not yet understand how voters' acceptance of ambiguous statements varies by how important they find the issue a politician is ambiguous on. This is important because without taking issue importance into consideration, we cannot 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.

This paper proposes a novel theoretical explanation that focuses on the importance of the issue a politician is ambiguous on and tests it in three studies using two survey experiments and an observational analysis. 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 may 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 may 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. In support of both these channels, 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 first 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 determines 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 outweigh the costs, except when issues become too salient among the electorate.

Using a second study, I ensure that the argument has internal validity by employing a randomized treatment that prompts respondents to find a given issue more important. Similarly to the conjoint experiment, in this study, I find that treated respondents prefer a politician that agrees with them as opposed to one that is ambiguous. In addition, treated respondents are less likely to think that the ambiguous politician has their preferred policy position. A third study aims to strengthen external validity by moving beyond the artificial experimental context. I rely on data from the European Election study and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey to show that people who find a given issue more important are more likely to disapprove of parties that are ambiguous on that issue.

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

While most studies on issue voting have been concerned about where parties are placed along a continuum (Downs, 1957), 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 fears being perceived as inexperienced on a particular issue and prefers to not draw attention to it; ambiguity can then be a way to make sure an issue does not become salient (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Meguid, 2005). In addition, the voters a candidate tries to target might have differing opinions on an issue, and taking a clear position may risk alienating some of them. By being ambiguous, it might even be possible to unite an otherwise heterogeneous electorate, leading to a boost in the polls (Bräuninger & Giger, 2018; Elias, Szöcsik, & Zuber, 2015; Han, 2022; Rovny, 2012; Rovny & Polk, 2020; Somer-Topcu, 2015; Tolvanen, Tremewan, & Wagner, 2021).

The literature has identified several different ways a politician can be ambiguous: flip-flopping their 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 (2022) shows that vagueness is the most successful strategy and that ambivalence works too, whereas flip-flopping and attacking others may backfire. In all, obfuscating one's position by being ambiguous can most easily be conceptualized by juxtaposing it to what ambiguity 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" (Somer-Topcu, 2015, p. 842).[1] In this paper, I am particularly interested in ambiguity with regard to making vague, general statements, as this has been shown to be the most effective way of being ambiguous (Nasr, 2021).

Yet how do ambiguity and broad appeals work? Theories that explain how ambiguity works can be classified in two groups. The first set of approaches assume that voters know that parties are being

[1] 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 an ambiguous politician has their position—whereas a centrist candidate is only attractive to voters who have a centrist position themselves.

ambiguous. Voters then respond to uncertainty based on party or voter characteristics; most notably, how '*risk averse*' voters are. According to this literature, voters who are uncertain about a party's position have a certain willingness to take the chance that an ambiguous candidate has their position (Glazer, 1990; Page, 1976; Shepsle, 1972). In a similar lineage, Bartels (1986), Enelow and Hinich (1981), and Rogowski and Tucker (2018) argue that voters dislike uncertainty, which determines what they think of ambiguous candidates.

The second group of theories that explain how ambiguity works posit 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). 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 implies that voters project their own positions onto an ambiguous candidate based on their pre-existing feelings about the candidate (Bartels, 1988).

A alternative explanation for projection posits 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-board optimism would thus give *any* ambiguous candidates an advantage in competition against precise competitors. In all, projection is argued to work through specific or general optimism among voters.

Existing evidence shows that ambiguity is effective and 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 Van 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, Piston et al. (2018) show that American voters are much more accepting of ambiguous candidates if they are of the same race. Focusing particularly on false consensus effects, Tolvanen et al. (2021) use a lab experiment to show that people are generally too optimistic when assessing where an ambiguous candidate may be positioned. In all, existing research shows that voters project their views onto politicians and are more likely to do so if they have warm feelings towards a politician.

Whilst these are convincing arguments, the literature on ambiguity remains underdeveloped as it predominantly considers characteristics of voters and parties, such as risk aversion or partisanship, as the main moderating variable that helps us understand when ambiguity helps parties attract voters. 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, which therefore 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 the same politician might be electorally rewarded for ambiguity yet not on a different issue. 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 better when ambiguity stops working, I focus on the salience of an issue a politician is ambiguous on as a key, overlooked variable.[2] 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 (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995; Dyer & Sarin, 1982; Howe & Krosnick, 2017; Lanzetta & Driscoll, 1968). For instance, Berent and Krosnick (1995) show that 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. The importance of attitudes has also been argued to determine how much thought people devote to those attitudes, introspecting more about their opinions if issues matter more to them (Hofmann, Gschwendner, & Schmitt, 2005; Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, & Boninger, 2005; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). These mechanisms apply to

[2]Issue salience is also known as 'preference intensity' in economics or 'attitude strength' in psychology.

politics too. Falk, Spunt, and Lieberman (2012), for example, asked respondents to rate their agreement on issues and candidates whilst inside an fMRI brain-scanner. Among respondents for whom an issue was more important, the parts of the brain associated with social cognition activated more strongly when rating that issue. The opposite is also true: Ciuk and Yost (2016) show that people rely more on party cues for information about issues that are less important to them, suggesting that issue salience may lead people to more thoughtfully consider information. 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, there is a '*direct effect*', where voters project the same way but simply dislike uncertainty more when issues are more important to them. A direct effect may occur for three reasons: (i) Seeking out more information about politicians' positions is harder if they are ambiguous. As voters will want more information and spend the least amount of time finding it, ambiguity is penalized for more important issues. (ii) When voters have to spend little time finding information about a party's position, they may realize that it has integrity which they value. (iii) When voters carefully consider all relevant factors—which they do for salient issues (Howe & Krosnick, 2017)—they are leaving less to chance. While this has not explicitly been linked to risk-aversion in any previous work, it seems plausible that voters who leave less to chance are more risk averse.

The second hypothesized way that the salience of an issue influences whether a candidate is penalized for being ambiguous is an '*indirect effect*'. Voters who seek out more information and pay more attention recognize that a party is being vague and as a result they stop projecting. At lower levels of salience, voters thus project; whereas as issues become more important, ambiguity on those issues works less well because voters project less. Because voters are generally not very attentive to begin with (Converse, 1964; Lippmann, 1946), it seems likely that voters are less likely to be uncertain about a candidate's position if they start paying attention to what ambiguous politicians say.

Taken together, I expect the following to hold true:

> ***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 less.

Both these hypotheses stand in contrast to a H0 hypothesis stating that ambiguity is effective on aggregate because voters, at the micro-level of political behavior, do not distinguish between politicians they agree with and those that are ambiguous. By focusing on the characteristics of the issue a candidate is ambiguous on, the proposed argument makes it possible to explain why the same ambiguous candidate is penalized for being ambiguous on one issue, but draws votes with the same strategy 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). First, how divided are the voters they are targeting? And, relatedly, how salient is the issue for them, i.e. can a politician benefit from being ambiguous, or will voters penalize them because they find the issue important?

3 Study 1

3.1 Design

In study 1, I provide the main evidence for the argument by testing my hypotheses using a pre-registered conjoint experiment embedded in a survey of a nationally representative sample of 1869 Dutch adults. 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, 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 6^2 credits used to buy six votes against a single statement) to +6 (all votes in favor of a single statement).[3] 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, which were actually used in Voting Advice Applications, 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

[3]Note that voters who do not vote on an issue are asked in a separate pre-treatment question whether they would be in favor or against the statement.

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 in a context that better mimicks the real-world. On the six policy statements, the candidates can either be pro on 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 full range of attributes (the policy positions and parties) as well as their levels (the party names and statements parties can take) are presented in the Online Appendix.

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.

3.1.1 Measures

The first *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 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 4 as the last two categories—5 and 6 votes—are combined to ensure enough responses in each category). 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 focus on the effect of the levels of each attribute on the outcome. In my case, this would, for instance, mean that I estimate the effect of being ambiguous on the EU or factory farming on what people think of a candidate profile (i.e. the rows in the data frame would be candidate profiles). The effects of individual attributes are not particularly interesting for this study, 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 'ambiguous on policy X'. This makes it possible to 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 column per issue. This means that each two-candidate comparison will result in 2×6 rows in the data as the unit of analysis is the policy attribute in the candidate profile.[4] 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.

3.1.2 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

[4]Note that in a normal conjoint each two-candidate comparison results in just two rows, one for each profile.

$i \in (1, ..., N)$) is presented with K rating tasks ($k \in (1, ..., 10)$ of two profiles each, with every candidate in each rating task making a statement on P different policies ($p \in (1, ..., 6)$). In each one of their tasks, the respondents choose the most preferred of the two alternatives. I estimate the AMCE using using a simple linear regression of the form:

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

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 are included minus the reference categories. Salience is fully factorized. The reference category for the strategy of a candidate is 'agreeing' with a voter, for issue salience '0', for party the 'CDA', and for the issue 'climate change'. This estimation thus controls for the issue a hypothetical politician was ambiguous on, as captured for immigration by β_4, as well as the party that was ambiguous (β_1).

Because of the restrictions in the randomization for the issues that the three non-mainstream 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. β_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 β_6, which captures whether the causal effect of ambiguity as opposed to agreeing is different at different levels of salience. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

Using this model, 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 (Leeper et al., 2020). 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 less effective than agreeing for a given subset of the electorate, it might still be the most effective strategy for the *whole* electorate depending on how divided the electorate is. The overall 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 effect of interest I will calculate, using the marginal means from Model 1. This concept is formalized in the following equation:

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

where *ambiguity*, *agree*, and *disagree* capture the average utility voters derive from a party that is ambiguous, agrees, or disagrees with them. Crucially, a captures the proportion of the electorate that has the majority opinion. E.g., if 60% of people are pro-immigration, a equals 0.6. On average, ambiguity is the most effective strategy as long as the first inequality in Equation 2 holds: If the utility in the electorate when a party is ambiguous is larger than the 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 with these voters. I call this proportion the '*threshold effectiveness of ambiguity*'. This threshold can be calculated at different levels of issue salience. To do so, I use the marginal means from Model 1 as measures of the utility for *ambiguity*, *agree*, and *disagree*.

3.2 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.

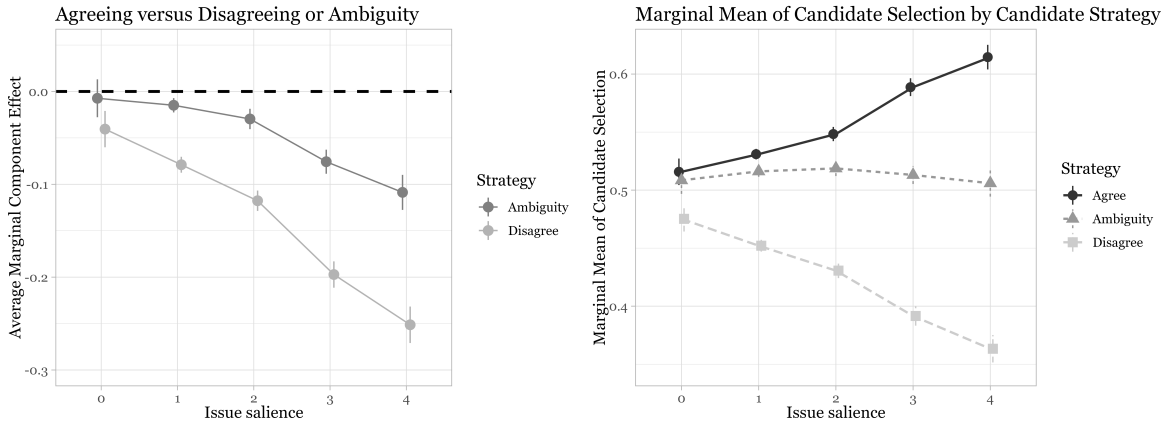
Both panels clearly show that the effect of each strategy depend on the salience of an issue. For instance, disagreeing on an extremely salient issue as opposed to agreeing makes a candidate about 30% less likely to be selected by a voter. Recall that this is for a *single* issue, indicating that positional congruence—even on a single issue—can strongly influence vote choice as long as issues are salient to voters. If the null-hypothesis—voters never distinguish between agreeing and ambiguity—were true, then we would expect to find that ambiguity and agreeing always have the same effects. The results show, however, that while ambiguity is very similar to agreeing at lower levels of issue salience, for more salient issues, being ambiguous is positioned somewhere in-between agreeing and disagreeing. This shows that voters who find issues less important are not or barely distinguishing ambiguity from agreeing, whereas those who find issues important can.[5]

These average difference between ambiguity and agreeing do 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 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 the right panel of Figure 1, calculated using 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

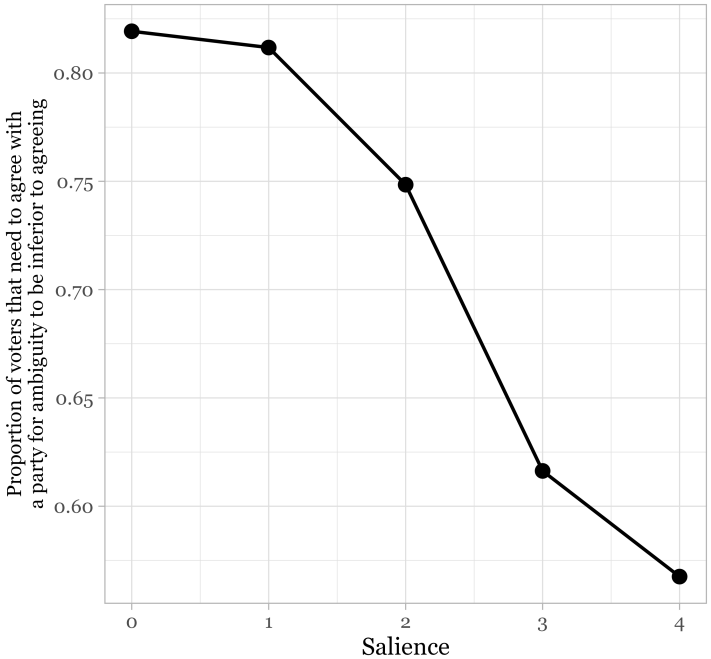
[5]Furthermore, these figures also show that respondents who do not find an issue very salient do *not* interpret ambiguity as moderation and like it because they are moderates themselves. If this were the case, then ambiguity should be liked *more* than agreeing at lower salience levels. This is not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

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



Note: The figure plots the Average Marginal Component Effects (left) and the Marginal Means (right) of the main model that uses the binary candidate choice outcome. The baseline—the dashed line—in the figure on the left is 'agreeing' with voters. Both figures indicate that at lower levels of issue salience, there are no significant or substantially very small differences between ambiguity and agreeing. At higher levels of issue salience, by contrast, voters start distinguishing between agreeing and ambiguity.

Figure 2: Threshold Effectiveness of Ambiguity



Note: The figure shows the proportion of voters that a party needs to be able to agree with for ambiguity to be inferior to agreeing with those voters. It shows that this value depends on the salience of the issue to voters: as voters find an issue more important, it is increasingly beneficial to side with the majority as opposed to being ambiguous to everyone.

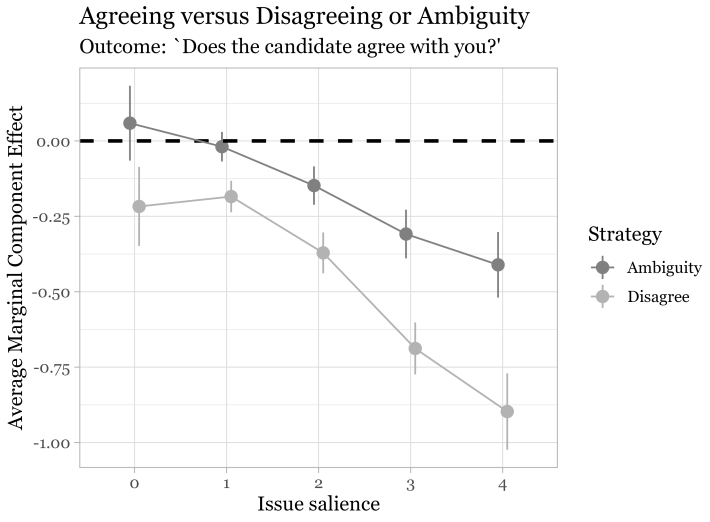
issues (4, 5, or 6 votes on the QV salience scale), ambiguity is only the most effective strategy if a party cannot agree with at least 55% of the electorate at the same time. As issues become more salient, it is thus increasingly attractive to pick a side and say what the majority thinks.

Taken together, both Figures 1 and 2 provide support for both hypotheses and 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.

3.2.1 Mechanisms: the direct and indirect effects of ambiguity

Salience might influence the effectiveness of ambiguity because on more salient issues, voters project less and thus perceive ambiguous candidates as further away from their own position (H1b). Alternatively, a direct effect of ambiguity is also possible where voters simply dislike ambiguity on important issues (H1a). In the first mechanism test, I focus on the former mechanism (H1b).[6] 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.

Figure 3: Effects of Candidate Strategy on Perceived Closeness



Note: The figure shows that average marginal component effect of being ambiguous or disagreeing vs agreeing (the dashed line for no effect) for the outcome: "Up to what degreee do the candidates agree with you from not at all (0) to completely (10)".

[6]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.

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 four votes for 16 credits, an ambiguous 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 0.9 steps less close on an 11-step Likert scale. 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.

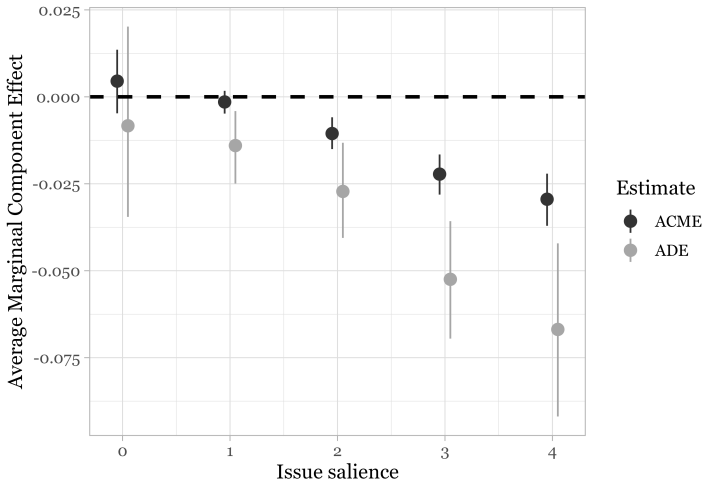
As a second test of the potential mechanisms, I use mediation analysis methods developed by Imai and collaborators to unpack the effect of being ambiguous as opposed to simply agreeing with a voter into it's direct and indirect effects (2011)—called the 'Average Causal Mediation Effects' (ACME) and 'Average Direct Effect' (ADE).[7] Simply put, the ACME captures how much of the total effect of being ambiguous runs through perceiving a candidate as projecting less (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.

3.3 Counterfactual Electorates: what are the optimal strategies for parties?

Whether being ambiguous is the most effective strategy for a politician depends on the distribution of opinions in the electorate. Han (2021) and Han (2020), for instance, show that mainstream parties use ambiguity if their voter base and society are internally divided. Tolvanen et al. (2021) argue that ambiguity becomes more effective when societies are more polarized (fewer people are 'centrists'), because

[7] 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



Note: The figure shows the results from a mediation analysis using the binary candidate choice outcome and the candidate positional questions as mediator (Imai et al., 2011, 2010).

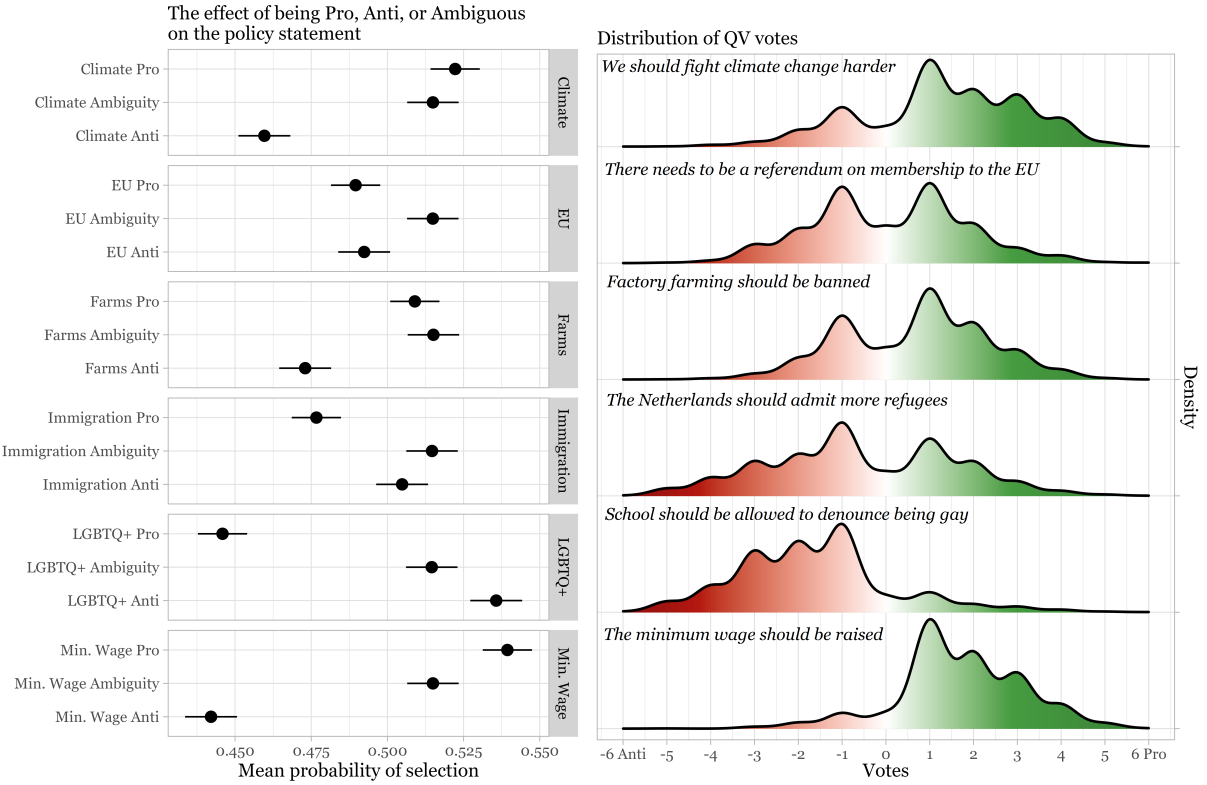
people will incorrectly assume that ambiguous, non-centrist politicians have their opinion. These are arguments about party strategies and the overall distribution of opinions. The argument presented here makes a contribution to these studies by focusing on a micro-mechanism of voting behavior—the effect of issue salience—and its implications for how the overall distribution of opinions influences what the optimal strategy is. Simply put, I argue that parties have to take positions (the proportion of voters who are pro or anti on a given issue) *and* 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 voter utility' for a party had they used a specific strategy on a particular issue. It is possible to calculate these utilities if we assume that the marginal means from Model 1 tell us the effect of each strategy at each salience level on the probability a voter would choose a party.[8]. As the survey measures the opinion of respondents and how salient these opinions are, the effect of a strategy for each respondent can 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. The right pane shows

[8]These are simply the marginal means as reported early in the right pane of Figure 1, and I thus interpret these as the utility for each strategy

Figure 5: Counterfactual election strategies



Note: The figure plots the mean probability a party would be selected if they using different strategies towards a given policy statement. The left panel shows the effect of using different strategies and the right panel the distribution of respondents. The estimates for the effects of different strategies come directly from the predicted probabilities shown in Figure 1.

the distribution of opinions and their salience on the six different policy statements. The direction of votes—positive or negative—indicates whether voters are 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, anti, or ambiguous on the statement. The mean selection probability thus captures what the average effect in the electorate is when pursuing a given strategy.

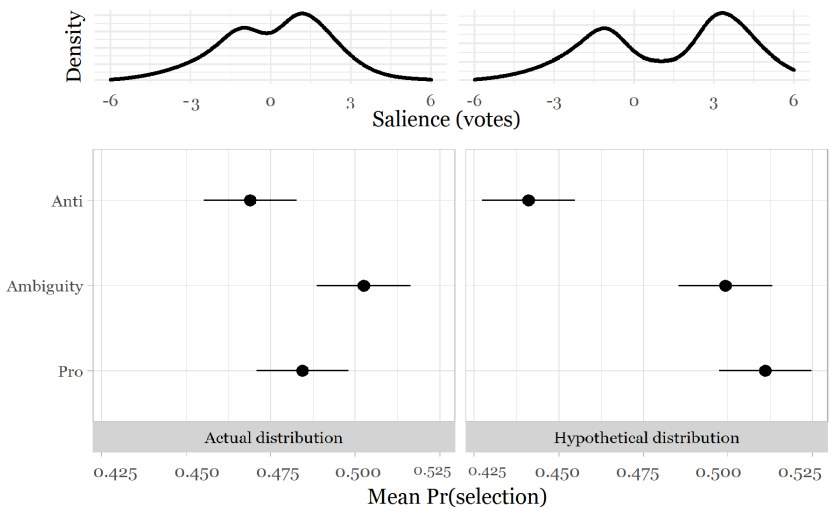
The results clearly show that the distribution of opinions and their salience on a given policy statement heavily influences which strategy is most effective. Focusing on the minimum wage, for instance, being pro on the statement clearly leads to the highest mean selection probability because almost all voters are pro themselves and quite some have strong opinions on it. For divisive issues, especially when the issue salience is symmetric between two sides, 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. 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.

However, parties generally do not try to persuade *all* of the electorate at the same time. Instead, they aim to attract their 'likely voters': core constituents and party members 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 persuade. To further illustrate this point, in Figure 6, I look at likely Social Democratic voters (those who indicate a propensity to vote of more than six on an 11-step scale) and focus on the most effective strategy on the issue of immigration.

The density plot at the top left shows that actual distribution of likely Social Democratic voters from the QV 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 (although these differences are not significant). This indeed contradicts the results in Figure 5, which shows that it is more effective to be anti-immigration than pro when considering the whole electorate. The effectiveness of ambiguity for a given party is thus determined at the aggregate level and depends on the share of the electorate a party focuses on.

These results speak against popular claims that the decline of Social Democratic parties is caused

Figure 6: The Real and Hypothetical Electorate of the Social Democrats



Note: The figure plots the mean probability likely Social Democratic voters would select a party depending on the strategies the party uses to address the issue of immigration. The left panel shows the real distribution and the average effects of choosing a given strategy, the right panel a hypothetical distribution where everyone who is pro on the immigration statement finds the issue '2 votes' more salient.

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 vote share of Social-Democratic parties would be *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? In this hypothetical scenario, a share of the electorate thus cares a lot about its position, and another share less so. The right panel of Figure 5 considers this hypothetical scenario. All Social-Democratic voters that are pro-immigration are artificially set to find the issue 2-votes more important. In this hypothetical scenario, being clearly progressive would be the most advantageous strategy (although the differences are not significant). A shift in issue salience might thus change what the most effective strategy is, even if voters' positions stay the same. Furthermore, 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.

What may explain why parties sometimes seemingly do not use the optimal persuasion strategy? One key assumption made here is that parties know the position of voters. As recent research has shown, however, this may not always be the case (Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Pereira, 2021; Sevenans, 2021). In fact, in the face of uncertainty about voters' positions, politicians may decide to be ambiguous. The argument presented here illustrates that not knowing what your target audience thinks about a given issue can become increasingly costly as that issue grows in importance to voters. Imagine, for instance, that a party incorrectly assumes that its electorate is divided on an issue. If the issue is not important to voters, being 'wrongly' ambiguous will not do much harm. As this issue grows in importance to voters, however, voters will defect to clear candidates. Such losses could have been avoided if the party had known where its voters are positioned and chosen to side with the majority.[9]

4 Study 2

4.1 Design & Methods

In study 2, I rely on an additional pre-registered survey experiment to ensure internal validity and gain leverage on the causal effects of issue importance through direct experimental manipulation of salience.

The experiment focuses on the issue of building more data centers in the Netherlands.[10] Respondents first answer some background questions, among which whether they are in favor or against building new data centers. Respondents are then blocked on whether they are in favor or against and randomized into treatment or control. Treated respondents see a text vignette that provides them with two reasons for why the issue is important to them personally, in alignment with their initial position on the issue.[11] The treatments are aligned with respondent's existing priors to not also change their positions.[12] Respondents in the control group read nothing. The treatment is likely to increase the salience of the issue because it primes self-interest, which research has identified as the most important driver behind attitude

[9] This argument can be extended by directly incorporating a 'cost' parties would have to pay to figure out what the true public opinion is. If true opinion never reveals itself and this cost is a constant (e.g. the price of a population representative survey), then ambiguity will be used by parties on all low-salience issues, as it's not worth paying to figure out what voters think.

[10] The construction of data centers by Big Tech is a topic that has received some but not much attention in Dutch media. Data centers are server farms that are placed in former farmland.

[11] Treated people in favor see: 'The construction of new data centers is an important topic for you. Experts have predicted that data centers will create many new jobs. They will also attract new industries. It is a top political priority.'. Those against see: 'The construction of new data centers is an important topic for you. Experts have predicted that data centers will drive up the energy prices. They are also ugly and bad for the environment. It is a top political priority.'

[12] In addition, in the Appendix I include a test where I will ask respondents about their position, and controlling for this does not change the main effects.

importance (Howe & Krosnick, 2017; Miller, Krosnick, & Fabrigar, 2016). Leeper (2014) successfully uses a similar treatment in a study that scrutinizes whether salience influences whether people prefer information that confirms or goes against their priors.

Following the treatment, respondents see two statements by hypothetical and unnamed political parties. The 'agree' party agrees with the respondent's position on the issue of building more data centers[13], whereas the 'ambiguous' statement is the following: 'People in The Hague talk about the issue of building more data centers. We need to do better research into the impact of the centers. We think we should examine the official city planning rules'.

As dependent variables, respondents are, first, asked which party they prefer. This variable is re-coded as preferring the 'agreeing' party (1) vs. choosing the 'ambiguous' party (0). This is followed by a battery of agree vs disagree questions about each party (on 0 to 100). As the second main outcome, I use two questions that ask: 'I would vote for the party' and 'I like the party'. As pre-registred, I take the mean of these two questions and then the difference between the two parties. Higher values on this scale indicate liking the 'agreeing' party more than the ambiguous party.

To capture which mechanisms might drive effects, respondents are additionally asked whether they think that 'the party has the same position that they do' (the indirect effect) and if they 'like the statement by the party' (the direct effect). To check whether the treatment manipulates issue salience, respondents were asked a battery of questions that assess how important they think the issue of building data centers is. The survey was run by Lucid in December 2022 on a non-probability sample of 770 Dutch adults.[14]

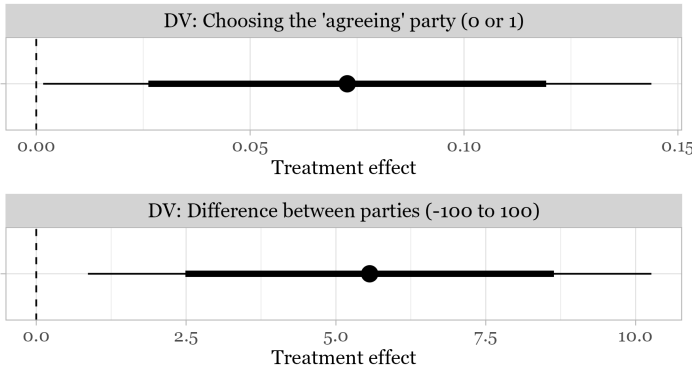
4.2 Results

The main results are shown in Figure 2, and indicate that, on both outcome variables, treated respondents are better at distinguishing between parties that agree with respondents and those that are ambiguous. To be precise, treated respondents are 7% more likely to choose the party they agree with, and there is a strongly significant difference between the ambiguous party and the party that agrees with respondents in the treatment group on the composite outcome.

[13]The agree statement is: 'People in The Hague talk about the issue of building more data centers. We need to do better research into the impact of the centers. We think we should continue/stop construction'

[14]The survey had IRB approval. While a sample of 1050 adults was pre-registred, fieldwork was more expensive than expected, which necessitated a reduced sample size due to budget limitations.

Figure 7: Main results for study 2 where the treatment intends to make an issue more salient



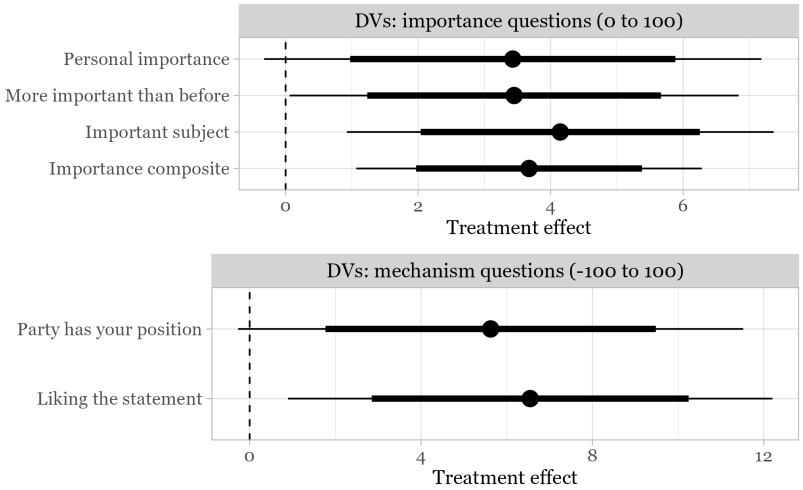
Note: Results for the main analysis of Study 2. The figure plots the treatment effect (being told an issue is important to you) on whether respondents are better at distinguishing between a party that agrees with them and one that is vague. Higher values on the difference variable indicate being more in favor of the party that agrees with you. Thick (thin) lines indicate 90% (95%) confidence intervals. Full regression models can be found in Table A4.

To verify whether the treatment indeed manipulates issue salience and to test for mechanisms through which the treatment effect may run, Figure 8 shows the results for several additional outcomes. First, assessing the effects on issue salience, the top graph in the figure shows the treatment effects on three agree vs disagree (0-100) questions and their composite. Respondents were asked whether the issue of building more data centers was of 'personal importance' to them, whether it was 'more important than before the survey', and if they thought it was 'an important political subject'. The composite of these variables is strongly significant, indicating that the treatment affected issue salience.

The bottom half of Figure 8 shows the results for two mechanism outcomes. Respondents were asked whether they think each party has 'their position' (the indirect effect), and if they 'like the statement' of each party (the direct effect). I once again use the differences in the scores between the 'agreeing' and the 'ambiguous' party. While only significant at the 10% level for the positional question, the results largely indicate that both hypothesized mechanisms drive the effects. Respondents who find an issue more important are more likely to think that a clear party has their position and like its statement, as compared to an ambiguous party.

In all, study 2 shows that when respondents are randomly assigned to receive a treatment that leads them to consider an issue as more important, they are better at distinguishing between clear and ambiguous parties.

Figure 8: Manipulation & Mechanism tests for experiment 2



Note: Results for the mechanism questions and manipulation checks for study 2. The figure plots the treatment effect (being told an issue is important to you) on manipulation-check questions (the top figure) and mechanism outcomes (the bottom figure). Higher values on the difference variable (the mechanism questions) indicate being more in favor of the party that agrees with you. Thick (thin) lines indicate 90% (95%) confidence intervals. The full regression results can be found in Tables A5 and A7.

5 Study 3

5.1 Design & Methods

Study 3 employs population and expert-survey data to ensure that the behavioral patterns my theory predicts can also be found outside the artificial experimental context and in other European countries. Using the 2014 European Election Study (EES) and the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Schmitt, Hobolt, Popa, & Teperoglou, 2016; Jolly et al., 2022), I run two analyses.

(1) For voters, the theory and experimental results imply that those who find an issue more important will dislike politicians who are ambiguous on that issue. In technical terms, when predicting liking a party, there should be a significant interaction between voter issue importance and party ambiguity while holding constant party and voter positions Han (2022). A respondent's evaluation of a party, from the EES, is the dependent variable. The EES is also used to capture issue importance of immigration (the moderating variable), using a question that asks respondents what they think 'the most important issue facing the country' is.[15] I focus on immigration because there are enough respondents in the sample that indicate that they find the issue important. Furthermore, as is common in the literature on party strategies, I rely on disagreement among CHES experts (the standard deviation) when placing

[15] While the theory and experimental results focus on *personal* issue importance, there are no surveys that ask directly about personal issue importance that I can use for these purposes.

parties on an immigration scale as a measure of party ambiguity, which is my main independent variable (Rovny, 2012, 2013; Rovny & Polk, 2020; Han, 2020). I run a standard linear regression model with country-fixed effects and individual-level controls. More details on the analysis can be found in the Online Appendix.

(2) For parties, the section on counter-factual electorates implies that as the share of the electorate a party focuses on—their 'likely voters'—finds an issue more important, parties will be less ambiguous. To test whether parties exhibit these patterns, I also use the EES and the CHES. For each party, I define its likely voters as those respondents who (1) have ever voted for the party, (2) indicate they would vote for the party, or (3) place it higher than the middle value on a thermostat scale. I use the percentage of a party's likely voters who consider immigration the most important issue as the main independent variable. The main dependent variable is the same party-ambiguity measure as used for the voter analysis (uncertainty among experts). This data is available for 98 parties in Europe. The results are presented using correlations.[16]

5.2 Results

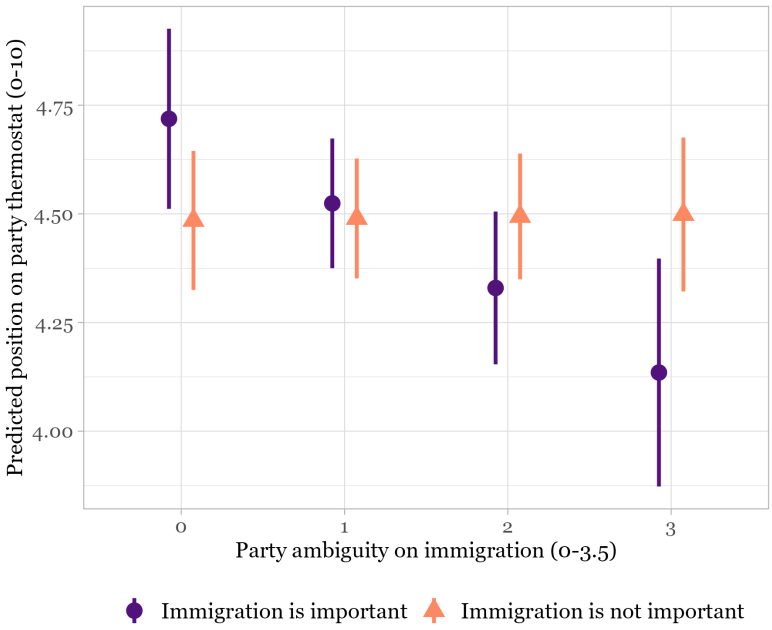
The results for voters can be found in Figure 9, and are presented using the predicted outcomes on the party thermostat scale. In line with expectations, the results show that considering immigration to be the most important issue influences the relationship between a parties ambiguity and voter assessment of parties. For respondents who find immigration important, more party ambiguity results in liking a party less. Respondents who do not care about immigration, by contrast, evaluate more and less ambiguous parties in the same way.

For parties, the results can be found in Figure 10. The plot shows the correlation between both variables and highlights the most important Dutch parties. As the percentage of a party's likely voters who find immigration important increases, the party is less likely to be ambiguous on immigration. Focusing on the highlighted parties, the PVV has, as expected, more likely voters who find immigration important and is less ambiguous than the other parties in the Netherlands.

Taken together, study 3 shows that the patterns predicted by the theory and validated by the experiments hold up outside the artificial experimental context and across all of Europe.

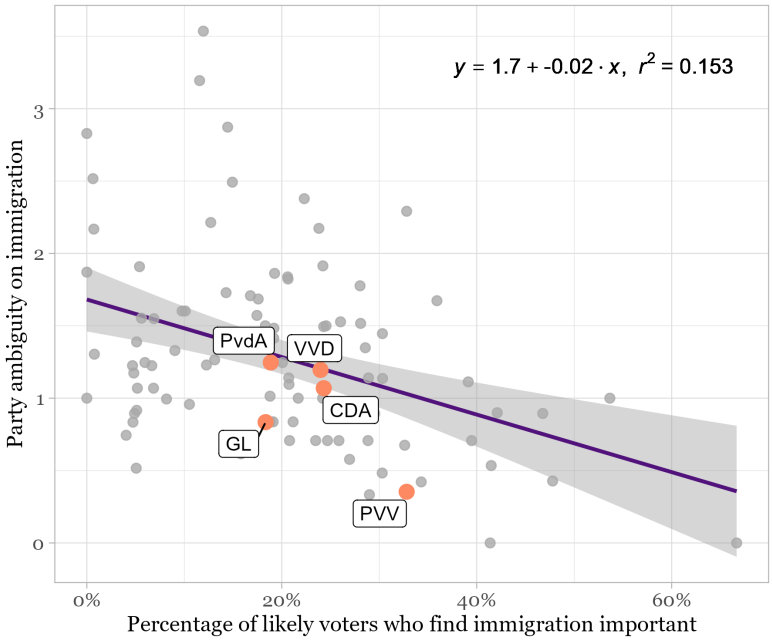
[16] The results remain significant in a regression that includes party-system (country) fixed effects.

Figure 9: Correlational results for voters



Note: Results for the voter analysis in Study 3. The figure plots the predicted positions on party thermostats based on whether the party was blurring on immigration and if respondents find immigration the most important issue. The models include individual and party-level controls, among which party and voter positions on immigration. The results thus show the effect of blurring on liking the party while holding constant positions. Lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Party and voter data are from the 2014 EES and CHES. Full regression results can be found in Table A8.

Figure 10: Correlational results for parties



Note: Results for the party analysis in Study 3. The figure plots the percentage of a party's electorate that finds immigration important (x-axis) and the party's degree of ambiguity (y-axis). Regression coefficients for the linear line are shown in the top-right corner. As a party's likely voters find an issue more important, parties are less ambiguous on that issue. Party and voter data are from the 2014 EES and CHES.

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 are determined by 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 closely to one who they agree with. With low salience, ambiguity can thus be an 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 pick a side.

There are two important limitations to this study that future work can address. First, 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 first 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 experimental work on partisan identity and ambiguity was conducted in the US,[17] the results are not discussed here because they are potentially caused by pre-treatment bias. As respondents completed the attention-intense 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. It would be interesting for future work to consider how partisanship and salience interact, and how this might differ across contexts.

The second limitation of this study is the statements that are used in study 1. By choosing real statements that politicians said in talk shows or parliament, the experiment become more externally valid. This comes, however, at the expense of internal validity: while the statements generally refer to ambiguity by means of being 'vague' (Nasr, 2022), they are real-world versions of a theoretical concept and therefore imperfect. Similar to Tomz and Van Houweling (2009), future studies could use other experimental designs to ensure internal validity when measuring whether issue salience influences what voters think of ambiguous statements.

[17] One exception is a recent study by Mohamed Nasr (2021), who finds that motivated reasoning is important in Europe too.

What can these results tell us about changes in the politics of advanced democracies over the past decades? Potential ramifications include questions about 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 (Eady & Loewen, 2021). As ambiguity and broad appeals are important strategies in forming broad catch-all coalitions of voters with diverse backgrounds and preferences, understanding when ambiguity fails explains why such coalitions are becoming rarer. This paper shows that in a political environment characterized by increasing polarization and the politicization of dividing conflicts, ambiguity stops working, making the formation of broad coalitions of voters increasingly difficult. 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). Even more so, as some have shown, politicians often do not know where their voters are positioned (Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Pereira, 2021; Sevenans, 2021). In the face of such uncertainty, politicians may decide to also be ambiguous on issues where there electorate is *united* if they wrongly assume otherwise, leading to further electoral losses. In all, the rise of radical parties and outsider candidates is thus as much a story about how mainstream parties failed to keep their coalitions together when new issues became important, 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-19 pandemic 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 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 pandemic 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 on it. And in Europe, Radical Right parties have ignored the issue or even been against climate action. If climate change becomes more important to these parties' bases, however, it may result in a split among their ranks. Ultimately, voters would punish Radical Right and Republican politicians' lack of clarity on climate change, forcing them to pick a side. As new—and old—topics rise to the top of voters' minds, parties will be forced to take a stance as these issues become too important to ignore.

7 Acknowledgments

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8 Biographical Statement

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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.[18] 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.

[18] 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

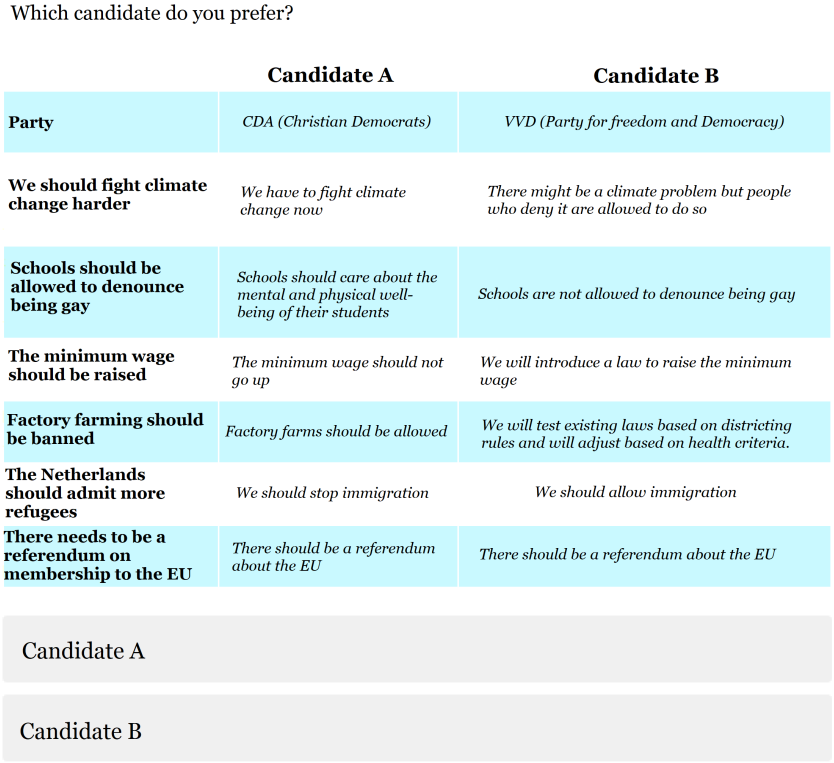


Table A1: Levels and attributes

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

A.1.2 Further explanation of the QV

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 6^2 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). After the QV exercise, respondents see the same statements and are asked what they would choose if they were forced to choose between statements.

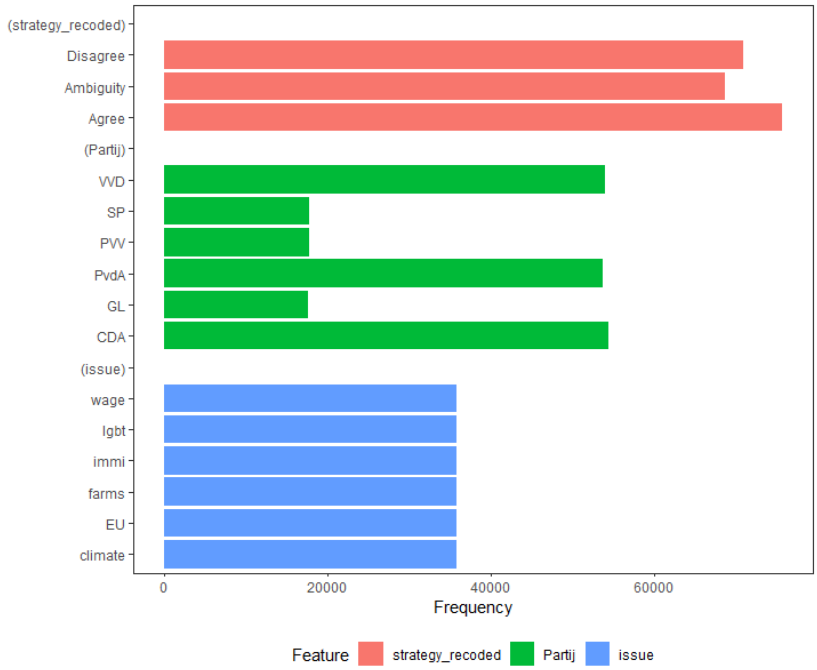
Table A2: Costs in QV voting

Votes	*Total cost*
1	1
2	4
3	9
4	16
5	25
6	36

A.1.3 Distribution of the attributes in the conjoint

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 are 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.

Figure A2: Distribution of conjoint attributes



A.2 Deviations from the Pre-Analysis-Plan in study 1

There are several small deviations from the PAP.[19] First, in the PAP I proposed to estimate a full model with a triple interaction including partisanship (Equation 1). I am instead presenting the main results using a model without partisanship because the lack of effect for partisanship may be caused by pre-treatment bias. The full model including partisanship is reported in the appendix (Section A.4). This pertains to what in the PAP is labeled as hypotheses H1 and H2.

Second, in the PAP I pre-registred four hypotheses. The first two hypotheses are not included in the paper because they are about the effects of partisanship, which I am thus not discussing in the main body of the paper because of pre-treatment bias. Interpreting the findings on partisanship nonetheless (appendix Section A.4): I reject the first hypothesis that was in the PAP ('the effectiveness of ambiguity depends on identity, such as partisanship'). The second hypothesis in the PAP ('when an issue is not important to voters, positional congruence or ambiguity does not matter much and voters decide based on partisan identity') would be accepted. I indeed find that partisan identity is more important than positional congruence at lower levels of issue salience. Hypotheses H3 and H3a in the PAP are tested

[19] The Pre-Analyis Plans for this study can be found at: https://osf.io/gq68s/registrations. Note that for Study 1 there are three PAPS pre-registered. The second one I preregistered was after the pilot, and the third one, which is the final one, corrected some small mistakes in the second PAP. Section 6.5 in the PAP discussess these differences in more detail.

in the paper but not labeled as such. To making the wording clearler, I did not use the exact same phrasing for the hypotheses in the paper (to not have to discuss linear vs non linear effects), and I instead separated out the hypotheses by the direct and indirect effect (the mechanisms). If I were to interpret the hypotheses in the PAP, I would fail to reject H3a ('At low levels of salience voters are ambivalent about candidate ambiguity, as salience increases ambiguity is first rewarded, yet when issues are highly salient voters start to penalize ambiguous candidates') and reject H3.

Third, in the PAP (section 5) I initially proposed 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 (zero to four). I made this modeling choice because it means the results are *less* sensitive to the way I code-up the three buckets. The paper thus uses a more conservative operationalization to present the results than what was pre-registered in the PAP.

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.3 Differences in subgroups stratified by issue salience in study 1

Because the salience of different issues is not randomized in study 1, 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 of the variation in issue salience thus comes from within individuals. To nonetheless ensure that the results are not driven by endogeneity, study 2 randomizes issue salience. To further test whether the results in study 1 may be caused by endogeneity, I compare whether salience levels depend on voters' 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. Note that categories six, five, and four are combined in the main body of the paper and thus also in this model. The standard errors are clustered at the individual level. The results are reported in Table A3.

The model predicts, based on a respondent's characteristics, whether the salience level a given respondents ascribes to a given issue is different from level 1. Generally, the different salience groups,

as compared to a salience of 1, are relatively balanced. Nonetheless, there are some strong outliers. For instance, among those who reported a salience level of four, as compared to one, there are relatively more younger people. For example, there are six age categories, meaning that being in salience category four as opposed to one is associated with a $exp(0.11) = 1.12$ decrease (12% 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.

While differences between the salience-levels in study 1 are small, to ensure that the effects are truly due to differences in issue salience, study 2 uses a treatment that makes people find a given issue more important.

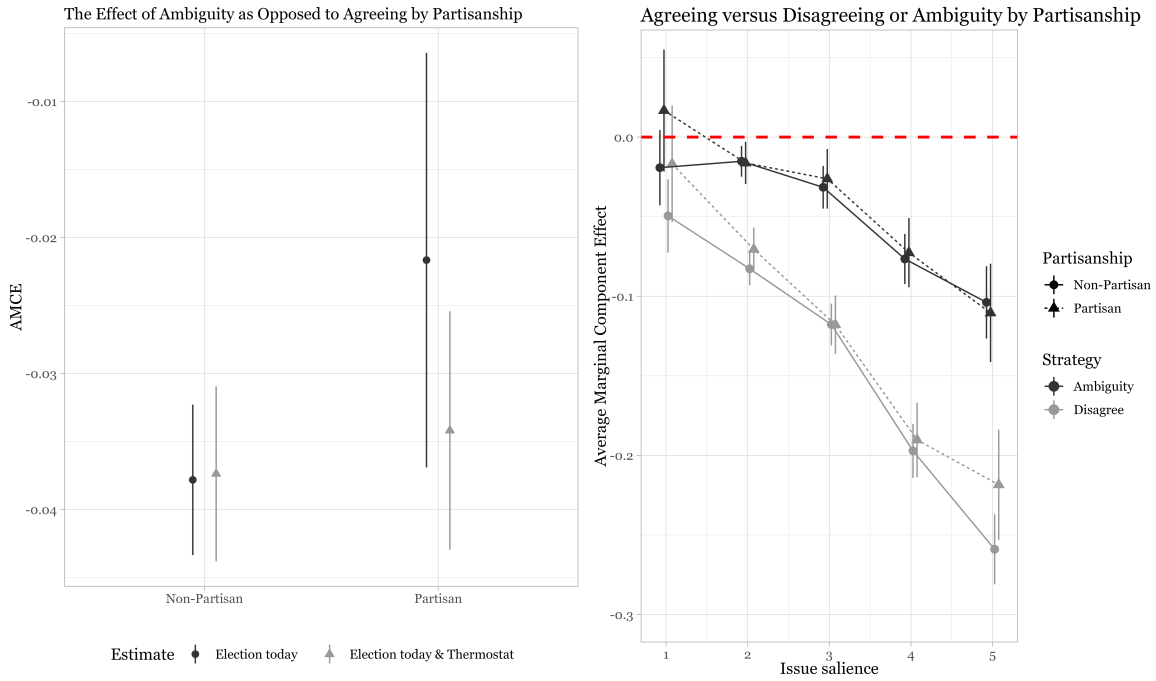
Table A3: Balance test in study 1

	Dependent variables (issue salience level 'one' is the baseline):			
Issue Salience level:	Four	Three	Two	Zero
Age	-0.110^{***}	-0.003	-0.014	-0.076^{*}
	(0.023)	(0.027)	(0.024)	(0.042)
Women	0.058	-0.170^{*}	-0.117	0.179
	(0.080)	(0.093)	(0.081)	(0.148)
Education	0.008	0.063^{***}	0.036^{**}	0.031
	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.027)
Income	0.053^{***}	0.011	0.023	0.018
	(0.016)	(0.019)	(0.017)	(0.032)
Interest	0.041	0.016	-0.025	-0.086
	(0.055)	(0.058)	(0.053)	(0.097)
Left-Right	-0.028	-0.055^{***}	-0.043^{**}	-0.032
	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.016)	(0.031)
Risks	-0.030	-0.064	-0.065	-0.042
	(0.044)	(0.047)	(0.042)	(0.079)
Constant	-1.620^{***}	-0.839^{**}	-0.261	-1.673^{***}
	(0.265)	(0.294)	(0.250)	(0.487)
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

A.4 Do the effects in study 1 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: a variable that codes a respondent as a partisan if the 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. In addition, 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.

However, the specific nature of the experiment with the QV—a time and attention intensive task—coming before the conjoint may mean that these results are caused by pre-treatment bias. As such, I decided to only report these results in the appendix and not in the main body of the paper.

A.5 Alternative explanation for the results found in study 1

An alternative explanation for the results found in Study 1 may be that voters who hold more salient opinions have more ideological room to place ambiguous candidates further away from themselves. This is the case because issue salience correlates with positional extremity. Differently put, if issue salience strongly correlates with positional extremity, then voters have more 'projection space' on salient issues (which allows them to place candidates further away from them). This way of reasoning does *not* explain the results found in Study 1, however: This argument implies that at lower levels of issue salience voters already notices differences between ambiguous candidates and those that agree with them, and that these differences grow linearly as issues become important (we'd expect this to be linear because the projection space grows linearly). What I find, however, is that there are no significant differences between ambiguous and agreeing candidates at lower levels of issue salience and that these differences do not grow linearly as issues become more important (see Figure 2). To illustrate this point, consider the alternative 'null effect': as shown in Figure 2, at 0 salience the difference between ambiguity and agreeing is 0.02 (insignificant), and a party can maximally be 4 'steps' away (because -4 and 4 are the maximum in the QVSR scale used in this model—note that the model uses the absolute values). At salience 4, by contrast, a party can be

8 steps away (from +4 to -4), meaning that the projection space is twice as large. If this alternative line of reasoning is true, then we would thus expect a difference between agreeing and ambiguity at salience 4 of 0.02 (the initial effect) X 2 (the twice as large projection space) = 0.04. Taking a difference of 0.04 as an alternative null effect, the observed difference of 0.11 at salience 4 is still statistically significantly different from 0.04. The increased projection space on more salient issues thus does not explain the results found in Study 1.

A.6 Further results for study 2

Table A4 presents the main results from Figure 7. Tables A5 and A7 present the results from Figure 8. All models were pre-registered. Table A7 additionally shows the individual items for the agreeing and ambiguity party on the questions that ask whether people think the 'party has their position' and if they 'like the statement by the party'. These models indicate that the differences between the parties are driven by the fact that people both dislike the ambiguous party more and appreciate the agreeing party more (at the 10% significance level).

Moroever, in Table A6, I present the results of the model that tests whether treated voters are more likely to say that the clear party as compared to the ambiguous party has their position, next to the same model that includes a control for whether people changed their position on the issue of data centers. Whether people change their position is measured using a 0-100 agree vs disagree scale that asks whether they think 'more data centers should be build'. This is an important test because voters who find an issue more important tend to take more distinct positions on it and therefore have more potential space available to place a party away from themselves. The tests illustrates that controlling for changes in position does not change the sign of the found effects. Without controls the results are significant at the 10% significance level (P=0.062), and with controls they become insignificant (P=0.103) due to a loss in power caused by an implementation error where not all respondents saw this question.

Table A4: Effect of salience treatment on ability to distinguish between parties

	Choosing the agreeing party	Difference between parties
Treated	0.073**	5.563**
	(0.036)	(2.398)
Position Disagree	0.155***	20.107***
	(0.041)	(2.686)
Female	−0.111***	−8.281***
	(0.036)	(2.404)
Education	−0.003	−0.101
	(0.007)	(0.480)
Intercept	0.555***	4.765
	(0.063)	(4.137)
R^2	0.038	0.094
Adj. R^2	0.033	0.089
Num. obs.	728	728

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$. The first model uses as outcome whether people choose the party that agrees with them (1 versus 0). The second model uses as outcome the difference between the party that agrees with a respondent and the party that is ambiguous on a composite scale that is composed of two continuous items (from 0 to 100). The composite ranges from -100 (completely preferring the ambiguous party) to 100 (completely preferring the agreeing party). Models are estimated through OLS

Table A5: Effect of salience treatment on importance of the issue

	Composite	Important subject	Personal importance	More important than before
Treated	3.674***	4.145**	3.428*	3.449**
	(1.330)	(1.644)	(1.915)	(1.729)
Position Disagree	−14.613***	−1.652	−17.874***	−24.311***
	(1.490)	(1.841)	(2.144)	(1.937)
Female	−2.775**	−3.538**	−1.802	−2.986*
	(1.334)	(1.647)	(1.919)	(1.733)
Education	0.116	−0.063	0.662*	−0.250
	(0.266)	(0.329)	(0.383)	(0.346)
Intercept	50.867***	58.925***	43.144***	50.532***
	(2.295)	(2.835)	(3.303)	(2.983)
R^2	0.128	0.016	0.095	0.184
Adj. R^2	0.124	0.010	0.090	0.180
Num. obs.	728	728	728	728

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$. The first model uses as outcome a composite of the other three importance scales. All outcomes range from 0 to 100. Models are estimated through OLS

Table A6: Effect of salience treatment on thinking the party has your position

	No position controls	Position controls
Treated	5.625*	5.956
	(3.007)	(3.649)
Position Disagree	25.741***	35.736***
	(3.368)	(5.368)
Female	−8.700***	−6.714*
	(3.014)	(3.661)
Education	−0.106	0.016
	(0.602)	(0.738)
Position		0.299***
		(0.095)
Intercept	5.733	−11.630
	(5.188)	(8.214)
R^2	0.090	0.102
Adj. R^2	0.085	0.093
Num. obs.	728	519

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$. Both models use as outcome the difference between the party that agrees with a respondent and the party that is ambiguous on a question that asks if people think the party has their position (from 0 to 100). The difference scale ranges from -100 (completely thinking the ambiguous party has your position) to 100 (completely thinking the agreeing party has your position). 'Position' is measured using a 0-100 agree vs disagree scale that asks people if they think more data centers should be build. Models are estimated through OLS

Table A7: Effect of salience treatment on ability to distinguish between parties

	Diff in position	Position Agree Party	Position Ambiguity Party	Diff in liking	Like agree statement	Like ambiguity statement
Treated	5.625*	3.468*	−2.156	6.547**	3.210*	−3.337*
	(3.007)	(1.837)	(1.980)	(2.884)	(1.790)	(1.920)
Position Disagree	25.741***	10.597***	−15.144***	26.714***	9.531***	−17.183***
	(3.368)	(2.057)	(2.218)	(3.230)	(2.004)	(2.150)
Female	−8.700***	−6.017***	2.684	−8.907***	−5.762***	3.145
	(3.014)	(1.841)	(1.985)	(2.891)	(1.794)	(1.924)
Education	−0.106	−0.282	−0.176	−0.139	−0.394	−0.255
	(0.602)	(0.368)	(0.396)	(0.577)	(0.358)	(0.384)
Intercept	5.733	58.442***	52.708***	3.450	59.593***	56.143***
	(5.188)	(3.169)	(3.416)	(4.976)	(3.087)	(3.311)
R^2	0.090	0.055	0.065	0.105	0.050	0.089
Adj. R^2	0.085	0.050	0.060	0.100	0.045	0.084
Num. obs.	728	728	728	728	728	728

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$. The difference models use as outcome whether people differentiate between the party that agrees with them and the party that is ambiguous on a question that asks 'does the party have your position' and whether respondents 'like the statement by the party'. Both are composite scales that are composed of two continuous items (from 0 to 100). The composites range from -100 (completely preferring the ambiguous party) to 100 (completely preferring the agreeing party). The other models focus directly on these questions for each party. Models are estimated through OLS

A.7 Further details on study 3

The full regression results for Figure 9 can be found in Table A8. The Table shows that plot with the linear interactions, which is what the figure is based on, as well as a version where the party blurring variable is binned up into equally-sized quartiles. This shows that there is common support and that differences between the first quartile of the blurring variable and the other quartiles mainly drive the effects. The analysis excludes Eastern-European countries. Respondents are coded as finding the economy important if they indicate that they are worried about immigration, both for cultural reasons and labor migration. What voters think about parties is captured using a standard battery of 0-10 thermostat scales.

A.8 Results for the second experiment in study 2

As part of study 2, I pre-registered and ran a second new experiment as well. Respondents in this experiment were asked what they thought the effect is of raising the minimum on the number of children that lives in poverty in the Netherlands. Respondents in the treatment condition were then given the right answer (their priors were 'updated'), and those in the control condition were simply shown their own answers again. The results of this experiment can be found in Table A9. The experiment failed to find any significant effects. Manipulation checks indicate that this is the case because the updating treatment did not make the issue more important to people (the last three columns). While there is a strongly significant effect on updating (knowing the right statistic), there are no effects on issue importance, nor are treated people better at choosing the agreeing party or distinguish differently between parties (the first two columns). I suspect that this experiment failed due to ceiling effects. As the QV in study 1 indicates, the minimum wage is already a very important topic in the Netherlands, and it is thus very hard for a treatment to make it even more important.

Table A8: Effect of blurring and issue importance on liking parties

	DV: Party thermostat	
	Linear interaction	Binned interaction
Immigration MII	0.234**	0.310***
	(0.086)	(0.069)
Party immi ambiguity	0.005	
	(0.033)	
Immigration attitude	0.019***	0.019***
	(0.005)	(0.005)
Party position	−0.116***	−0.111***
	(0.007)	(0.007)
Female	0.042	0.042
	(0.029)	(0.029)
Left school at 16-19	0.225***	0.226***
	(0.047)	(0.046)
Left school at 20+	0.343***	0.345***
	(0.048)	(0.047)
Still in school	0.532***	0.535***
	(0.083)	(0.083)
No education	−0.072	−0.074
	(0.145)	(0.145)
Urban (1-3)	0.040*	0.040*
	(0.020)	(0.020)
Easy paying bills (1-3)	0.027	0.026
	(0.028)	(0.028)
Immi MII X Party immi ambiguity	−0.199**	
	(0.065)	
Party immi ambiguity Q2		0.129**
		(0.047)
Party immi ambiguity Q3		0.758***
		(0.050)
Party immi ambiguity Q4		−0.182**
		(0.059)
Immi MII X Party immi ambiguity Q2		−0.593***
		(0.098)
Immi MII X Party immi ambiguity Q3		−0.412***
		(0.105)
Immi MII X Party immi ambiguity Q4		−0.325**
		(0.118)
Intercept	4.728***	
	(0.133)	
R^2	0.023	0.032
Adj. R^2	0.022	0.031
Num. obs.	55228	55228
RMSE	3.418	3.402
N Clusters	8031	8031

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Models are estimated through OLS with SEs clustered at the individual level and including country FEs. The baseline for education is leaving education at age 15. The baseline for the party ambiguity variable is the first quartile of the variable.

Table A9: Effects of the alternative updating salience treatment

	Choosing P	Diff between P	Updating	Imp subject	More Imp	Imp comp
Treated	0.022	−0.687	−3996.660***	1.507	3.162	2.335
	(0.033)	(2.588)	(1013.425)	(1.324)	(1.836)	(1.338)
Female	0.015	0.668	1532.397	3.048*	2.919	2.984*
	(0.033)	(2.594)	(1015.830)	(1.327)	(1.841)	(1.342)
Education	−0.010	−0.808	−350.085	−0.436	−1.106**	−0.771**
	(0.007)	(0.518)	(202.811)	(0.265)	(0.368)	(0.268)
Intercept	0.773***	23.302***	172.680	78.079***	69.552***	73.816***
	(0.056)	(4.348)	(1702.822)	(2.225)	(3.086)	(2.249)
R^2	0.004	0.004	0.028	0.013	0.020	0.022
Adj. R^2	−0.000	−0.001	0.024	0.009	0.016	0.018
Num. obs.	728	728	728	728	728	728

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Choose P is the binary outcome capturing whether people prefer the clear party. Diff between P captures the difference between both parties on the composite variables. Updating captures whether people update their priors after the treatment. The first two importance questions capture the individual scales and the final question is the composite of both. Models are estimated through OLS

A.9 Questionnaire for study 1

A.9.1 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.9.2 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? (11-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.9.3 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.9.4 Conjoint

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

A.10 All Conjoint attributes and levels

All statements from hypothetical politicians are real and from Dutch politicians who have used them in parliament or on TV. The policy statements come from Voting Advice Applications. All are minimally edited. Using real statements ensures that the experiment has a certain degree of external validity. The restricted randomization ensures that the non-mainstream parties (GL, PVV, and SP) never take positions on their core issue that they would not normally take.

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.'

A.11 Questionnaire for study 2

A.11.1 Treatments:

- In favor: "*The issue of building new datacenters is very important for you. Experts predicted that it may create new jobs. Datacenters can also attract new companies and industries. It is a top priority on the political agenda in The Hague.*"
- Against: "*The issue of building new datacenters is very important for you. Experts predicted that datacenters may cause an increase in enegery prices. They are also bad for the climate and ugly. It is a top priority on the political agenda in The Hague.*"

A.11.2 Party statements:

- Vague: "*In the Hague, people discuss building more datacenters. We need better research on the impact of centers. We think we need to test the planological rules for building more centers.*"
- Agree for pro datacenters: "*Building datacenters is being discussed in The Hague. We need better research into the effects of datacenters. We think we should continue building more.*"
- Agree for against datacenters: "*Building datacenters is being discussed in The Hague. We need better research into the effects of datacenters. We think we should stop building more.*"

A.11.3 Outcomes:

- *Do you prefer party A or B?.* This is the main outcome in the experiment.
- *How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements what party A/B said?* [From 0 disagree completely to 100 agree completely] Note that the questions below will thus be asked for both party A and B. The order in which is randomized.
    1. *I would vote for the party*
    2. *It seems like a good party*
    3. *The party has the same opinion as I do*
    4. *I like the statement from the party*
    5. *I think the party is **un**clear*

- *How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?* [From 0 disagree completely to 100 agree completely]
  - *Building datacenters is an important political topic*
  - *Building datacenters will influence employment*
  - *Building datacenters will influence energy prices*
  - *Building datacenters can be important for me personally*
  - *I know what the impact of building datacenters will be*