

Perceptions of Party Ambiguity and their Electoral Consequences

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Abstract

Do citizens realize that a party's stances are ambiguous? And, if so, what shapes the extent to which citizens detect party ambiguity? And what are the potential electoral consequences? This paper provides the first examination of individual perceptions of party ambiguity and their electoral implications. By analyzing novel cross-national surveys from twelve European democracies, we find that citizens adjust their perceptions of party ambiguity in light of actual party ambiguity, and that their abilities to make correct assessments are shaped by political sophistication, partisanship, and their perceptions of intra-party politics. We further discover that citizens tend to underestimate their perceived distance to an ambiguous party only when they fail to detect the party's ambiguity. When they detect it, however, they tend to overestimate the voter-party distance. These findings, therefore, yield important implications for our understanding of the intertwined relationship between parties' communication strategies, public perceptions and behavior, and political representation.

Keywords: Democratic Representation, Party Ambiguity, Public Perceptions, Electoral Behavior

Ever since Downs (1957) postulated that political parties benefit electorally from taking ambiguous stances, the role of ambiguity in political competition, and especially party competition, has been receiving significant scholarly attention. Particularly, it has motivated a rich literature in which scholars intensively explore the electoral consequences of parties embracing vague platforms through developing rigorous theoretical arguments (e.g., Shepsle 1972; Alesina and Cukierman 1990; Alesina and Holden 2008; Meirowitz 2005; Aragonés and Neeman 2000; Kartik, Van Weelden and Wolton 2017) and conducting careful empirical tests in observational and experimental settings (e.g., Bräuninger and Giger 2018; Martin 2019; Rogowski and Tucker 2018; Hersh and Schaffner 2013; Tomz and Van Houweling 2009; Tolvanen, Tremewan and Wagner 2021; Nasr Forthcoming). Despite these efforts and their insightful findings, political scientists have not yet reached a consensus on whether party ambiguity helps or hurts political parties' electoral appeals (e.g., Tomz and Van Houweling 2009; Somer-Topcu 2015; Bräuninger and Giger 2018; Bartels 1986; Aldrich et al. 2018; Rogowski and Tucker 2018; Martin 2019).

We contend that the mixed findings presented by this body of work result at least partially from overlooking the role individual perceptions of party ambiguity play in this context. Prior research often presumes that voters are highly aware of the level of ambiguity embedded in party positions (e.g., Shepsle 1972; Bartels 1986; Aragonés and Neeman 2000; Bräuninger and Giger 2018). Similarly, empirical efforts largely measure ambiguity at the party level and consider it equivalent to public perceptions without paying much attention to the potential variation at the individual level (e.g., Campbell 1983; Somer-Topcu 2015; Jensen and Lee 2017; Rogowski and Tucker 2018; Han 2020; Nyhuis and Stoetzer 2021).¹ Consequently, we have little understanding about the extent to which voters' perceived ambiguity reflects actual party ambiguity, and how these perceptions further shape their attitudes and behavior.

We, therefore, suggest that scholars ought to study perceptions of party ambiguity

¹Although some scholars attempt to measure perceived ambiguity at the individual level (e.g., Nasr 2021; Martin 2019), their proposed measures, at best, capture voters' perceived party ambiguity indirectly.

in a similar fashion to the vibrant literature on how citizens formulate their perceptions of party policy positions. Specifically, empirical evidence from this latter body of work has demonstrated that citizens' perceptions of party policy positions tend to trace actual party positions to a certain extent, although these perceptions are far from perfect (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013; Fortunato and Adams 2015; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014; Seeberg, Slothuus and Stubager 2017; Plescia and Staniek 2017; Somer-Topcu, Tavits and Baumann 2020; Adams, Bernardi and Wlezien 2020). What is more, citizens vary substantially in their ability to construct accurate perceptions of party policy positions (e.g. Fortunato and Adams 2015; Seeberg, Slothuus and Stubager 2017).

Against this background, we investigate key issues in the context of party ambiguity *perceptions*. First, we examine the extent to which voters' perceptions of party ambiguity correspond to actual levels of party ambiguity. Second, we scrutinize factors that strengthen or weaken individuals' ability to correctly assess party ambiguity. Finally, to examine the electoral consequences of party ambiguity, we further study how voters' perceptions of party ambiguity structure their perceived ideological proximity to political parties (which has direct implications for vote choices).

Theoretically, we build on prior research showing that voters are capable of tracking where political parties stand ideologically based on their actual behavior (e.g., Fortunato and Stevenson 2013; Fernandez-Vazquez 2014; Seeberg, Slothuus and Stubager 2017; Adams, Bernardi and Wlezien 2020). Following this line of research, we contend that voters' perceptions of party ambiguity by and large reflect actual levels of party ambiguity. That said, we further highlight that party ambiguity need not be public knowledge as it is usually assumed. Instead, we hypothesize that individual characteristics, e.g., political sophistication or partisanship (Plescia, Kritzinger and Eberl 2020), as well as individual perceptions of party features, e.g., perceived party cohesiveness (Greene and Haber 2015), can alter the extent to which a voter's perceived party ambiguity reflects the actual level of party ambiguity. Furthermore, we investigate the electoral implications of (potentially strategic) party ambiguity by taking voters' perceptions of party ambiguity into account. In particular, we extend an argument proposed by Somer-Topcu (2015) and further argue

that when voters believe that a party takes rather ambiguous stances, it deteriorates the party's electoral fortune as voters are more likely to be exposed to mis-targeted policy messages (Hersh and Schaffner 2013; Lehrer and Lin 2020).

To test our arguments, we implemented an original cross-national survey in twelve European parliamentary democracies, where we specifically ask respondents to evaluate the level of ambiguity of a list of political parties in their country. Our survey data comprises over 19,000 respondents and their assessments of party ambiguity of 100 parties. The final data set not only enables us to directly explore the variation of voters' perceptions of party ambiguity at the individual level, but also allows us to examine the extent to which these individual perceptions correspond to parties' actual ambiguity and how they further structure vote choices.

Our empirical analyses reveal robust evidence consistent with our theoretical expectations. First, we find that there is a substantively relevant positive relationship between actual party ambiguity and voters' perceived party ambiguity, although the correspondence between the two is far from perfect. Moreover, this positive relationship is more pronounced when a voter is more politically sophisticated, when the voter is not a partisan of the focal party, and when the voter perceives the party to be more internally-divided. Last but not least, our results further demonstrate that voters tend to underestimate (overestimate) the ideological distance between themselves and a party with an ambiguous policy platform when they believe that the party takes unequivocal (ambiguous) stances. Our results imply that the correspondence between a party's actual ambiguity and citizens' perceived party ambiguity makes voters less likely to support the ambiguous party electorally, and *vice versa*. Most importantly, our results suggest that, from the party's perspective, ambiguous stances can be a two-edged sword: They attract some voters and, yet, repel others.

The paper's contributions are threefold. First, we are the first to empirically investigate the correspondence between a party's actual level of ambiguity and the public's perceptions of it, which has been conventionally assumed to be perfect, yet, has never been empirically tested in prior research. While our results partially confirm this conventional

view, we also reveal a distorted perception of party ambiguity as well as a certain level of variation in the correspondence at the voter level. Our second contribution pertains to factors that systematically shape individual perceptions of party ambiguity. More precisely, individual characteristics such as partisanship and political sophistication as well as perceptions of party features shape the extent to which one's perceptions of party ambiguity correspond to actual party ambiguity. Third, we re-visit the debate on whether taking ambiguous stances boosts parties' electoral support. In this context, we introduce the notion that voters' perceptions of party ambiguity need to be considered as well. Our findings suggest that the impact of party ambiguity on electoral behavior is closely intertwined with how voters perceive it. These results, therefore, not only shed new light on the potential consequences of strategic ambiguity, but they also have important implications for research on political communication, party competition, and democratic representation. We will elaborate on these implications in the concluding section.

Who Detects Ambiguous Party Stances?

How well do citizens assess party ambiguity? Research on voter perceptions of party positions suggests that voters do not only pay attention to party policies, but that they also process corresponding information well enough to allow it to adjust their perceptions about parties in a meaningful way. Despite some early doubts (Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu 2011), the last decade of scholarship has produced ample evidence that citizens' perceptions of parties' policy positions by and large respond to what these parties say and do. For instance, voters adjust their perceptions of what a party stands for in light of the party's membership in a coalition government (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013), its role in the coalition (Fortunato and Adams 2015), and the party's policy choices in office (Adams, Bernardi and Wlezien 2020). Also, citizens' party policy perceptions respond to actual party policy shifts (Fernandez-Vazquez 2014; Seeberg, Slothuus and Stubager 2017), and particularly so when these shifts pertain to salient issues (Plescia and Staniek 2017) or are accompanied by change in the party leadership (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu

2019, see also Somer-Topcu 2017). Moreover, voters update their perceptions of where a party stands based on party rhetoric (Somer-Topcu, Tavits and Baumann 2020, see also Rogowski and Tucker 2018). Overall, there is good reason to believe that many citizens possess the cognitive ability to follow party politics and use information available in the broader informational environment to adjust their perceptions of parties accordingly.

Even though citizens can follow party politics in general, one question still remains as to whether citizens are able to judge the specifics of party behavior such as party ambiguity. Recent empirical work by Plescia, Kritzinger and Eberl (2020) suggests a positive answer by showing that voters are able to detect and evaluate intra-party fighting accurately. Since intra-party fighting is one of the potential sources contributing to party ambiguity (Lehrer and Lin 2020; Lin and Lehrer 2021),² we believe that voters are able to detect similar political specifics that can lead to party ambiguity. The above discussion thus leads to our first hypothesis:

General Correspondence Hypothesis: Public perceptions of party ambiguity positively correspond to the party's actual level of ambiguity.

Even though we argue that many or even most voters are able to judge party ambiguity and that a general correspondence between a party's actual ambiguity and voters' perceptions exist, making accurate assessment could still be more difficult for some citizens than for others. As previous research has demonstrated, voters' perceptions of a given party behavior can often be very different (Plescia, Kritzinger and Eberl 2020; Slothuus and De Vreese 2010). Following this logic, we expect that some individual characteristics may shape the extent to which voters are able to detect actual party ambiguity, and thus result in varying levels of perceived party ambiguity.

To begin with, we argue that higher levels of political sophistication make citizens more skilled at judging party ambiguity. Evidence from assessments of government poli-

²Other sources of party ambiguity may include strategic decisions to blur the policy position (e.g. Shepsle 1972; Rovny 2012; Bräuninger and Giger 2018), a deliberate choice to not take a position at all (Nyhuis and Stoetzer 2021), or rival party policy message distortion (Somer-Topcu and Tavits N.d.).

cies, party politics, and the economic environment suggest that politically sophisticated citizens process political information in more complex ways than less sophisticated voters (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003; Tilley and Hobolt 2011; Vegetti and Mancosu 2020; Kölln 2018; Plescia, Kritzinger and Eberl 2020). This is because sophisticated citizens follow political events or news more closely and thus are more politically knowledgeable (e.g., Carpini and Keeter 1996; Eveland Jr and Scheufele 2000; Lecheler and de Vreese 2017). Having more and higher-quality information at hand is an obvious advantage that makes individuals more successful in assessing party ambiguity. Further, citizens need to engage with political information in order to process it, make inferences and draw conclusions from it, and eventually update their beliefs accordingly. Since assessing party ambiguity is a task that requires cognitive effort, citizens who are more cognitively able and more motivated to make the required effort, i.e., citizens who are more politically sophisticated, are better equipped to succeed in performing the task (Luskin 1990). In other words, sophisticated voters are more likely to detect actual party ambiguity. As a result, we hypothesize the following:

Political Sophistication Hypothesis: The correspondence between a voter's perceived party ambiguity and that party's actual ambiguity is more pronounced the more politically sophisticated the voter is.

In addition to political sophistication, we expect partisan affiliation to affect voters' ability to assess party ambiguity. Previous research studying perceptions in a partisan context suggests that citizens tend to underestimate undesirable facts when they concern a party they support (e.g., Somer-Topcu 2015). We expect a similar effect to exist for party ambiguity (Nasr 2021). To begin with, we argue that there are at least three reasons why most citizens dislike party ambiguity: First, experimental evidence suggests that in a range of cultural contexts, a majority of people seek to avoid ambiguity (Rieger, Wang and Hens 2015). Second, party ambiguity is often associated with uncertainty (e.g., Martin 2019) which again is avoided by most people (Rieger, Wang and Hens 2015). Finally, party ambiguity is considered undesirable from a normative perspective on democracy (APSA 1950; Mair 2008). Below, we turn to assimilation effects and partisan motivated

reasoning, and we argue that partisans may deliberately ignore the undesirable fact of party ambiguity and tend to possess biased assessments of actual party ambiguity.

Assimilation effects are prominent in studies of citizens' perceptions of party policy positions, and are frequently used to explain why partisans tend to underestimate the policy distance between themselves and their favored party (Merrill, Grofman and Adams 2001; Calvo, Chang and Hellwig 2014; Drummond 2011; Ward and Tavits 2019). Following a similar line of argument and building on psychological research (Sherif and Hovland 1961), we argue that voters' perceived ambiguity of a party stance is dependent on the information easily accessible to an individual citizen about that party stance. Factors that selectively increase the availability of certain information, e.g., the association of a given stance's ambiguity with a political party, can thus affect judgements about it (Bless and Burger 2016). In particular, we argue that the association with a party that a voter supports makes the voter underestimate that party's ambiguity.

Partisan motivated reasoning has been demonstrated to bias economic and political evaluations (Lewis-Beck 2006; Bisgaard 2015; Robison 2020), responsibility attributions (Tilley and Hobolt 2011; Bisgaard 2019), and citizen preferences for policies (Slothuus and De Vreese 2010; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013). More recently, Plescia, Kritzinger and Eberl (2020) even demonstrate that partisan motivated reasoning applies to perceptions about rather specific party characteristics such as intra-party unity. While it describes a different cognitive process than assimilation effects, its outcome with respect to partisan judgements of party ambiguity is identical. In particular, citizens who rely on partisan motivated reasoning search for information that supports their partisan view, and weight information that corresponds to their partisan view more heavily (Bolsen, Druckman and Cook 2014, see also Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006). So when assessing party ambiguity, voters seek to reconcile their support for a party and the undesirable fact that the stance of the party is ambiguous. To cope with the cognitive dissonance this combination of facts triggers, citizens will, thus, discount information about its preferred party's ambiguity, and consequently underestimate it. To put it differently, partisans tend to believe that they know rather accurately what the party

they support intends to do.

It is worth noting that we are agnostic about whether partisans' perceptions of party ambiguity are biased by either assimilation effects or partisan motivated reasoning, or even by both.³ That said, we emphasize that both perspectives make the same prediction, i.e., that partisans tend to underestimate their preferred party's ambiguity and that non-partisans are more likely to make objective judgements. We, therefore, expect the following hypothesis to hold:

Partisanship Hypothesis: The correspondence between a voter's perceived party ambiguity and that party's actual ambiguity is more pronounced when the voter is not a partisan of the party and less so when the voter is a partisan.

Finally, we argue that citizens' ability to assess party ambiguity hinges also on their perceptions of party politics. In particular, we suggest that voters are better at recognizing party ambiguity when they perceive the corresponding party as internally fighting. A perception of internal fights implies that the voter believes that there are (at least) two conflicting camps within the party that seek to control its ways (Greene and Haber 2015; Lehrer and Lin 2020). Being aware of intra-party heterogeneity can be a first step to recognize ambiguity because internally fighting parties are likely to take ambiguous stances in multiple ways. On the one hand, a party may not be willing (or able) to reconcile internal conflicts. Then, it is likely to either refuse to take a stance on an internally highly debated issue at all (Nyhuis and Stoetzer 2021), or it blurs its positions in a way that internal stakeholders are satisfied (Rovny 2012). On the other hand, when conflicting camps take contradicting stances, a party's overall stance is blurred as well (Lehrer and Lin 2020). In all cases, intra-party conflict leads to confusion about what the party's exact stances are, i.e., ambiguous stances. And hence voters who believe that a party is internally fighting are more likely to detect its ambiguity. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Intra-Party Conflict Hypothesis: The correspondence between a voter's perceived party ambiguity and that party's actual ambiguity is more pronounced

³And in fact, we are neither trying nor able to discern the difference in this paper.

when the voter perceives the party to be more internally divided, and less so when the voter perceives the party to be less internally divided.

Data, Methods, and Modeling Strategy

Our theory concerns citizens' perceptions of the extent to which a party's stances are ambiguous, which requires data at the individual level that gauges respondents' assessments of party ambiguity. However, to our understanding, no comparative information is publicly available. Therefore, we conducted an innovative cross-national survey to gauge voters' perceptions of party ambiguity and to test our theoretical arguments. The survey includes twelve European countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.⁴ The selected countries represent a wide range of varieties of institutional, cultural, and party system characteristics, which make us confident that the results we present can be generalized beyond the surveyed countries.

Our General Correspondence Hypothesis suggests that voters' perceptions of party ambiguity should be positively correlated with parties' actual ambiguity. Thus, in our model, the dependent variable, *Perceived Party Ambiguity*, measures a respondent's assessment of the ambiguity or clarity of a given party's stances using a scale from 0 to 10, where greater values indicate higher levels of perceived ambiguity.⁵ The main explanatory variable is the party's actual ambiguity. We follow recent empirical work (e.g., Somer-Topcu 2015; Lehrer and Lin 2020; Martin et al. 2020) and use the perceptual agreement score developed by Van der Eijk (2001) to approximate actual party ambiguity. Essen-

⁴The corresponding surveys were conducted by Survey Sampling International (SSI) through their representative internet panels. Each survey was translated by paid translators at SSI and was implemented in each country's official language. The surveys were launched in the end of January 2019 and finished by mid-February 2019.

⁵In fact, in the survey set up, greater values represent perceived party clarity, yet, we flip the scale for presentation and interpretation purposes. We provide the question wording of all survey items in Online Appendix 1.

tially, this score provides an aggregated measure that captures the effects of various party behaviors and characteristics that may blur or clarify a party’s stances in the eyes of voters (Dahlberg 2009), which allows us to approximate the clarity of a party’s true stances. More precisely, we create the variable *Actual Party Ambiguity* by first asking respondents to place parties on an 11-point left-right scale, and then we compute the agreement score and rescale it such that it falls in the interval $[0, 10]$ (Sommer-Topcu 2015). In this case, greater values suggest that citizens are collectively less certain about a party’s stances, implying higher levels of actual party ambiguity.⁶

In addition to the General Correspondence Hypothesis, our general theory also concerns the conditional effects imposed by several factors at the individual level on the correspondence between perceived and actual party ambiguity. To test the Political Sophistication Hypothesis, we measure the respondents’ *Political Sophistication* by using the respondent’s self-stated level of political interest on a scale from 0 to 5, and then create the interaction term *Actual Party Ambiguity* \times *Political Sophistication*.⁷ To examine the Partisanship Hypothesis, we create a dummy variable *Partisan* that indicates the respondents who consider themselves close to a given party, and then generate the interaction term *Actual Party Ambiguity* \times *Partisan*. Finally, to test the Intra-Party Conflict Hypothesis, we create the variable *Perceived Party Unity* by asking respondents to indicate their perceptions of a party’s cohesiveness using a scale ranging from 0 to 10, and then we interact this variable with *Actual Party Ambiguity* to produce the interaction term *Actual Party Ambiguity* \times *Perceived Party Unity*. Of course, all constituent terms of these interactions are included in the regression model (Brambor, Clark and Golder

⁶While we cannot attribute party ambiguity to deliberate party choices using this operationalization, this approach is based on the entire array of information that voters obtain and process about a party’s stances. Besides the information provided through election manifestos, it also includes party statements, party actions, news reports, and potentially government actions. Eventually, it captures what voters as a whole believe rather than what parties want to communicate to them.

⁷In Online Appendix 4, we use a measure of political sophistication that is based on political knowledge. Results are substantially identical.

2006). The summary statistics of our variables are presented in Online Appendix 2.

In our empirical model, we also include a list of control variables at the party- and the individual-level that may influence voters' perceptions of party ambiguity. First, citizens may find it easier to observe a party's stances when the party receives more media attention. To account for this, we control for *Government Membership* and *Party Seat Share* since incumbent parties and parties with more parliamentary seats tend to receive more media attention (e.g., Semetko 1996; Schoenbach, De Ridder and Lauf 2001; Hopmann et al. 2012; Green-Pedersen, Mortensen and Thesen 2017; Meyer, Haselmayer and Wagner 2020). Moreover, we include a dummy variable *Niche Party* that indicates whether a party is a niche party, as niche parties may not always take positions on mainstream issues and thus make citizens less clear about their stances in general (Rovny 2012). Following Ezrow (2008), we consider nationalist, green, and communist parties as niche parties. Finally, more general demographic characteristics may affect how a respondent perceives party ambiguity. Hence, we control for the respondent's age as well as gender. We also include a respondent's perceived absolute left-right distance between herself and a focal party to account for its potential effect on the way respondents rate party ambiguity.

The final sample contains answers to our survey items from 19,269 respondents in twelve countries. The survey asks a respondent i to express her perceptions on several features of a party j in country k . In this case, each respondent will appear in the data as many times as she rates parties, making the unit of analysis a respondent-party dyad. In total, the final sample covers 100 parties from twelve countries and produces 139,600 observations. Since the dependent variable is a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 10 and the data structure is hierarchical (i.e., country-party-respondent), we employ multilevel linear modeling and perform several multilevel models to test our hypotheses. Importantly, since each respondent only rates parties in the country she lives in, both the respondent and the party she assesses are nested within the same country. Moreover, our observations are nested in respondents and parties in a crossed-effects manner because each respondent rates multiple parties and these parties are rated by multiple respondents.

Due to these complexities, we opt for a modeling technique that uses countries as top-level category, and both respondents and parties as crossed-effects as the lower levels. More precisely, we estimate random intercepts to account for heterogeneity at these levels. Our final model can be summarized as the following:

$$\begin{aligned}
[\text{Perceived Ambiguity}]_{ijk} &= \alpha_k + \alpha_{k[i]} + \alpha_{k[j]} \\
&+ \beta_1[\text{Actual Party Ambiguity}]_j \\
&+ \beta_2[\text{Political Sophistication}]_i \\
&+ \beta_3[\text{Partisan}]_{ij} \\
&+ \beta_4[\text{Perceived Party Unity}]_{ij} \\
&+ \beta_5[\text{Actual Party Ambiguity}]_j \times [\text{Political Sophistication}]_i \\
&+ \beta_6[\text{Actual Party Ambiguity}]_j \times [\text{Partisan}]_{ij} \\
&+ \beta_7[\text{Actual Party Ambiguity}]_{ij} \times [\text{Perceived Party Unity}]_i \\
&+ \boldsymbol{\gamma}\mathbf{X} + \epsilon_{ijk}
\end{aligned}$$

where α_k indicates a random intercept for country k , $\alpha_{k[i]}$ and $\alpha_{k[j]}$ represent random intercepts for respondent i and party j nested in county k respectively, $\boldsymbol{\gamma}\mathbf{X}$ denotes the set of control variables mentioned above and their respective coefficients, and finally ϵ as the error term.

Empirical Results

Before estimating the complete model we describe above, we present several separate models, each of which examines one of our hypotheses. Specifically, Model 1 tests the General Correspondence Hypothesis which predicts that the coefficient on the *Actual Party Ambiguity* variable should be positive. Model 2 investigates the Political Sophistication Hypothesis which would be supported if the coefficient on the interaction effect *Actual Party Ambiguity* \times *Political Sophistication* is positive. Next, Model 3 tests

the Partisanship Hypothesis which suggests that the coefficient on the *Actual Party Ambiguity* \times *Partisan* variable should be negative. Model 4 examines the Intra-Party Conflict Hypothesis which contends that the coefficient on the *Actual Party Ambiguity* \times *Perceived Party Unity* variable should be negative. Finally, Model 5 contains all the variables of interest and provides a full test of our argument. The estimated results are summarized in Table 1. A quick look at this table reveals that the results are fairly consistent across models.

The positive and significant coefficient on the *Actual Party Ambiguity* variable (in almost all models)⁸ suggests that the more ambiguous a party's stances become, the more ambiguity citizens perceive. To provide a more substantive interpretation of these estimated coefficients, recall that *Actual Party Ambiguity* and *Perceived Party Ambiguity* are coded such that a perfect correspondence between these two variables would imply a coefficient equal to 1. As Model 1 shows, for each unit increase in *Actual Party Ambiguity*, *Perceived Party Ambiguity* increases by about .3 units. While this is clear evidence against perfect correspondence (the p-value of testing whether the coefficient equals 1 is $p=.000$), it is also indicative of general correspondence (the p-value of testing whether the coefficient equals 0 is $p=.015$). In other words, when the party takes ambiguous stances, voters take notice but they usually do not detect the ambiguity in its entirety. Hence, this result corroborates the General Correspondence Hypothesis. At the same time, however, it suggests that the relationship between party ambiguity and citizens' perceptions of it is more complex than previously assumed.

In addition, according to our argument, the positive correlation between *Actual Party Ambiguity* and *Perceived Party Ambiguity* is conditioned by other factors as theoret-

⁸The two exceptions are models 2 and 5. Yet, please note that since *Actual Party Ambiguity* is interacted with *Political Sophistication* in these models, the coefficient on the *Actual Party Ambiguity* variable displays the effect for respondents who are not politically sophisticated at all. The fact that this interaction seems to exert a massive influence on the effect of the *Actual Party Ambiguity* variable, suggests that the Political Sophistication Hypothesis needs to be considered at the same time (see Model 5 and the discussion below).

Table 1. Determinants of Voters' Perceptions of Party Ambiguity

	DV: Perceived Party Ambiguity				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Actual Party Ambiguity	0.305*	0.051	0.294*	0.329**	0.180 [†]
	(0.125)	(0.132)	(0.122)	(0.093)	(0.095)
Political Sophistication		-0.411**			-0.222**
		(0.031)			(0.026)
Actual Party Ambiguity × Political Sophistication		0.071**			0.044**
		(0.011)			(0.010)
Partisan			-0.675**		-0.761**
			(0.106)		(0.096)
Actual Party Ambiguity × Partisan			-0.335**		-0.092*
			(0.040)		(0.037)
Perceived Party Unity				-0.427**	-0.395**
				(0.011)	(0.011)
Actual Party Ambiguity × Perceived Party Unity				-0.031**	-0.034**
				(0.004)	(0.004)
Niche Party	-0.370**	-0.372**	-0.344**	-0.228*	-0.218**
	(0.121)	(0.121)	(0.117)	(0.089)	(0.084)
Party Seat Share	-0.018**	-0.018**	-0.011*	-0.016**	-0.012**
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Government Member	-0.075	-0.076	-0.101	0.054	0.033
	(0.151)	(0.152)	(0.146)	(0.111)	(0.105)
Age	0.003**	0.004**	0.003**	0.002**	0.003**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female	-0.126**	-0.198**	-0.129**	-0.154**	-0.189**
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Perceived Distance to Party	0.367**	0.368**	0.311**	0.245**	0.216**
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Constant	3.582**	5.012**	3.794**	6.425**	7.167**
	(0.388)	(0.405)	(0.376)	(0.284)	(0.288)
Ranef - Country	0.163**	0.169**	0.158**	0.060**	0.066**
	(0.084)	(0.087)	(0.081)	(0.033)	(0.035)
Ranef - Party	0.281**	0.282**	0.263**	0.152**	0.136**
	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.040)	(0.023)	(0.021)
Ranef - Individual	1.901**	1.836**	1.869**	1.103**	1.090**
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.016)	(0.016)
Ranef - Residual	3.981**	3.980**	3.807**	3.135**	3.059**
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.013)	(0.012)
Observations (Individuals)	19269	19269	19269	19269	19269
Observations (Individual-Party Dyads)	139600	139600	139600	139600	139600
Log-likelihood	-308845	-308575	-305927	-289998	-288379

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, [†] $p < 0.1$

ically predicted. First, the positive and significant coefficient of the interaction term *Actual Party Ambiguity* \times *Political Sophistication* indicates that more sophisticated respondents are more likely to detect the correspondence between actual party ambiguity and perceived party ambiguity. Based on Model 5, Figure 1 depicts the marginal effect (along with its 90% confidence intervals) of actual party ambiguity on perceived party ambiguity at different levels of political sophistication for the average respondent in our data set.⁹ Clearly, when a party’s stances are ambiguous, respondents’ perceptions of that ambiguity grow as their political sophistication increases. When respondents’ political sophistication level reaches 4 (about 60% of respondents have a political sophistication level of 4 or above), the effect of detecting additional party ambiguity becomes positive and statistically significant. Respondents who are very politically sophisticated, i.e., who score 5 on the political sophistication scale, detect about 22% more of a party’s ambiguity than respondents who are not politically sophisticated at all. This finding therefore corroborates our Political Sophistication Hypothesis.¹⁰

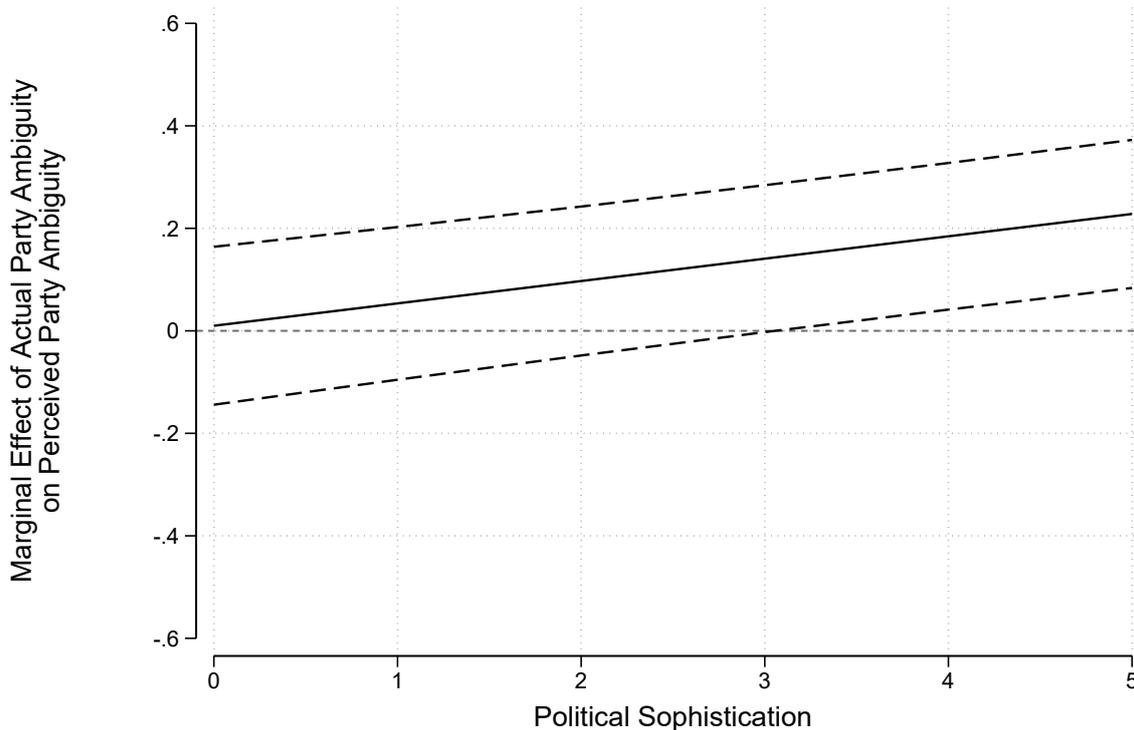
Second, our argument predicts that the correspondence between a respondent’s perception of party ambiguity and a party’s actual level of ambiguity will be more pronounced when the respondent is not a partisan of that party. To examine this interaction effect of *Actual Party Ambiguity* \times *Partisan*, we plot the the marginal effect (along with its 90% confidence intervals) of actual party ambiguity on perceived ambiguity for non-partisans and partisans in Figure 2.¹¹ As the figure depicts, there is a positive and statistically sig-

⁹We compute these marginal effects using the parametric method proposed by King, Tomz and Wittenberg (2000). Calculations are based on the estimated parameters derived from Model 5. To mimic the average citizen, we set *Partisan* to 0 and *Perceived Party Unity* to 5.

¹⁰As an alternative, we performed the same model by replacing political sophistication as measured by political interest with voters’ knowledge about government composition (i.e., which party holds the premiership in the government, and which parties are government members), and the substantive conclusion remains the same. The results are presented in Online Appendix 4.

¹¹As before, these marginal effects are computed for the average voter, and hence *Political Sophistication* is set to 4.

Figure 1. Marginal Effect of Actual Party Ambiguity on Perceived Ambiguity by Political Sophistication

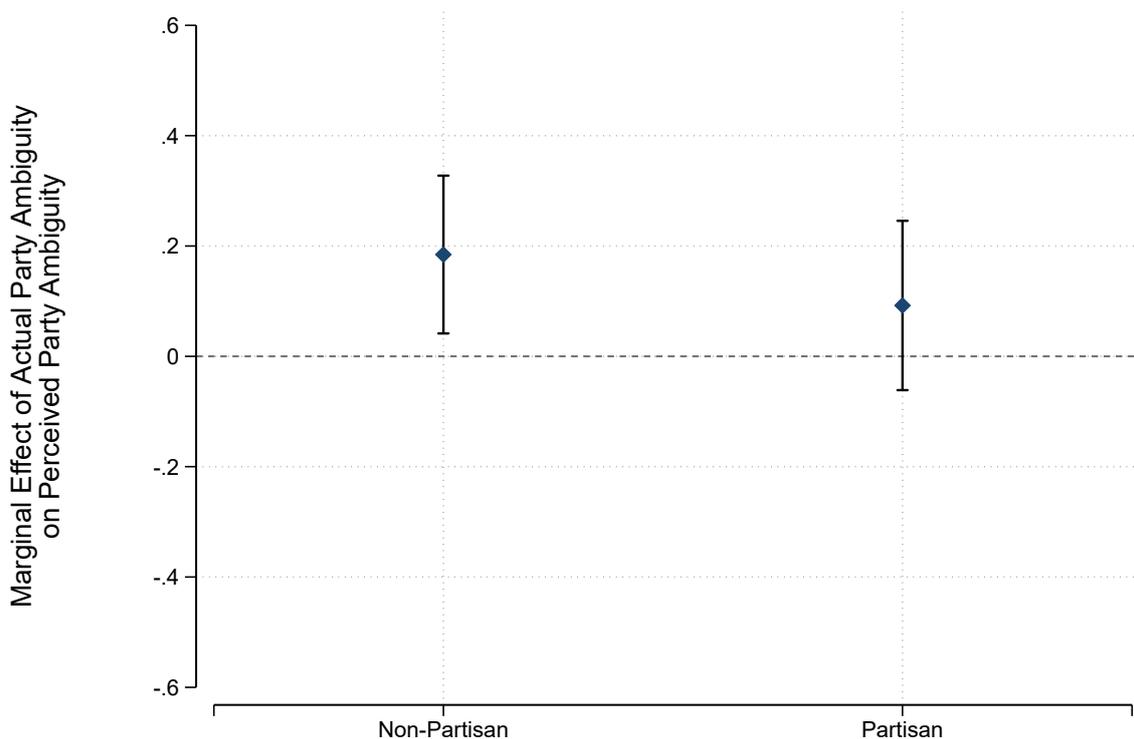


nificant relationship between actual levels of party ambiguity and individual perceptions of party ambiguity among respondents who are not partisans of the ambiguous party. It further suggests that partisans of a given party detect about 9% less of its ambiguity than non-partisans.¹² The Partisanship Hypothesis thus receives empirical support.

Finally, our Intra-Party Conflict Hypothesis concerns how voters' perceptions of party unity structure the relationship between actual and perceived party ambiguity. The negative and significant coefficient of the interaction term *Actual Party Ambiguity* \times *Perceived Party Unity* lends support to our expectation. Specifically, perceived party unity makes actual party ambiguity less likely to be detected and therefore weakens

¹²An alternative way to look the difference between partisans and non-partisans is to calculate the first differences in the predicted values of perceived ambiguity. The results are illustrated in Online Appendix 3, which suggest that the correspondence between actual party ambiguity and perceived ambiguity, particularly when a party moves from less to more ambiguous, is indeed less likely to be detected by partisans, compared to non-partisans.

Figure 2. Marginal Effect of Actual Party Ambiguity on Perceived Ambiguity by Partisanship



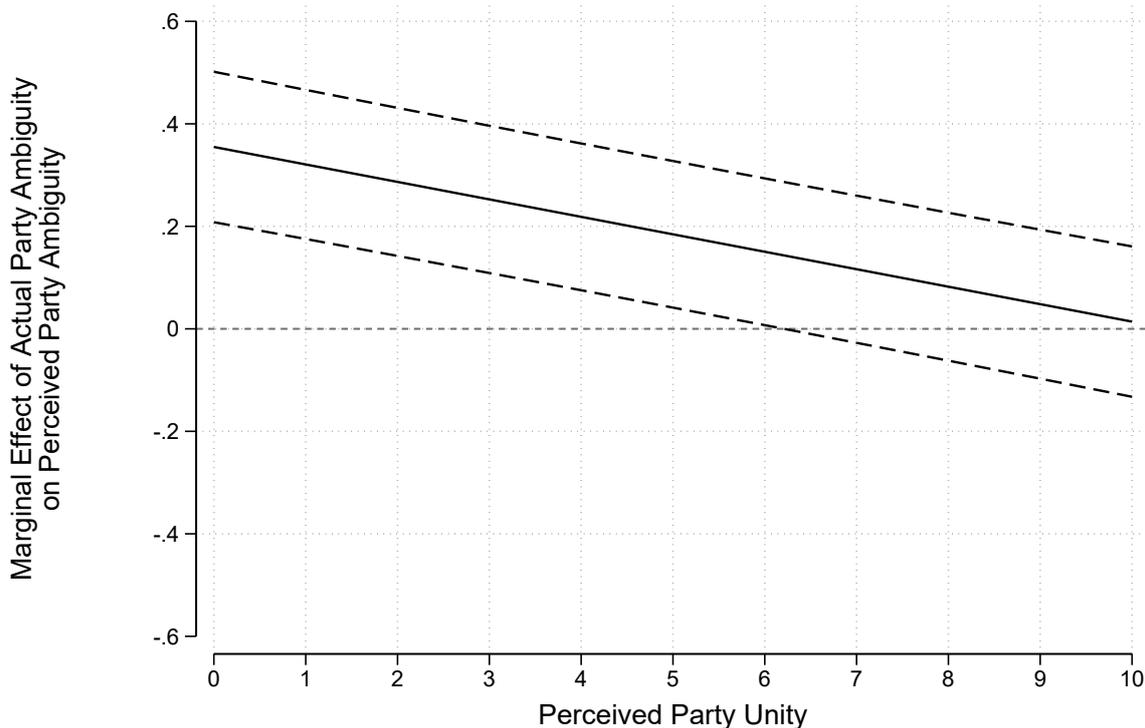
the relationship between actual and perceived party ambiguity. In Figure 3, we again illustrate the marginal effect (along with its 90% confidence intervals) of actual party ambiguity on perceived party ambiguity for the average voter. As the figure shows, when a party is perceived to be internally fighting, particularly when the level of perceived unity is below 6 (roughly 55% of our data points), the effect of actual party ambiguity becomes positive and statistically significant. In other words, the correspondence between actual and perceived party ambiguity is more pronounced when voters consider the party as internally divided. As one's perception of a party's unity goes up, the effect of actual party ambiguity on her perceived ambiguity wanes. In fact, when two voters' perceptions of party unity fully diverge, the voter who perceives the party to be internally divided tends to perceive 34% more of the party's actual ambiguity than a voter who believes the party to be fully united. These findings corroborate the Intra-Party Conflict Hypothesis.

The results on the control variables are generally in line with our expectations. The greater a party's seat share in parliament, the less ambiguous citizens perceive that

party's stance. This is most likely due to the fact that parties with larger parliamentary representation appear on the media more often. Interestingly, this effect seems to absorb the effect government membership may have on party ambiguity perceptions and therefore we do not observe a significant effect of government membership empirically (e.g., Semetko 1996; Schoenbach, De Ridder and Lauf 2001; Hopmann et al. 2012; Green-Pedersen, Mortensen and Thesen 2017; Meyer, Haselmayer and Wagner 2020). Further, we find that perceived party ambiguity increases in perceived distance to a given party. This finding suggests that the relation between party ambiguity perceptions may not only be bias downward by holding positive feeling toward a party. It may also be biased upward by strongly opposing a party. Moreover, we observe that citizens tend to perceive niche parties' stances as less ambiguous. So even though niche parties may blur their stances on specific issue dimensions (Rovny 2012), citizens seem to feel that they know what these parties stand for. Finally, we find that women perceive less party ambiguity than men and that the perception of party policy ambiguity increases as respondents grow older.

Overall, our findings suggest that while voters, on average, adjust their party ambiguity perception in light of actual party ambiguity, the correspondence is far from perfect. In fact, even when considering all interaction effects, Model 5 does not allow for a correspondence of *Actual Party Ambiguity* and *Perceived Party Ambiguity* of more than 40%. Further, a corresponding t-test clearly rejects the claim that the correspondence is perfect, i.e., that the joint effect of *Actual Party Ambiguity* on *Perceived Party Ambiguity* equals 1 ($p=.000$). To put it differently, even when conditions are very favorable to the detection of party ambiguity, citizens tend to underestimate it greatly. Moreover, our results demonstrate that there is a considerable variation in citizen's ability to detect party ambiguity. Indeed, the common assumption that parties' strategic ambiguity always works as intended is helpful in developing tractable theoretical and empirical models and learning about party ambiguity and its effects in general. At the same time, however, our results suggest that the reality is somewhat more complex. Building on previous findings as well as our results, we suggest that only when party ambiguity is not perceived by voters, parties actually benefit from it. In the next section, we test whether voters' party

Figure 3. Marginal Effect of Actual Party Ambiguity on Perceived Ambiguity by Perceived Party Unity



ambiguity perceptions affect their perceptions of how far a party ideologically locates from them which, in turn, is is central determinant of vote choice.

Electoral Implications of Party Ambiguity Perceptions

Up to this point, we have demonstrated that a party's level of ambiguity is misperceived by large segments of the public. As discussed earlier, this finding challenges what most existing models of voting behavior in the context of party ambiguity implicitly assume, i.e., that ambiguity was well observed by the public (e.g., Shepsle 1972; Campbell 1983; Bartels 1986; Aragonés and Neeman 2000; Somer-Topcu 2015; Jensen and Lee 2017; Bräuninger and Giger 2018; Rogowski and Tucker 2018; Han 2020; Nyhuis and Stoetzer 2021). This inconsistency therefore raises the question as to whether (biased) perceptions of party ambiguity are substantively relevant and if so, how. Thus, we investigate whether party ambiguity perceptions shape citizens' behavior. In what follows, we offer a theoretical argument and empirical evidence suggesting that party ambiguity makes vot-

ers underestimate the policy distance between themselves and an ambiguous party, yet, only if voters are not aware of that ambiguity. By implication, such an underestimation of policy distance makes it more likely that citizens vote for the ambiguous party. On the contrary, the beneficial effect of actual party ambiguity on perceived policy distance disappears and becomes harmful to parties the more voters are aware of a party's ambiguity. In other words, they are less likely to vote for that party when they perceive its platform as ambiguous.

Before moving forward, we first revisit Somer-Topcu's (2015) seminal argument that taking ambiguous stances helps parties gain votes because voters underestimate the policy distance between themselves and an ambiguous party. When the ambiguous party, for instance, positions a unit away from a voter's ideal position, the voter perceives less than a unit distance. According to Somer-Topcu, this is due to the voter only picking up policy messages designed specifically to target her, making her believe that the party is ideologically closer to her than it actually is. In the context of proximity voting (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984), this underestimation of policy distances results in a higher probability of parties with ambiguous stances to be voted for. Independent analyses of different (comparative) data sets have produced consistent evidence showing that citizens tend to underestimate policy distances to a given party when the party's stances are ambiguous (Somer-Topcu 2015; Martin 2019; Lehrer and Lin 2020; Lin and Lehrer 2021). In turn, this provides a solid empirical ground for the claim that strategic ambiguity makes parties more likely to expand their electoral bases.

Our work adds to Somer-Topcu's argument as well as to all prior research, theoretically and empirically, the potential mediating effect of the variation in voters' perceptions of party ambiguity. In particular, we relax the assumption that citizens are generally aware of party ambiguity and claim that their assessments of parties' ideological positions depend on each citizen's perception of party ambiguity. So, unlike Somer-Topcu (2015, see also Lehrer and Lin 2020; Lin and Lehrer 2021), we argue that party ambiguity by itself will not generally lead to policy underestimation. Instead, we expect its effect to vary by individuals' perceptions of party ambiguity.

To be more precise, we contend that a voter underestimates the policy distance between her and an ambiguous party only when the voter believes that the party pursues concrete goals. This reflects exactly the scenario depicted in Somer-Topcu’s argument: the voter only picks up one single, targeted policy message from various messages that the ambiguous party spreads out. She further believes that the message represents the party’s true stance, and hence perceives the party as ideologically close to her.

In addition to this well established mechanism (Somer-Topcu 2015; Lehrer and Lin 2020; Lin and Lehrer 2021), we add a second scenario: As soon as the voter realizes that the party actually stands on a rather ambiguous platform, she is more likely to observe that the party delivers various policy messages to different audiences (i.e., the party is ambiguous by appealing broadly). In this case, she may easily pick up wrong messages targeting different groups of voters, calculate the policy distance between her and the party differently, and end up voting differently (Lehrer and Lin 2020; Lin and Lehrer 2021). Also, as party ambiguity is often connected with uncertain outcomes and potential risks (Shepsle 1972; Alvarez 1998; Martin 2019), this negative impression may be given a greater weight in voters’ perception-forming and decision-making processes (Anderson 1981, see also Peeters and Czapinski 1990),¹³ and therefore makes voters push the party further away. Indeed, empirical work has demonstrated that those “mis-targeted” citizens tend to penalize political parties when they realize that they are not the ones to which parties attempt to pander (Hersh and Schaffner 2013). In other words, detecting actual party ambiguity and receiving wrong messages may offset the intended effect of policy distance underestimation, making the “broad-appeal” strategy no longer work and the voter less likely to support the party electorally. The above discussion thus leads to the following hypothesis:

¹³This arguments builds on psychological research on negativity biases. For a general overview of causes, consequences and instances of negativity biases, see Baumeister et al. (2001) and Rozin and Royzman (2001). For evidence that negativity biases exist in political contexts and around the world, see Soroka, Fournier and Nir (2019) and Boydston, Ledgerwood and Sparks (2019).

Perceived Proximity Hypothesis: The underestimation effect of actual party ambiguity on a voter’s perceived voter-party distance decreases as the voter’s perceived party ambiguity increases.

To understand the significance of the Perceived Proximity Hypothesis, recall that (perceived) ideological proximity is the key driver of vote choices in the spatial model of voting (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984). In fact, experimental research suggests that policy proximity is the strongest determinant of vote choice. It even trumps voters’ urge to not vote for corrupt candidates (Franchino and Zucchini 2015). So, if supported, the Perceived Proximity Hypothesis would imply that party policy perceptions influence vote choice via perceptions of party policy positions.

Testing the Perceived Proximity Hypothesis

Research Design

To test the Perceived Proximity Hypothesis, we rely on the same data set as before. Yet, our dependent variable becomes *Policy Distance Underestimation* which effectively compares a respondent’s perceived policy distance to a party to the actual policy distance between the respondent and the party. Our measure of *Policy Distance Underestimation* is based on respondents’ placements of themselves and parties on an eleven-point left-right scale. We compute the *perceived* respondent-party policy distance by obtaining the absolute distance between a respondent’s self-placement and her placement of the focal party on the left-right scale. The *actual* respondent-party policy distance is the absolute distance between a respondent’s self-placement and the true policy position of the focal party. Here we approximate a party’s true policy position by taking the mean value of all respondents’ left-right placements of the party. The final *Policy Distance Underestimation* measure is computed by subtracting the perceived voter-party policy distance from the actual voter-party policy distance. Hence, positive values in the dependent variable represent citizens who underestimate the policy distance between themselves and a given party, while negative values depict the opposite.

As the Perceived Proximity Hypothesis states that the effect of actual party ambiguity on the voter’s underestimation of voter-party policy distance is weakened by a voter’s perceived party ambiguity, our main quantity of interest in this section is therefore the interaction of *Perceived Party Ambiguity* and *Actual Party Ambiguity*. To support the Perceived Proximity Hypothesis, the corresponding effect should be negative. In addition, we control for several factors that scholars have linked to perceived policy distances, including whether a party is a member of government, its seat share in parliament, niche party status as well as individual characteristics including age, gender, and political sophistication (Somer-Topcu 2017; Somer-Topcu, Tavits and Baumann 2020). Finally, we use the same modeling strategy as in the previous section by estimating a hierarchical model with random effects at country, party, and individual levels. In Table 2, we report the estimated results of two models, one excludes all control variables while the other performs a full model.

Empirical Results

Recall that we are interested in the extent to which the effect of *Actual Party Ambiguity* on *Policy Distance Underestimation* is modified by *Perceived Party Ambiguity*. Thus, we rely on the estimated results of Model 7 in Table 2 and compute the amount of policy distance underestimation that we predict for the average respondent in our data when she assesses the average party’s policy position as her perception of Party Ambiguity varies.¹⁴ Figure 4 shows the results. We find that when citizens perceive the party as unambiguous (*Perceived Party Ambiguity* = 0) even though it is in fact somewhat ambiguous (*Actual Party Ambiguity* = 2.68), they underestimate their policy distance by about .46 units on an 11-point scale. When they, instead, perceive the very same party as very ambiguous (*Perceived Party Ambiguity* = 10), they overestimate their policy distance to the party by about 1.35 units (i.e., the predicted *Policy Distance Underestimation* becomes negative).

¹⁴Further, the party’s actual policy ambiguity is 2.68, it is no government member, has a seat share of 12.69 percent and is a mainstream party. The respondent has a political sophistication score of 3.62, is almost 49 years old and male.

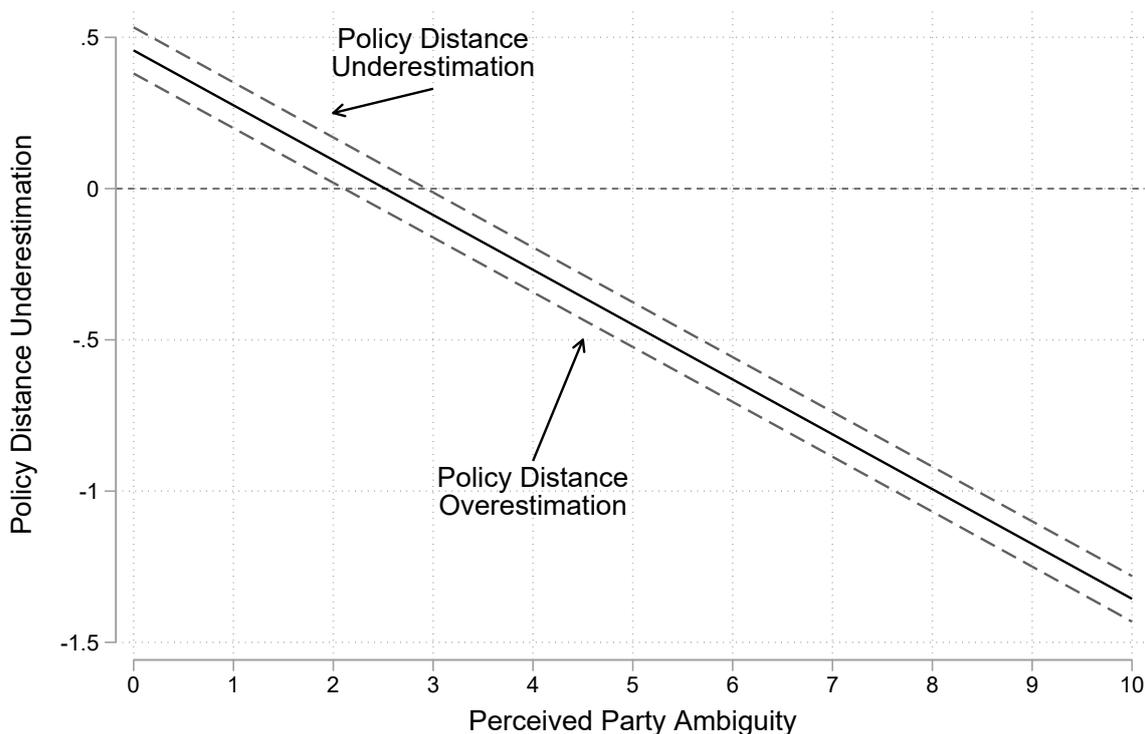
Table 2. Determinants of Underestimation in Perceived Voter-Party Distance

	DV: Policy Distance Underestimation	
	Model 6	Model 7
Actual Party Ambiguity	0.111* (0.057)	0.108* (0.054)
Perceived Party Ambiguity	-0.058** (0.009)	-0.026** (0.009)
Actual Party Ambiguity × Perceived Party Ambiguity	-0.054** (0.003)	-0.058** (0.003)
Government Member		-0.111 (0.068)
Party Seat Share		-0.007** (0.002)
Niche Party		0.000 (0.054)
Partisan		0.626** (0.016)
Political Sophistication		-0.046** (0.007)
Age		-0.011** (0.000)
Female		-0.041** (0.016)
Constant	0.291 [†] (0.157)	0.960** (0.164)
Ranef - Country	0.004** (0.005)	0.004** (0.005)
Ranef - Party	0.069** (0.011)	0.057** (0.009)
Ranef - Individual	0.775** (0.012)	0.739** (0.011)
Ranef - Residual	2.584** (0.011)	2.554** (0.010)
Observations (Individuals)	19269	19269
Observations (Individual-Party Dyads)	139600	139600
Log-likelihood	-275419	-274366

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, [†] $p < 0.1$

Figure 4. Effect of Actual Party Ambiguity on Policy Distance Underestimation by Perceived Party Ambiguity



So even at the average level of actual party ambiguity that we observe in our data, perceived ambiguity changes perceived policy proximity by up to 1.8 units on an eleven-point scale. This is a substantially highly relevant difference: In every country in our sample, there is at least one party whose closest competitor is less than 1.8 policy units away from it. In fact, 80% of all parties in our sample fall into this category. The evidence thus clearly corroborates the Perceived Proximity Hypothesis and its high relevance.¹⁵

¹⁵The results in Table 2 also suggest that *Perceived Party Ambiguity* may be associated with higher perceived voter-party distances independent of a party's actual party ambiguity (see the negative, statistically and substantially significant coefficient on the *Perceived Party Ambiguity* variable). We are wary to interpret the results this way because we lack a plausible theoretical argument that *Perceived Party Ambiguity* affects distance underestimation independent of party ambiguity. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to theorize such an effect or any other effect perceived party ambiguity may have on vote choice and other political behavior, we call on future research to obtain more detailed answers.

Our findings therefore suggest a rather complicated story. On the one hand, as prior work has demonstrated (Somer-Topcu 2015; Lehrer and Lin 2020; Lin and Lehrer 2021), parties can indeed act ambiguously as a means to fool voters into believing that the party is substantially closer to them than it actually is. On the other hand, the strategy of beclouding actual policy intentions to appeal broadly is a double-edged sword. As long as voters do not realize that a party is ambiguous, voters are likely to underestimate the policy distance between themselves and the ambiguous party. Yet, once they detect the party's ambiguous stances, they are likely to push the party away ideologically. Importantly, our results suggest that both political parties' actual level of policy ambiguity and voters' perceptions of party ambiguity together structure how voters gauge policy proximity to political parties, and in turn, shape their voting behavior (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Franchino and Zucchini 2015).

Conclusion

The causes and consequences of party ambiguity as a communication strategy of political parties have motivated a vibrant literature over the past years. Yet, how citizens perceive the extent to which political parties present ambiguous stances has so far received little scholarly attention. In this paper, we contribute to this literature by empirically investigating the extent to which voters' perceptions of a party's ambiguity reflect the party's actual ambiguity. We also offer several theoretical propositions to explain the variation in the correspondence between actual party ambiguity and voter perceptions, and provide corresponding empirical evidence. Moreover, we make another step forward by re-visiting the debate about the impact of party ambiguity on voters' electoral choices and introduce ambiguity perceptions to the debate. More precisely, we argue and empirically demonstrate that voters' perceived party ambiguity is a critical mediator that modifies the effect of an ambiguous platform on voters' perceived ideological distance to the ambiguous party (and by implication voters' support for the party on election day).

Overall, our results have important implications for the scholarly understanding of

how citizens make vote choices, how political scientists should develop and test theories pertaining to party ambiguity, and for future research that studies parties' communication strategies. With respect to the process by which voters make vote choices, we conclude that individual characteristics such as political sophistication and partisan preference as well as perceptions of party politics shape to what extent voters perceive a party as ambiguous or not. These findings contribute to the vast literature in Political Psychology that studies the cognitive determinants of political behavior (Slothuus and De Vreese 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2011; Plescia, Kritzinger and Eberl 2020). At the same time, this literature suggests a list of factors including character traits that are found to shape perceptions, and in turn, behavior in similar contexts (Nasr 2021; Martin 2019). As it is beyond this paper to theorize about and test all of the respective mechanisms, our results give rise to a new research agenda on the determinants of party ambiguity perceptions.

The findings also have clear implications for future research on how to refine theories on the links between party ambiguity and vote choices. Our findings shed severe doubt on the conventional assumption that some levels of objectively measurable party ambiguity at the party level corresponds to an equal amount of perceived party ambiguity for each voter (Shepsle 1972; Bräuninger and Giger 2018). While our contribution stops short of demonstrating to what extent conflicting results in the party competition literature that explores the electoral consequences of party ambiguity can be attributed to this assumption, it is plausible that previous mixed findings evolve at least partially due to ignoring perceptions of party ambiguity. We are convinced, however, that future research efforts will benefit greatly from including notions of heterogeneous perceptions of party ambiguity in to both theoretical and empirical models. Our results, for instance, suggest that partisans are more prone to vote for a party that does not represent them, simply because they are less aware of their favored party's ambiguity. In similar contexts, the implication of party ambiguity perceptions for political representation in democracies will become clear.

Finally, our results are of great relevance to our understanding of how political parties communicate with voters and whether these strategies work. Our main finding suggests

that the public's perceptions of parties' ambiguity are not only structured by actual party actions but also shaped by individual characteristics. This adds to the literature on pandering and group-tailored campaign messages (Hersh and Schaffner 2013) by outlining what voters learn about party ambiguity, under what circumstances they learn about it, and how they respond to it. Also, consistent with previous findings, our results suggest that whether parties benefit electorally from presenting ambiguous platforms is largely conditional on voters' perceptions or awareness of certain party and issue features (Ezrow, Homola and Tavits 2014; Tolvanen, Tremewan and Wagner 2021; Han 2020; Lehrer and Lin 2020; Nasr Forthcoming). Clearly, there is a tradeoff to make when parties decide to becloud their stances in a fog of ambiguity. As a consequence, we call upon political scientists scrutinizing the strategic decisions of parties to study if the heterogeneity in the public's perceptions of party ambiguity (or other party features) we demonstrate here dampens or facilitates parties' efforts to communicate a particular image to (specific) voters.

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Online Appendix 1 Question Wording

Perceived Party Ambiguity

Political parties usually make statements about what policies they want to pursue. These statements can be vague or concrete. Using a scale from 1 to 11, where 1 means very vague and 11 means very concrete, how vague or concrete do you think are the overall policy goals of each of the following parties?

- Order of parties was randomized
- Answer options (single choice): 1 (Very vague)- 11 (Very concrete), don't know

Actual Party Ambiguity (Survey Based)

In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place the following parties on a scale from 1 to 11, where 1 means the left and 11 means the right?

- Order of parties was randomized
- Answer options (single choice): 1 (Left) - 11 (Right), don't know

Perceived Internal Fights

Members of a political party sometimes express opposing views. Using a scale from 1 to 11, where 1 means highly divided and 11 means highly united, how divided or united do you think is each of the following parties?

- Order of parties was randomized
- Answer options (single choice): 1 (Highly divided) - 11 (Highly united), don't know

Political Sophistication

To what extent would you say you are interested in politics? Please indicate your interest using a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 means "not interested at all" and 5 means "very interested".

- Answer options (single choice): 1 (Not interested at all) - 11 (Very interested), don't know

Party Identification

Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party? If so, please tell us which party you feel closest to.

- Answer options (single choice): List of parties in respective country (randomized), not close to any party, don't know

Age

How old are you?

- Answer options: Open text

Female

What is your gender?

- Answer options (single choice): Male, female

Political Knowledge: Prime minister party

Which of the following parties, in your opinion, currently holds the Prime Minister post?

- Answer options (single choice): List of parties in respective country (randomized), other party, don't know

Political Knowledge: Government party

Which if any of the following parties are, in your opinion, represented in the current national government? You can choose more than one party.

- Answer options (multiple choice): List of parties in respective country (randomized), don't know

Online Appendix 2 Descriptive Statistics

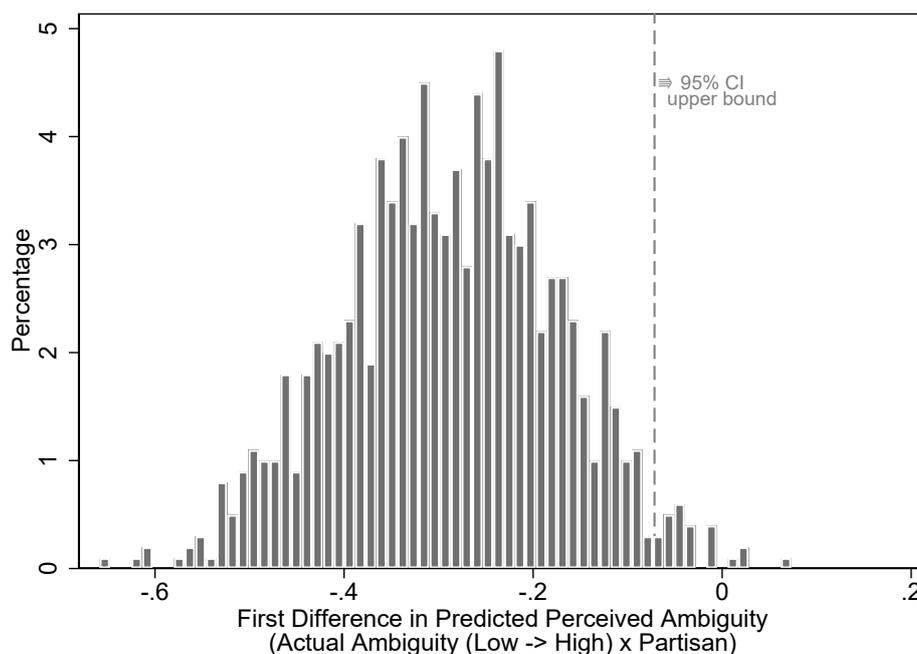
Table A1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Perceived Party Ambiguity	5.159	2.668	0	10
Actual Party Ambiguity	2.676	0.526	1.273	4.343
Political Sophistication	3.620	1.141	0	5
Partisan	0.089	–	0	1
Perceived Party Unity	5.161	2.579	0	10
Niche Party	0.437	–	0	1
Party Seat Share	12.692	13.627	0	58.8
Government Member	0.262	–	0	1
Age	48.729	16.852	18	99
Female	0.425	–	0	1
Perceived Proximity to Party	3.011	2.552	0	10
Distance Underestimation	-.470	1.941	-8.372	8.735

Online Appendix 3 Predicted Perceived Ambiguity, Actual Party Ambiguity, and Partisans

Here we provide an alternative examination to investigate the difference between partisans and non-partisans. Specifically, we calculate the first differences in predicted perceived ambiguity of an average party between partisans and non-partisans while allowing the actual party ambiguity moving from its minimum value to its maximum value. Using simulated parameters derived from Model 5, we calculate the predicted first difference 1,000 times and then plot the distribution of them in Figure A1. When the party increases its actual ambiguity, the mean difference in perceived ambiguity between partisans and non-partisans is $-.289$ (with $[-.510, -.072]$ as the 95% confidence interval), suggesting that partisans indeed perceive a lower level of party ambiguity than their non-partisans counterparts when the party moves its actual ambiguity to a greater level. Again, this is in line with our expectation depicted in the Partisanship Hypothesis.

Figure A1. First Differences in Predicted Perceived Ambiguity between Partisans and Non-Partisans When Actual Party Ambiguity Moves from Low to High



Online Appendix 4 Robustness Check: Alternative Measurement of Political Sophistication

In the main text, we operationalize political sophistication with references to political interest (e.g., Tilley and Hobolt 2011). Political sophistication, however, is often also measured by assessing respondents' political knowledge (e.g., Slothuus and De Vreese 2010). In the following, we demonstrate that our substantive results remain unchanged when we replace the interest-based measure by a knowledge-based measure.

We construct our political knowledge score using answers to the two factual political knowledge questions that were included in the survey: 1) Which party currently holds the premiership? 2) Which parties form the current national government? To answer the second question correctly, a respondent needs to identify all government parties as such and must not label any opposition parties as government members. Our political knowledge score captures how many of these items a respondent solves correctly. Consequently, the variable *Political Sophistication (Knowledge)* ranges from 0 to 2.

Table A2 shows the results of replicating Models 2 and Model 5 (full model) from Table 1 while replacing *Political Sophistication* with *Political Sophistication (Knowledge)*. A first comparison of the results immediately reveals that findings are very similar. In particular, all findings reported in the main text hold up. The one potentially relevant difference is that the coefficient on the *Actual Party Ambiguity* variable is no longer statistically significant in the full model. However, recall that due to the interaction variables, the coefficient on the *Actual Party Ambiguity* variable reports the effects for a very specific type of respondent, i.e., someone who fails to answer any of the political knowledge questions. In our sample, less than 17% of respondents fall into this category. Once the *Political Sophistication (Knowledge)* variable is set to a value that represents the samples in the twelve surveyed countries more accurately, the effect of *Actual Party Ambiguity* on *Perceived Party Ambiguity* becomes substantively positive and statistically significant. Together, these results corroborate both the General Correspondence Hypothesis as well

as the Political Sophistication Hypothesis.

Table A2. Robustness Check: Replacing Political Interest with Political Knowledge

	DV: Perceived Party Ambiguity	
	Model A2	Model A3
Actual Party Ambiguity	-0.140 (0.136)	0.051 (0.097)
Political Sophistication (Knowledge)	-0.671** (0.070)	-0.368** (0.060)
Ambiguity × Political Sophistication (Knowledge)	0.282** (0.025)	0.176** (0.022)
Partisan		-0.799** (0.096)
Ambiguity × Partisan		-0.080* (0.037)
Perceived Party Unity		-0.401** (0.011)
Ambiguity × Perceived Party Unity		-0.032** (0.004)
Niche Party	-0.390** (0.125)	-0.231** (0.086)
Party Seat Share	-0.017** (0.005)	-0.011** (0.004)
Government Member	-0.099 (0.157)	0.022 (0.107)
Age	0.002* (0.001)	0.002** (0.001)
Female	-0.122** (0.023)	-0.149** (0.018)
Perceived Distance to Party	0.366** (0.002)	0.214** (0.002)
Constant	4.693** (0.416)	7.070** (0.294)
Ranef - Country	0.176** (0.091)	0.076** (0.039)
Ranef - Party	0.303** (0.046)	0.141** (0.022)
Ranef - Individual	1.898** (0.025)	1.099** (0.016)
Ranef - Residual	3.977** (0.016)	3.059** (0.012)
Observations (Individuals)	19269	19269
Observations (Individual - Party Dyads)	139600	139600
Log-likelihood	-308778	-288432

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