



CERGU'S WORKING PAPER SERIES 2017:2



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN RESEARCH

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October 2017

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Party Responsiveness to Public Opinion in New European Democracies

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Abstract

Understanding whether and how political parties respond to the ideological preferences of the public is essential for the study of democratic representation. Research from Western Europe suggests that parties follow shifts in either the mean voter position or the mean position of party supporters. Combining CHES data on parties' policy positions and ESS data on voters' positions between 2002-2014, we extend these arguments to Eastern Europe. We find no evidence that parties follow shifts in the mean voter position, mean independent voter position, or the mean party voter position. Instead, parties follow changes in the mean partisan supporter position, particularly parties in which actors other than the national leadership are involved in setting the party's electoral strategy and policy. Our finding, that CEE parties respond to preference shifts of their core constituencies as measured by partisanship rather than recalled vote, is important for understanding representational processes in these newer democracies.

Introduction

Understanding whether and how political parties respond to the ideological preferences of the public is essential for the study of democratic representation. Recent empirical research has suggested that party responsiveness in Western Europe works in two ways: either parties respond to shifts in the positions of the mean voter or the average party voter (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow et al., 2011). Evidence suggests that the former mode of representation is a characteristic of mainstream and/or leadership-dominated parties while the latter is a feature of niche and/or activist-dominated parties (Ezrow et al., 2011; Schumacher, de Vries and Vis, 2013).

The applicability of these models outside the established democracies in Western Europe is unknown. The present study addresses this gap in the research by providing analyses of party responsiveness in 10 Central and Eastern European (CEE) democracies on the left-right dimension over a substantial span of time (2002-2014). In addition to providing an analysis of party responsiveness to the mean voter in the whole electorate and the mean party voter, we also build on a recent cross-continental study of party representation by Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012) to examine how parties respond to changes in the preferences of their self-reported partisans and those of self-reported independents or non-partisans. Our empirical approach combines Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) on parties' positions (Bakker et al., 2015; Polk et al., 2017) with data on the public's preferences from the European Social Survey (ESS) over several waves of each survey.

Although parties' programmatic linkages in post-communist democracies are increasingly subject to thorough investigation (e.g. Kitschelt et al. 1999; Roberts 2010; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012; Ezrow, Homola and Tavits 2014), to the best of our knowledge we provide the first systematic cross-national comparison of how parties respond to shifts of the public's preferences on the left-right dimension over an extended period of time. In contrast to the heterogeneity of Western European parties' strategies in responding to public opinion shifts, we find that CEE parties only respond to shifts in the preferences of their partisan

supporters. Such responsiveness is especially characteristic of parties in which the influence of the national party leadership in setting party policy is constrained by other intra-party actors. Shifts in the preferences of the mean voter position, mean independent voter position, or the mean party voter do not affect party policy change in CEE countries.

These findings make an important contribution to the debate on party democracy in post-communist democracies. On the one hand, high levels of electoral volatility and electoral success of new parties (Powell and Tucker, 2014; Tavits, 2008), the prevalence of anti-establishment parties with vague programmatic appeals (Pop-Eleches, 2010; Hanley and Sikk, 2016) and multiple splits, electoral coalitions and mergers of political parties (Ibenskas, 2016; Marinova, 2016; Ibenskas and Sikk, 2017) provide indirect indications that parties' responsiveness to public opinion is weak. On the other hand, "programmaticness" of party politics in the region is suggested by the stability of the structures of competition (Rovny and Polk, 2017) and relatively high congruence between parties' and their supporters' ideological positions (Kitschelt et al., 1999; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012). Our findings relate to both views in the literature. More specifically, leadership-dominated parties in the region respond neither to their supporters nor the broader electorate, which may account for the persistent levels of electoral and party instability outlined in the former body of literature. However, we also provide empirical evidence that CEE parties in which decision-making is diffused more broadly throughout the party are responsive to their supporters in line with the approach that emphasises programmatic party competition in the region.

With regard to the broader debate on party representation and party spatial competition, our research stresses the importance of complementing existing analyses of party responsiveness that are based on party manifesto data with examinations of party responsiveness that employ expert surveys on parties' positions. Evidence presented here also qualifies the emerging consensus that, depending on party organisation, goals or the broadness of ideological appeal, parties respond to either the general electorate or their voters (Ezrow et al., 2011; Lehrer, 2012; Schumacher, de Vries and Vis, 2013; Bischof and Wagner, 2017), by suggesting

additional factors that influence the level and type of party responsiveness. In particular, our findings emphasise the importance of differentiating between independents and partisans in Central and Eastern Europe, as advocated by Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012), rather than focusing on the mean position of all voters as opposed to party voters, which is more common in studies of party responsiveness in Western Europe. And although we report responsiveness to shifts in the position of the mean partisan supporter rather than the mean party voter, our findings are similar to those of Schumacher, de Vries and Vis (2013) in that less leadership-dominated parties are more responsive to core electoral constituencies rather than changes in the broader electorate.

Theoretical expectations

Mean voter and mean party voter. The empirical literature on the effect of public opinion on party policy shifts in Western Europe suggests two types of party responsiveness.¹

First, parties respond to shifts in the centre of the distribution of the whole electorate’s policy preferences.² This hypothesis is derived from a set of multiparty spatial models that assume vote-seeking parties and probabilistic voting behaviour (Lin, Enelow and Dorussen, 1999) as well as a multiparty policy-seeking model by Adams and Merrill (2009).³ Additionally, office-seeking parties (Strøm and Müller, 1999) have incentives to be responsive to shifts in the position of the median or average voter in order to be sufficiently moderate for consideration in the formation of government coalitions (Ezrow, 2008; Lehrer, 2012).⁴

¹The opposite direction of causal relationship - voters taking cues from parties’ positions - is of course important to consider. However, research on Western Europe provides weak evidence that parties can shift voter preferences on left-right issues (see Adams 2012, 405). Further, Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) and Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu (2014) also present evidence of a substantial lag between party shifts and voters perceptions of these changes, which further speaks against cue-taking in the circumstances examined in this paper. Finally, the relatively low party durability and organisational strength in post-communist democracies suggests additional priors against the cue-taking perspective in CEE.

²In the subsequent theoretical and empirical analyses, in line with most empirical literature on the effect of public opinion on party policy (Adams et al., 2004, 2006; Ezrow et al., 2011; Schumacher, de Vries and Vis, 2013), we use *mean* as a statistic of the central point in voter distribution.

³Adams (2012) provides an extensive review of this research.

⁴While most of these studies examine parties’ responses to all shifts of the mean voter, Adams et al. 2004 suggest that parties may respond only to “harmful” shifts, i.e. moving of the mean voter away from its

However, Adams et al. (2006) and Ezrow et al. (2011) find that only mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties respond to shifts in the mean voter position. In contrast, niche green, communist and radical right parties are more responsive to shifts in the preferences of their supporters. Responsiveness to the mean party supporter is derived from the partisan constituency model that emphasises historical linkages between parties and their electoral constituencies (Dalton, 1985; Wessels, 1999).

While we recognise (as discussed later in this section) that individual parties may respond to public opinion shifts differently, we also consider the possibility that the distinction between mainstream and niche parties developed in the Western European context may be less applicable to CEE parties. Thus, we start with the expectation that one or both of these types of responsiveness may be characteristic of all parties in CEE democracies.

Mean Voter Hypothesis: Parties change their positions in line with the shifts in the mean voter position.

Party Voter Hypothesis: Parties change their positions in line with the shifts in the mean party voter position.

Mean partisan and mean independent voter. In their study of party congruence, Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012) argue that parties face a “representational strain” by trying to appeal to predominantly centrist independents (this includes both self-identified independents that still voted for the party and other independents that may have voted for other parties) while having to sustain the support of their partisan base. Moreover, parties are unlikely to appeal to the partisans of other parties. The representational strain is a challenge to parties both in Western Europe, where dealignment has been on-going for the last few decades, and in CEE democracies, where, despite high electoral volatility, some voter groups formed stable attachments to parties (Dalton and Weldon, 2007). Indeed, in both

position (see also Meyer 2013, 90). In contrast to benign shifts, harmful shifts are more threatening to the party in terms of its electoral support and access to office. We present additional analyses in Appendix 4 that differentiate between beneficial and harmful shifts in public opinion. These analyses lead to substantively similar results to those presented below.

regions the shares of partisan and independent voters are roughly equal (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012, 29). This argument implies that, instead of following the shifts in the mean position of *all* voters, parties will respond to changes in the mean position of *independent voters*. Furthermore, parties are expected to be responsive to their partisan supporters rather than all party voters. This tension between the desire to be responsive to both independent and partisan constituencies generates the representational strain for parties in Rohrschneider and Whitefield’s argument, and lead to our next set of expectations.

Mean Independent Voter Hypothesis: Parties change their positions in line with shifts in the mean independent voter position.

Partisan Supporter Hypothesis: Parties change their positions in line with shifts in the mean partisan supporter position.

Niche qualities and CEE parties. The distinction between niche and mainstream parties is less straightforward in Central and Eastern Europe where green and partially communist parties are weaker while ethnic as well as predominantly confessional Christian Democratic parties could reasonably be classified as niche parties. Yet, we also anticipate that several of the qualities often attributed to niche or challenger parties in Western European party systems are readily found in many CEE parties and potentially condition party responsiveness in important ways. Bischof and Wagner (2017) summarize three reasons why mainstream and niche parties respond differently to shifts in public opinion. First, potential electoral and office gains from following shifts in the mean voter position are less attractive to parties that prioritise policy goals, such as most niche parties. Second, the internal party balance of power affects the type of party responsiveness (Lehrer, 2012; Schumacher, de Vries and Vis, 2013). In leadership-dominated parties office-seeking leaders set policy positions in response to the general electorate in order to increase their chances of obtaining political office. However, if party policy change requires the approval of policy-seeking activists, the latter are more likely to respond to party supporters. Third, parties with narrow issue

appeals, like niche parties, are also unlikely to respond to changes in public opinion on the broader left-right dimension, instead focusing on their core issues (Bischof and Wagner, 2017, 2).

CEE parties are generally considered to be less policy-seeking and more flexible in their policy positions than their Western European counterparts (Dalton and McAllister, 2015; Kselman, Powell and Tucker, 2016), which makes the first of these three distinctions less applicable to the region. But we follow the Bischof and Wagner (2017) argument in expecting that internal party balance of power and narrow issue appeals will condition responsiveness. The importance of internal power balance is most readily transferrable to the CEE context where average levels of internal party democracy and its variation across individual parties are only moderately lower than in Western Europe, according to a recent systematic comparison that included three countries in the region (Poguntke et al., 2016). Party organisation has been shown to provide important electoral benefits to the parties in the region (Tavits, 2012, 2013), and effective local branches are better at communicating with and mobilizing voters (Tavits, 2011). Our expectation is that parties with more decentralised decision making are likely to have more robust sub-national units which better convey the preferences of individuals active in the party locally and thus increase party responsiveness to supporters. Conversely, Schumacher, de Vries and Vis (2013) suggest that leadership-dominated parties should be more responsive to shifts in the general electorate or among independents.

Decentralised Leadership Hypothesis: Parties in which sub-national actors are involved in setting the electoral strategy will change their positions in line with shifts in the mean party voter or mean partisan supporter position.⁵

Centralised Leadership Hypothesis: Parties in which national party leaders set the electoral strategy will change their positions in line with shifts in the mean voter or mean independent voter position.

⁵We state this and the next hypothesis neutrally with respect to responsiveness to changes in the mean position of the party voter or the party partisan in order to cut down on the number of hypotheses, but differentiate between the two measures empirically in the analysis that follows.

We also anticipate that the breadth of a party’s issue appeals could impact its responsiveness to changes in public opinion. From a number of available options (Meguid, 2005; Wagner, 2012; Bischof and Wagner, 2017), we follow Meyer and Miller (2015, 261) when defining ideological “nichness as the emphasis by the party of the policy areas neglected by its competitors”. This definition does not necessarily consider the issues related to the economic dimension as the core or traditional issues of party competition, which makes the definition more broadly applicable to the CEE context, where the economic left-right dimension has not always been the main dimension of party competition (Kitschelt et al., 1999; Rovny, 2014). However, working from the understanding that the general left-right dimension frequently is an important dimension of competition in many CEE democracies in recent years, we expect that narrower issue appeals will be associated with less responsiveness on the left-right dimension, irrespective of the particular electoral constituency. If, for example, an ethnic party is quite narrow in its appeal, focusing primarily on questions related to national identity and related issues, we would not expect this party to be especially sensitive to shifts in voter preferences on the general left-right dimension of politics, because the core of the party’s ideology is much more specific than the bundle of issues that makes up the general left-right dimension. We suggest that national identity and other narrower issues could be related to the broader left-right dimension in some of these countries, but because this dimension also includes other issues, a party with narrow appeals will be less likely to respond to the change in voters’ preferences on the general left-right dimension.

Issue Appeal Hypothesis: Parties with broad issue appeals will change their general left-right positions in line with shifts in the general left-right preferences of their supporters, whereas parties with narrow issue appeals will not be responsive to shifts in left-right public opinion.

Empirical strategy

To test our expectations, we build a dataset that covers 10 Central and Eastern European democracies (all EU member states in the region except Croatia) in the period between 2002 and 2014. By excluding the years before 2002, we largely avoid the contamination of our results by the specific context of the transition to market economy, consolidation of liberal democracy and EU accession process that characterised the rather chaotic decade of the 1990s in the region. Indeed, by the early 2000s, parties and party systems in all 10 countries were substantially more similar to those in Western Europe than in the early 1990s (Bakke, 2010).

Measuring parties' policy positions

To measure political parties' ideology, we rely on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al., 2015; Polk et al., 2017). The survey is a well-established database that provides information on parties' ideology and policy based on the responses of political scientists specialising in political parties and European integration. For post-communist democracies, party ideology data is available from the survey waves conducted in 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2014. The estimates of the expert survey have been cross-validated with other sources of information on parties' policy positions (Bakker et al., 2015; Hooghe et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2007). In comparison to the Manifesto Project Database (Klingemann et al., 2006) that has been more widely used for studying shifts in parties' policy (e.g. Adams et al. 2006), in the context of CEE countries the CHES data provides several distinct advantages. Parties' manifestoes may be a less reliable data source on parties' policy in these countries (Däubler and Benoit, 2015, 18), potentially due to the lower levels of programmatic competition or organisational capacity of parties. The RILE scale of parties' left-right positions derived from the Manifesto Project Database (MARPOR) is also less applicable to post-communist democracies (Mölder, 2016) due to its different content in the region (Benoit and Laver, 2006, 202). The longer time coverage of MARPOR, which is a major advantage of this dataset

over CHES in Western Europe, is also largely absent in CEE countries due to their shorter democratic experience. Even if MARPOR covers all elections after 1989 in these countries, as mentioned above the specific context of the 1990s makes this less useful. The CHES data are also more inclusive than MARPOR with regard to the minimum electoral support of parties (3 percent of the vote in CHES vs. parliamentary party status in MARPOR). This is particularly important given that a party has to be included in the dataset for two consecutive elections in order to be considered in the analysis. This can lead to the exclusion of many parties when restrictive selection criteria are applied. Last but not least, CHES also provides a good fit with the European Social Survey that is the main source on the public's ideology in this study, as explained below in this section.

For the purposes of this paper, we use the question in CHES in which experts are asked to place parties on the left-right dimension in terms of their overall ideological stances. The question uses a 11-item scale in which 0 and 10 represent the most leftist and rightist positions, respectively. There are different opinions on the extent to which a single dimension of party competition summarises the most important divisions between CEE parties (Bakker, Jolly and Polk, 2012; Benoit and Laver, 2006; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012). Nevertheless, the general left-right dimension of party competition has been used fairly extensively in the research on electoral politics, government coalition formation and representation in post-communist democracies (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2011; Dalton and McAllister, 2015; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Savage, 2016). The case for examining the general left-right dimension is further bolstered by our use of expert survey data. We do not have to ascribe a fixed meaning to the left-right dimension, as would be the case if we used, for example, the RILE scale from the Manifesto Project Database. The results of our statistical analyses (that include country-level fixed effects) are therefore less likely to be affected by differences in the meaning of the left-right dimension across countries.⁶

⁶The meaning of the left-right dimension can also change within a single country across multiple periods. However, it is more likely that any such significant changes occurred in the period prior to the one analysed here. Indeed, Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2009, 686-687) report that “the structure of party positions ... remains highly stable and unidimensional” in the 13 post-communist democracies in the period between

To construct our dependent variable, we first identify the parties in the 2002, 2006 and 2010 waves that were also included in, respectively, the 2006, 2010 and 2014 waves. If a party merged with another party between the years when two consecutive waves were conducted, we compare the left-right positions of each of the constituent parties in the beginning of the period considered with the position of the merged party at the end of this period. We then compute the change in the party’s policy as the difference between its left-right positions in two consecutive waves. The average observed change is 0.58 points, thus representing almost 6% of the range of the left-right scale.

Measuring the public’s preferences

In comparison to Western European democracies, election surveys are fairly rare in Central and Eastern Europe and, when they exist, do not always match the timing of CHES survey. The European Social Survey (ESS) is therefore our main data source on the public’s policy preferences (*European Social Survey*, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014). The survey has been conducted every two years in the period between 2002 and 2014, thus providing a good fit with the CHES data. All waves included a question in which respondents were asked to place themselves on the left-right scale ranging from 0 (representing the most leftist position) and 10 (the most rightist position). The second and third waves of the survey have been used previously in combination with experts’ estimates of parties’ positions to measure the congruence between parties and voters in the CEE context (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012). Out of 39 country-wave dyads (all countries were included in the CHES survey four times with the exception of Estonia which was not in the 2002 survey), we were able to match the year of the survey and public opinion perfectly in 26 cases. Since some countries were not included in all ESS waves, for 7 other observations we used ESS data from two years before or after the year for which the ESS data was available. The remaining

2003 and 2007 (although there was more instability with regard to issue salience). Similarly, Rovny and Polk (2017, 8) note that “the political spaces of party competition in the region - both from the perspective of experts and voters - are defined and stable”. Appendix 2 presents additional evidence that changes in the meaning of the left-right dimension are at best likely to have only a moderate effect on our results.

country-wave dyads were excluded from analysis.⁷

Four key explanatory variables were constructed based on this survey data. The first one is the change in the mean voter position between two CHES waves. The second variable captures the change in the mean party voter position based on reported vote choice in the last national election. Third, we also measure the change in the mean partisan supporter position. Voter partisanship is determined based on the ESS question that asks respondents to indicate the party they feel closer to than all other parties. We do not differentiate between strong and weak partisans since, as Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012, 114) report, the main dividing line in the patterns of representation is between all partisans on the one hand and independents on the other.⁸ The fourth variable captures the change in the mean position of all independent supporters regardless of the party they voted for in the last general election. After excluding some parties that were not included in the surveys (for example, due to party change or small party size), we are left with 109 observations that cover 59 parties.

Other independent variables

We follow Schumacher, de Vries and Vis (2013) in using expert survey data for measuring internal power balance. However, instead of using Laver and Hunt (1992) that covers few of the parties included in the CHES dataset, our indicator comes from the expert survey conducted as part of the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project (*Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project*, 2014). This survey was conducted in 2008-2009, thus falling in the middle of the time period for our analysis. The survey includes a question on the actors that are most influential in setting party's electoral strategy including its

⁷These are Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania in the 2002-2006 period and Latvia and Romania in the 2010-2014 period.

⁸Focusing on partisan supporters as opposed to all party voters is not only justifiable for the theoretical reasons outlined in the previous section, but it also reduces the possibility that observed shifts in the average voter position are a result of voters adjusting their party allegiances after shifts in parties' positions instead of voters actually changing their positions. Differentiating between the two processes would require panel survey data (Ezrow et al., 2011, 281), which is not available for most countries and time periods analysed here.

campaign platform.⁹ The variable takes values between 1 and 4, where 1 stands for the electoral strategy being set by local or state level organisations and 4 represents the situation where electoral strategy is set by national party leaders. The intermediate values of the scale refer to the electoral strategy being set by regional or state-level organisations (value of 2) or through the process of bargaining between different levels of party organisation (3). Although this is an ordinal variable, the DALP dataset reports the continuous variable of average placements of parties by experts on the scale between 1 and 4.

As mentioned in the theoretical section, we follow Meyer and Miller (2015) when identifying ideological nicheness. The first step in computing this measure is obtaining the sum of the squared differences between the emphasis of the party on each policy dimension and the average emphasis on these dimensions by all other parties and dividing this sum by the number of dimensions.¹⁰ This gives the ideological nicheness of a party in a given party system. This measure is then standardised by subtracting from it the average nicheness (weighted by party vote share) of all other parties. Higher scores thus indicate higher ideological nicheness.

Our analysis also controls for the effect of party splits, mergers and electoral coalitions. These party transformations are common in CEE countries. They may lead to shifts in a party’s policy position if, for example, a substantial faction with different ideological preferences than those of the rest of the party leaves or if a party joins an electoral alliance or merges with another party that represents a different ideology. To account for these changes, we identified major splits (characterised by at least 10 percent of party’s legislative delegation joining the splinter party), mergers and electoral coalitions based on Ibenskas and Sikk (2017). We then constructed two dichotomous variables based on whether a party transformation should lead to a leftist or rightist change in its position. Thus, leftist changes are

⁹The exact question is: “which of the following options best characterises the process by which the following parties decide on electoral strategy, for example campaign platforms and slogans, coalition strategies, and campaign resource allocations?”

¹⁰The average is weighted by parties’ vote share. We use all substantive policy issues included in the CHES survey except the ones related to specific EU policies. The list of questions used is provided in Appendix 1. The salience that parties attach to these issues was only included in the 2006 and 2010 waves. We use the former for the 2002-2006 and 2006-2010 periods and the latter for the 2010-2014 period.

expected if a splinter faction was to the right of the rump party, if the party left an electoral coalition with another, more rightist party or if it joined an electoral coalition or merged with a more leftist party.¹¹ Converse coding was applied to the expected rightist shifts. In total, 9 leftist and 5 rightist shifts were identified.

[Table 1]

Earlier work on party policy change also emphasises the importance of controlling for previous shifts in party policy positions (i.e. the lagged dependent variable) as parties, for example, may alternate with shifts to opposite directions across multiple electoral periods (Budge, 1994). However, including this variable eliminates more than one third of the observations in our sample (i.e. all observations in the 2002-2006 period and some new parties in other periods for which data on previous party policy is missing). We therefore do not include this variable in the analyses reported below, but report regression models with the lagged dependent variable in Appendix 3 (they lead to substantively similar results).

The literature suggests that several other factors, such as government status (Schumacher, de Vries and Vis, 2013) or change in party’s electoral support (Adams et al., 2004) could affect parties’ policy change. We included these variables (as well as logged party age and party size as measured by its vote share) in additional analyses (not reported in the paper), but they were not statistically significant. The inclusion of these variables also had a very limited effect on the effect of the main variables of interest. We therefore excluded them from the analyses reported below.

Table 1 summarises the descriptive statistics for all variables used in the analysis.

Results

Table 2 reports the results for four non-conditional hypotheses. Model 1 provides tests of the Mean Voter and Mean Party Voter Hypotheses. Model 2 report the results for the

¹¹The “direction” of transformation for electoral coalitions and mergers was identified based on CHES data with 0.5 points difference on the general left-right scale used as a threshold for indicating ideologically different parties joining or leaving electoral coalitions or merging with other parties.

Mean Independent Voter and Mean Partisan Supporter Hypotheses. Model 3 includes all four variables measuring change in the public’s preferences. Table 3 presents empirical tests of the Centralised and Decentralised Leadership and Issue Appeal Hypotheses. All models control for country-specific effects through the use of dummy variables for countries. Since our data is nested within parties (59 parties are included in the analysis: 27 once, 14 twice and 18 parties three times) and country-time period dyads (23 in total; for example, Poland 2002-2006), all models also include random intercept terms for parties and country-time periods.

[Table 2]

One key result that emerges from these analyses is the absence of support for the idea that parties in CEE countries respond to the broader electorate beyond their own supporters. Specifically, the variable capturing changes in the mean voter position is far from substantive and statistical significance in Models 1 and 3 in Table 2. We report similar results with regard to the change in the mean *independent* voter position (Models 2 and 3 in Table 2). Thus, both the Mean Voter and the Mean Independent Voter Hypotheses are rejected.

[Figure 1]

Our second key finding is very limited evidence for the Mean Party Voter Hypothesis. The coefficient of the change in the mean party voter position has a positive sign in line with the hypothesis (Model 1 in Table 2), but falls short of the conventional levels of statistical significance. The size of the coefficient drops dramatically once the change in mean partisan supporter position is included in Model 3 in Table 2.¹²

In contrast to these null results, we find strong support for the Mean Partisan Supporter Hypothesis. According to Model 2 (Table 2), a one point change in the left-right position of the partisan supporters on average results in 0.35 points change in a party’s position. This result provides additional empirical support for the importance of differentiating between

¹²The strength of correlation between these two predictor variables is 0.67.

partisan and independent voting groups recommended by Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012). The substantive and statistical significance of this variable is not affected by the inclusion of the variable measuring mean party voter change (Model 3 in Table 2). The strong effect of this variable for political parties in CEE is substantively similar to the findings for niche or activist-dominated parties from the Western European context (Ezrow et al. 2011; Schumacher, de Vries and Vis 2013; but see also Meyer 2013). Many parties in Central and Eastern Europe appear to be responsive primarily to their supporters' positions, much like what was found to be true only for niche or activist-dominated parties in Western Europe, although the responsiveness we report is to self-identified partisans rather than the mean party voter.

The findings are also partially in line with Schumacher, de Vries and Vis (2013) in that responsiveness to the partisan supporters is most characteristic of parties in which the powers of leadership to set electoral strategy are constrained. Figure 1 shows that the change in the mean partisan supporter position has a statistically significant effect on party policy change for lower values of the electoral strategy variable (this includes approximately half of the total number of observations in the sample), which represents a greater role of local and regional level organisations in setting party's policy.¹³ This evidence supports the Decentralised Leadership Hypothesis. Conversely, however, parties in which electoral strategy is set by national party leadership with little participation from local or regional level organisations are not responsive to the broader electorate as measured by the mean position of voters or the mean position of independents.¹⁴ This means that we find no support for the Centralised Leadership Hypothesis, in contrast to expectations derived from the research on Western Europe.

Ideological nicheness also conditions the effect of the change in the mean partisan supporter position, albeit to a smaller extent than the balance of power within the party. The

¹³The change in the mean voter position on the other hand has no statistically significant effect on party policy change for all values of the control of electoral strategy variable.

¹⁴Nor are centralised leadership parties responsive to their partisan supporters.

change in the mean partisan supporter position has a statistically significant effect for 80 percent of the observations in the sample (Figure 1). The direction of the effect is in line with the theoretical expectation of the Issue Appeal Hypothesis: parties with broader appeals (lower values of the nicheness variable) are more responsive to their partisan supporters. As these parties compete on the broader range of substantive issues, most of which presumably are linked to the general left-right dimension, these parties have greater incentives to respond to the shifts in their supporters' positions on these issues. Parties that emphasise a narrower range of issues are more likely to be responsive to their supporters on these issues as opposed to the broader left-right dimension. However, we find no evidence that parties with broader issue appeals are also more responsive to the mean voter, mean independent voter, or the mean party voter: these variables do not have a statistically significant effect on party policy change for all values of the broadness of issue appeals (Figure 1).

Among the control variables, the leftist party transformation has no significant effect on the dependent variable. Surprisingly, rightist transformations, all else equal, led to the change of party's policy position to the left. This result however may be driven by a small number of observations (5 parties experienced rightist transformations).¹⁵

Discussion

This research presents the first systematic study of party responsiveness on the left-right dimension in Central and Eastern Europe over a relatively large time span in these newer democracies. Combining CHES data on parties' policy positions and ESS data on voters' positions between 2002-2014, we report three key findings. First, we find no evidence that parties follow shifts in the overall mean voter position, nor do they follow shifts of the mean independent (as opposed to partisan) voter. In this, CEE parties differ substantially from the parties of Western Europe, where mainstream or leadership-dominated parties respond

¹⁵We re-ran the analyses excluding the two party transformation variables as a robustness check. The results are substantively similar to those presented here, with the exception that the conditional effect of the breadth of appeals in the conditional models is no longer present. That said, these types of party transformations of substantial ideological change are important variables to include in these models.

to shifts in the mean voter position (Adams et al., 2004, 2006; Schumacher, de Vries and Vis, 2013). Second, parties also do not follow the shifts of their mean voter position. This also departs from the Western European evidence, which reports that mainstream and niche parties respond differently to shifts in public opinion, and that niche or activist-dominated parties are responsive to changes in the position of the mean party voter (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow et al., 2011; Schumacher, de Vries and Vis, 2013). Third, we report that CEE parties *are responsive* to shifts in the mean partisan supporter position. Parties in the region respond primarily to shifts in the electoral sub-constituency that self-identifies as attached to the party, irrespective of recalled previous voting history. This type of responsiveness is particularly characteristic of parties in which actors other than the national party leadership are involved in setting the party’s electoral strategy, including its policy.

The present research advances an exciting research agenda on the causes and consequences of party policy change in Central and Eastern Europe and potentially other young democracies. The theoretical literature and empirical research on Western Europe suggests multiple explanations for party policy shifts and their consequences that can be examined in the context of CEE democracies while also taking into consideration the specific electoral and party contexts of the region. Although our results differ in several ways from studies focused on parties in Western Europe, there are also key points of complementarity. Most importantly, our findings provide fresh support for the idea of differentiating between partisan and independent electoral constituencies in research on representation (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012). While we found no evidence of responsiveness to shifts in the mean voter or mean party voter positions that are more common measures in the party responsiveness research, the distinction between independents and partisans yet again proved to be crucial for understanding representation in these newer democracies. Our analysis also reinforces the argument that party organisational features condition responsiveness to changes in public opinion (Schumacher, de Vries and Vis, 2013), by showing that less leadership-dominated parties are more responsive to narrower electoral constituencies than to shifts in the general

electorate or unattached voters. Finally, although the niche party categorisation is more complicated to apply straightforwardly in the CEE democracies, our paper productively incorporated some of this literature’s theoretical arguments (Bischof and Wagner, 2017) and recent categorical schemes (Meyer and Miller, 2015) to suggest that parties with particularly specific issue appeals, relative to the other parties in their system, are less responsive to shifts on the general left-right dimension in the public.

What explains the higher responsiveness of CEE parties to their supporters and the absence of their responsiveness to the broader electorate? One plausible explanation concerns weaker programmatic linkages between parties and voters in CEE democracies (Kitschelt, 2014). This is most obviously exemplified by the prevalence of anti-establishment parties with vague programmatic appeals that are supported by voters disappointed with economic and social costs of the transition to the market economy (Tavits, 2008; Pop-Eleches, 2010; Hanley and Sikk, 2016; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2015). Since for these independent voters parties’ policy positions are relatively unimportant, parties may seek to win their support with the appeals based on their competence, anti-corruption rhetoric, leaders’ personalities or clientelistic exchanges. Substantive policy commitments are then used to mobilise core supporters. It is also possible that the left-right dimension is less useful as an aggregation of different substantive issues in CEE countries. Communist legacies may lead individual voters to develop different understandings of the left-right dimension. For example, for older generations of voters left-right may be linked with attitudes to the communist past while socio-economic and socio-cultural issues may structure the left-right perceptions of younger voters. Consequently, shifts in the left-right positions aggregated at the level of the whole electorate would blur changes in specific issue positions to which parties may be more responsive. However, within the electoral constituencies of specific parties the understanding of the left-right dimension might be more unified, thus making it more likely for empirical analyses to uncover party responsiveness to these constituencies. Testing these and other ideas in a broader comparative analysis across Europe would be a fruitful extension of our

current findings.

As Central and Eastern European countries gain more democratic experience, researchers also have more access to survey data that measures the preferences of citizens and the positions of political parties over longer stretches of time. This information increasingly allows for studies of democratic representation in Europe from a unified perspective, while maintaining focus on important contextual differences across the region. Within this paper, we have applied and modified theories of party responsiveness from Western Europe to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and uncovered important differences and similarities that we hope will spark future comparative work on party-based representation.

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Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Party position change	109	0.073	0.755	-1.675	2.400
Mean voter change	109	0.017	0.367	-0.649	1.119
Party voter change	109	-0.069	0.465	-1.423	1.636
Mean independent voter change	109	0.023	0.217	-0.408	0.521
Party partisan supporter change	109	-0.073	0.579	-1.579	1.871
Party position change (lagged)	68	0.090	0.798	-1.675	2.400
Leftist party transformation	109	0.083		0	1
Rightist party transformation	109	0.046		0	1
Control over electoral strategy	102	3.632	0.286	2.857	4.000
Ideological nicheness	109	0.233	1.675	-3.068	6.356

Table 2: Public's preferences and party policy shifts (no interaction effects)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Intercept)	0.07 (0.28)	0.07 (0.29)	0.05 (0.30)
Mean Voter Change	-0.12 (0.24)		0.31 (0.60)
Party Voter Change	0.26 (0.16)		-0.07 (0.21)
Mean Independent Voter Change		-0.33 (0.43)	-0.82 (1.05)
Mean Partisan Supporter Change		0.35** (0.12)	0.38* (0.16)
Party transformation (leftist)	-0.21 (0.27)	-0.26 (0.26)	-0.27 (0.26)
Party transformation (rightist)	-1.14** (0.35)	-1.21*** (0.34)	-1.20*** (0.34)
Log Likelihood	-119.81	-116.76	-116.83
N	109	109	109
Number of parties	59	59	59
Number of country-periods	23	23	23
Party-level variance	0.00	0.01	0.00
Country-period level variance	0.03	0.04	0.06
Residual	0.51	0.46	0.47

Mixed-effects linear regression models. The dependent variable is changes in parties' positions on the left-right dimension. Dummy variables for countries included in all models.

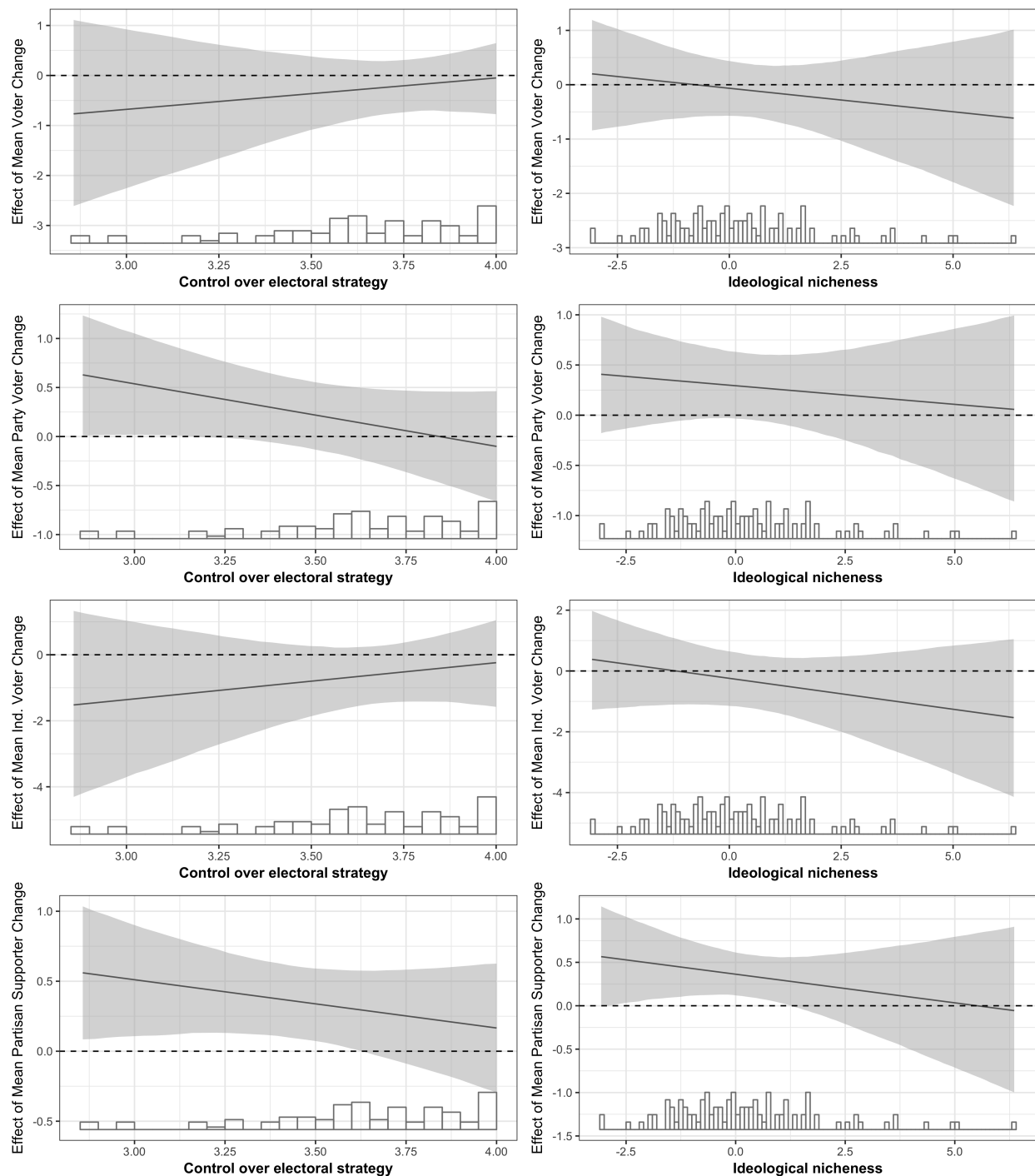
*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 3: Public’s preferences and party policy shifts (with interaction effects)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(Intercept)	−3.46 (1.85)	−3.63* (1.79)	0.10 (0.29)	0.09 (0.30)
Mean Voter Change	−2.55 (3.82)		−0.07 (0.25)	
Party Voter Change	2.49 (1.46)		0.29 (0.17)	
Control Electoral Strategy	0.93 (0.48)	0.97* (0.47)		
Mean Voter Change X Control Electoral Strategy	0.63 (1.02)			
Party Voter Change X Control Electoral Strategy	−0.65 (0.42)			
Ideological nicheness			−0.02 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.04)
Mean Voter Change X Ideological nicheness			−0.09 (0.13)	
Party Voter Change X Ideological nicheness			−0.04 (0.07)	
Mean Independent Voter Change		−4.71 (6.03)		−0.25 (0.45)
Mean Partisan Supporter Change		1.58 (1.19)		0.36** (0.13)
Mean Independent Voter Change X Control Electoral Strategy		1.12 (1.63)		
Mean Partisan Supporter Change X Control Electoral Strategy		−0.36 (0.34)		
Mean Independent Voter Change X Ideological nicheness				−0.21 (0.20)
Mean Partisan Supporter Change X Ideological nicheness				−0.07 (0.08)
Party transformation (leftist)	−0.14 (0.27)	−0.18 (0.26)	−0.25 (0.27)	−0.29 (0.26)
Party transformation (rightist)	−1.06** (0.36)	−1.17*** (0.36)	−1.26*** (0.38)	−1.38*** (0.37)
Log Likelihood	−109.60	−106.39	−124.40	−120.37
N	102	102	109	109
Number of parties	53	53	59	59
Number of country-periods	23	23	23	23
Party-level variance	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Country-period level variance	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.05
Residual	0.51	0.48	0.52	0.47

Mixed-effects linear regression models. The dependent variable is changes in parties’ positions on the left-right dimension. Higher values of the “Control Electoral Strategy” variable refer to more control for party leadership (as opposed to local or regional bodies) of setting party strategy (including its policy). Dummy variables for countries included in all models. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Figure 1: Party Responsiveness, Control over Electoral Strategy and Ideological Niche



Note: Estimated effects of the shift in the public preference variables. Higher values of the electoral strategy variable indicate greater control of national party leadership over electoral strategy including setting party's policy. Higher values of the ideological niche variable represent narrower issue appeals. Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

Party Responsiveness to Public Opinion in New European Democracies: Online Appendices

Appendix 1: Issues included in measuring the broadness of issue appeals (ideological nicheness)

To construct the ideological nichness index, we use all substantive policy questions from the 2006 and 2010 CHES waves except for the ones on parties' positions on specific EU policies. Specifically, the following items from the CHES wave conducted in 2006 were used:

- Overall orientation towards European integration
- Improving public services vs reducing taxes
- Deregulation
- Redistribution
- State intervention in the economy
- Civil liberties vs law and order
- Social lifestyle
- Religious principles in politics
- Immigration
- Urban vs rural interests
- Cosmopolitanism vs nationalism
- Decentralisation
- Importance of US power in world affairs
- Ethnic minorities

In the 2010 CHES wave, the following items were used:

- Overall orientation towards European integration
- Improving public services vs reducing taxes
- Deregulation
- Redistribution
- State intervention in the economy
- Civil liberties vs law and order
- Social lifestyle
- Religious principles in politics
- Immigration
- Urban vs rural interests
- Environment
- Decentralisation
- Ethnic minorities

Appendix 2: Content of the left-right dimension

The validity of our findings relies on the assumption that the meaning of the left-right dimension remains substantively the same within the countries analysed. Although previous work suggests that this is largely the case (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2009; Rovny and Polk, 2017), we carried out additional tests to examine how potential shifts in the meaning of the left-right dimension at the party level influence our analysis. We examine whether the strength with which the economic and GALTAN (social) dimensions (the questions for

which were included in all CHES waves analysed here) correlate with the general left-right dimension changes in time. Inspired by the approach suggested by Benoit and Laver (2006, 196), for each country-wave dyad we fit three linear regression models (weighted by party vote share) with the average expert placement on the left-right dimensions as the dependent variable. The first set of regressions includes the average expert placements of parties on the economic dimension as the only predictor variable; the second set of regressions uses GALTAN placements as the only explanatory variable; and the third set of regressions includes both substantive dimensions. For each country-year we then compute the change in the root mean squared error when both variables are included vs when only one of them is in the model, and take the average of the two quantities. We then compute the absolute difference in this average across two waves. If the contribution of two substantive dimensions on parties' placements on the general left-right dimension does not change, we would expect for this difference to be small. If, however, one of the substantive dimensions becomes more important for placing parties on the general left-right dimension, it should be higher. At the country level this quantity varies between 0.13 in Slovakia and 0.67 in Romania, indicating that the meaning of the left-right dimension changed more in some countries than in others. More importantly, if the movements in parties' left-right dimensions are driven mainly by the change in the meaning of the dimension as opposed to parties' shifts on substantive issues, we would expect our measure of dimensional stability to correlate positively with absolute changes in parties' positions. In contrast to this expectation we find that, within countries, this correlation ranges between -0.55 (in Poland) to 0.13 (Slovakia) and is statistically significant at the 0.1 level in Poland only. This provides evidence against the argument that shifts in parties' left-right positions are a consequence of shifts in the importance of substantive economic and social dimensions for determining parties' positions on this dimension.

Appendix 3: Analyses with lagged dependent variable

Earlier work on party policy change also emphasises the importance of controlling for previous shifts in party policy positions (i.e. the lagged dependent variable) as parties, for example, may alternate with shifts to opposite directions across multiple electoral periods (Budge, 1994). However, including this variable eliminates almost one half of the observations in our sample (i.e. all observations in the 2002-2006 period and some others in other periods where data on previous party policy is missing). Nevertheless, as reported in Table 1, our results remain substantively the same when including the lagged dependent variable. The substantive size of the coefficient of the variable indicating previous shifts in party's policy is very small and is not statistically significant in any of the models.

Table 1: Public's preferences and party policy shifts (no interaction effects)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Intercept)	−0.18 (0.29)	−0.23 (0.29)	−0.23 (0.29)
Mean Voter Change	−0.22 (0.30)		−0.43 (0.64)
Party Voter Change	0.33 (0.20)		0.05 (0.31)
Mean Independent Voter Change		−0.28 (0.53)	0.39 (1.15)
Mean Partisan Supporter Change		0.32* (0.16)	0.30 (0.25)
Party transformation (leftist)	−0.31 (0.34)	−0.33 (0.33)	−0.37 (0.34)
Party transformation (rightist)	−1.30* (0.60)	−1.39* (0.59)	−1.42* (0.61)
Party policy change (lagged)	0.01 (0.13)	0.04 (0.13)	0.04 (0.13)
Log Likelihood	−69.05	−68.15	−67.72
N	68	68	68
Number of parties	46	46	46
Number of country-periods	17	17	17
Party-level variance	0.00	0.00	0.00
Country-period level variance	0.00	0.00	0.00
Residual	0.47	0.46	0.47

Mixed-effects linear regression models. The dependent variable is changes in parties' positions on the left-right dimension. Dummy variables for countries included in all models.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Appendix 4: Analyses with harmful and beneficial changes in public opinion

While most of the research on public opinion and party policy change examines parties' responses to all shifts of the mean voter, Adams et al. (2004) suggest that parties may respond only to “harmful” shifts, i.e. moving of the mean voter away from its position (see also Meyer (2013, 90)). In contrast to benign shifts, harmful shifts are more threatening to the party in terms of its electoral support and access to office.

To test this hypothesis, we follow Adams et al. (2004, 598) and Meyer (2013, 147) by considering rightist changes in public opinion between $[t]$ and $[t+1]$ as harmful to the parties that were left of the mean voter at $[t]$ and leftist changes in public opinion between $[t]$ and $[t+1]$ as harmful to the parties that were right of the mean voter at $[t]$. All other shifts in public opinion were given a value of 0. We expect a positive coefficient for this variable, meaning that greater shifts to the right (left) of the mean voter should lead to more substantial changes in the positions of rightist (leftist) parties to the left (right). We construct this variable for the shift in the mean position of all voters as well as independent voters only. Additionally, we examine the effects of a variable capturing beneficial shifts, that is, changes in the mean voter position to the right (left) when the party is rightist (leftist).

Table 2 presents the results of the models with these variables. None of them is statistically significant in any of the model specifications. This supports our main findings that parties do not respond to the shifts in the preferences of the broader electorate beyond their own partisan supporters.

Table 2: Public's preferences and party policy shifts (no interaction effects)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Intercept)	0.13 (0.29)	0.07 (0.29)	0.06 (0.31)
Harmful Mean Voter Change	0.13 (0.33)		0.29 (0.73)
Benign Mean Voter Change	-0.29 (0.30)		0.24 (0.64)
Mean Party Voter Change	0.27 (0.16)		
Party transformation (leftist)	-0.20 (0.27)	-0.24 (0.26)	-0.24 (0.26)
Party transformation (rightist)	-1.16*** (0.35)	-1.23*** (0.34)	-1.23*** (0.34)
Harmful Mean Independent Voter Change		0.09 (0.55)	-0.37 (1.24)
Benign Mean Independent Voter Change		-0.69 (0.52)	-1.07 (1.11)
Mean Partisan Supporter Change		0.35** (0.12)	0.35** (0.12)
Log Likelihood	-119.26	-115.53	-114.53
N	109	109	109
Number of parties	59	59	59
Number of country-periods	23	23	23
Party-level variance	0.00	0.01	0.01
Country-period level variance	0.03	0.04	0.05
Residual	0.51	0.46	0.47

Mixed-effects linear regression models. The dependent variable is changes in parties' positions on the left-right dimension. Dummy variables for countries included in all models.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

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