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When shifting backfires: the electoral consequences of responding to niche party EU positions

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ABSTRACT


Recent research has shown that mainstream political parties shift their positions on European integration in response to threats from niche parties. Whether or not this strategy affects the electoral fortunes of mainstream parties remains unclear, however. Drawing on both spatial and issue competition models of party competition, this study examines how mainstream political party accommodation of niche party position on the issue of European integration affects mainstream party electoral success. Using fixed-effects panel regression models, we investigate the effect of mainstream parties becoming more Eurosceptic in the face of a radical right political party on the size of the mainstream party's vote share. We show that position shifts towards Euroscepticism are detrimental to centre-right mainstream party success when faced with a radical right party that has seen more electoral success. Our findings have important implications for our understanding of party competition and electoral responsiveness in the European Union.

KEYWORDS European integration; Euroscepticism; issue competition; niche parties; party competition; spatial theory

Mainstream political parties tend to respond to electorally successful niche parties by changing their policy positions. Research shows that mainstream parties, fearing the loss of voters to niche party challengers, often engage in a practice known as accommodation, i.e. moving their positions toward the positions of the niche party on the niche party's issue (Abou-Chadi 2016; Meguid 2008; Meijers 2017). Yet, the electoral repercussions of accommodating niche party positions have, to date, not been empirically tested. Applied to the issue of European integration, this study fills this gap by establishing what the effects are of mainstream party shifts towards niche party positions on the electoral success of said mainstream party.

Meguid (2008) argues that mainstream parties can counter a niche party threat by adopting positions similar to niche parties. In Meguid's model,

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niche parties lose votes when mainstream parties adopt a position similar to the niche party's. As a consequence, it is often assumed that moving towards a niche party's position, i.e., employing an accommodative strategy, wins a mainstream party votes or prevents vote loss, at the very least. Yet, we argue that this is a superficial reading of Meguid's contribution.

The timing of the accommodative strategy is crucially important for mainstream party success. Meguid (2008: 275) finds that 'an established party's ability to undermine a niche party ultimately rests on its implementation of accommodative tactics *prior to the reputational entrenchment of the niche party* as the only credible issue promoter' [emphasis added]. In order to entrench its reputation as an issue 'owner', the niche party must secure a sizeable share of the vote (Petrocik 1996).

Hence, we argue that the electoral consolidation of a niche party makes mainstream party accommodative strategies risky. Both the electoral success of the niche party and the mainstream parties' policy shifts further increase the saliency of the niche party's issue – while also strengthening the niche party's issue ownership (Petrocik 1996). As such, we expect mainstream parties' strategic responses to niche party challengers to backfire when the niche party in question is electorally successful.

We test this theoretical proposition by systematically examining the electoral effects of mainstream party movements towards the radical right's position on the issue of European Union (EU) integration. Mainstream parties have been shown to respond to radical right success by decreasing their support for EU integration (Meijers 2017). The EU issue is a good issue to test this proposition as mainstream parties generally share pro-EU positions, while the radical right can be considered an 'issue owner' of outright EU opposition (de Vries and Edwards 2009; de Vries and Hobolt 2012; Williams and Ishiyama 2018).

Specifically, we examine the effect of a mainstream party's positional shift on the EU issue on its vote share in the face of radical right party electoral success. To do so, we use data derived from the Manifesto Research Group/Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) data set (Volkens et al. 2017), supplemented with election data from ParlGov (Döring & Manow 2019).

Our findings show that mainstream parties do not win votes when shifting their positions towards Euroscepticism in the face of a more electorally successful radical right party. Instead, centre-right party vote shares decrease when mainstream parties become more Eurosceptic and radical right parties have established electoral success. Centre-left party shifts towards Euroscepticism do not appear to affect their vote share.

This study sheds doubt on the efficacy of co-opting competitors' policy positions, at least for the EU issue and suggests that the electoral context in which policy accommodation takes place matters for parties' electoral fortunes. The findings indicate that if mainstream political parties do not

quickly accommodate niche parties after their initial emergence, those parties may present substantial difficulties for the party system further down the road. Moreover, late accommodation not only fails to neutralize the niche party threat, it may also have lasting implications for the distribution of EU preferences in domestic politics. Bringing Euroscepticism to the political centre can lend further credibility to Eurosceptic niche parties. As political parties play an important role in shaping citizens' preferences (Steenbergen et al. 2007), increasing centrist Euroscepticism can have a profound impact on voter's EU preferences. As we have seen in the case of Brexit, such potential consequences of Eurosceptic accommodation are no trivial matter.

In addition, these findings may be applicable beyond the issue of European integration. Increasingly, research points to the idea that parties' policy change may prove detrimental to those parties, especially in the long-term. Karreth et al. (2012) and Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2019) have found that right-ward shifts of centre-left parties, both on economic and cultural issues, are not a recipe for electoral success. Instead, when voters dismiss a parties' policy change to be insincere and strategic in nature (Fernandez-Vazquez 2019), this may lead to electoral punishment (Tomz and Van Houweling 2016).

Programmatic responses to the niche party threat

Spatial theory of party competition treats political parties as rational unitary actors with the aim of vote-maximization (Downs 1957). A central thrust of spatial theory is that a party's policy positions are significantly shaped by their political surroundings (Adams 2012). Scholars have found that political parties shift their general left-right positions in response to changes in public opinion on the left-right dimension (Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow et al. 2010) and in public opinion on specific policy issues such as immigration (Vranceanu 2019) or European integration (Spoon and Williams 2017; Williams and Spoon 2015). Crucially, political competitors can also exert a strong influence on a party's policy programme. For instance, political parties adapt their positions in response to policy shifts of political rivals in a previous election period (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009).

Not all political competitors are equally threatening, however. Issue competition theory informs us that parties try to acquire a competitive advantage over other parties by emphasizing certain issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Carmines and Stimson 1986). By building a credible issue reputation, parties can assert issue ownership over specific policy issues (Petrocik 1996). Niche parties pose a particular electoral threat to mainstream parties as they mobilize on issues largely ignored by mainstream competitors – cross-cutting the dominant left-right dimension of party competition (Adams et al. 2006; Meguid 2005). Niche parties emphasize non-economic issues, such as the

environment, immigration policy, or European integration, and usually adopt extreme positions on these issues (Bischof 2017; Wagner 2012). Such an 'issue entrepreneurial' strategy tends to pay off in electoral terms (de Vries and Hobolt 2012).

In line with expectations of both spatial and issue competition theory, research has found that the electoral threat of niche parties motivates mainstream parties to shift their positions on the niche issue (Meguid 2005, 2008). With respect to the issue of multiculturalism and immigration politics it has been found that both left and right mainstream parties react to the electoral support of radical right parties by moving towards more restrictive positions on immigration related policies (Abou-Chadi 2016; Van Spanje 2010; Wagner and Meyer 2017).

Importantly for the purpose of this contribution, the issue of European integration has also proven to be an issue on which mainstream parties shift position strategically in order to avoid vote loss (Meijers 2017). The European integration issue is orthogonal to the left-right dimension of party competition (Hix and Lord 1997; Van Der Brug and Van Spanje 2009) and has been characterized by ideological convergence of mainstream parties on pro-EU positions. This makes the issue particularly attractive for niche parties to mobilize on. The pro-EU consensus among mainstream parties opened up ideological space for niche parties to stress a Eurosceptic position – making mainstream parties vulnerable to flank attacks (de Vries and Edwards 2009; de Vries and Hobolt 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2018).

Indeed, the electoral threat of Eurosceptic radical right parties induces mainstream parties to tone down their support for European integration (Meijers 2017). The idea that mainstream parties are susceptible to domestic Euroscepticism is also corroborated by research finding that mainstream and governing parties respond to Eurosceptic public opinion by changing their EU positions (Spoon and Williams 2017; Williams and Spoon 2015) and by increased opposition to legislative proposals in the Council of Ministers (Hagemann et al. 2017). And while the EU issue has not always been salient, Eurosceptic parties are known to drive the salience of EU issues (Grande and Hutter 2016; Meijers and Rauh 2016).

The effect of shifting towards niche parties on mainstream party electoral fortunes

While the literature on party policy change has made important advances in explaining *why* parties adapt their policy programmes, the electoral *consequences* of such programmatic shifts have been left largely unexplored. This study aims to fill this lacuna.

Meguid (2005, 2008) argued that the success of niche parties depends in part on the programmatic strategies of mainstream parties on the niche

party issue. Meguid found that niche parties lose electoral support when both centrist mainstream parties adopt a position similar to the niche party's. Doing so, a mainstream party challenges the niche party's exclusive ownership of the issue. As a result, it is often assumed in the literature that moving to a niche party's position is electorally beneficial for a mainstream party. After all, if a niche party loses votes, the mainstream party gains votes or, at least, prevents vote loss.

We argue that this is a superficial reading of Meguid's contribution. Meguid also argues that the timing of the accommodative strategy is of crucial importance. Indeed, 'a mainstream party's ability to acquire issue ownership – the key mechanism of accommodation – is severely limited once the window of ownership opportunity is closed and the niche party's reputation as the rightful issue owner is entrenched' (Meguid 2008: 51).

But how do niche parties entrench a reputation as an issue owner? While elevated issue emphasis is a necessary condition of issue ownership (see Abou-Chadi 2016; Meijers and van der Veer 2019), it is not a sufficient condition. To assert issue ownership, parties must convey to be viable and credible 'handlers' of the issue in question (Petrocik 1996). Establishing electoral success is a way of gaining public legitimacy as a significant political competitor. Hence, electoral fortune is a key ingredient in *attaining* as well as *maintaining* the reputation of a credible 'issue owner'.

Consider the issue of European integration in Germany. While both the electorally successful *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and the electorally negligible *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD) principally reject the EU, the AfD can be considered the issue owner rather than the NPD. In short, electoral success is another necessary condition for establishing a durable reputation as 'issue owner'. In line with this argument, Meguid's (2008: 275) case studies of the French *Front National* and the *Scottish National Party* show that for an accommodative strategy to be successful, mainstream parties must move *before* the niche party has become electorally successful (Meguid 2008: 275).

Moreover, a mainstream party's accommodative strategy also increases the salience of the niche issue (Meguid 2005, 2008). If the mainstream party manages to become the issue owner, this increased issue salience can be to their advantage. If the niche party remains the rightful issue owner due to its electoral gain, a mainstream party's shift toward the niche party's position is likely to do more harm than good. In this scenario, the accommodative strategy drives the salience of an issue on which the niche party holds issue ownership – giving voters more cause for abandoning the mainstream party in favour of the niche party. At the same time, increased issue salience may alienate more moderate voters from the mainstream party in question. Contingent on the extent to which more moderate voters find the issue salient, they could opt to defect to a steadfast party.

Hypotheses

In this study, we examine the electoral repercussions for mainstream parties of accommodating a niche party on the issue of European integration. We argue that the EU issue is particularly suited to study the electoral repercussions of responding to niche parties for a number of reasons. First, while the EU issue has been characterized as a 'sleeping giant' (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004) – i.e., an issue with low public salience but high politicization potential, scholars have shown that the EU salience in domestic political contestation has increased considerably since the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Not only has the EU issue gained visibility in public debate, the EU issue has also become increasingly politicized (Grande and Hutter 2016; Rauh 2018).

Furthermore, EU issue voting literature has established that voter dispositions towards Europe can be an important determinant for vote choice in national elections (de Vries 2007, 2010). Mainstream parties, thus, have reason to believe that their EU positions matter for voters' party choice (see Meijers 2017).

Additionally, the EU issue is particularly suited to test the theoretical implications of issue ownership. First, although both radical right and radical left parties propagate Eurosceptic positions, radical right parties are considered to be 'hard Eurosceptics' that reject supranational integration in principle, whereas radical left parties tend towards 'soft Euroscepticism' inspired by opposition to market liberalism, and thus, preferring institutional reform rather than immediate EU exit (de Wilde and Trenz 2012; Williams and Ishiyama 2018).

Findings that the radical right drives the salience of the EU issue in domestic public debate are also indicative of the radical right's issue ownership¹ of 'hard Euroscepticism' (Grande and Hutter 2016; Meijers and Rauh 2016). By assessing the effects of accommodation of the radical right,² the EU issue allows us to test the expectation that the *issue owner* should affect mainstream parties.

Second, to assess the consequences of Eurosceptic party success for mainstream party behaviour, it is imperative to separate the impact of the Eurosceptic party from changes in public opinion. To do so, one must control for public opinion on the EU issue. The EU issue is one of the few 'niche' issues for which extended time-series public opinion data are available.

Turning to our expectations, we argue that a mainstream party faces a dilemma when it considers shifting its position toward the stance of a Eurosceptic radical right party challenger. If a mainstream party *does not* shift towards the Eurosceptic radical right party, it may risk losing voters to the challenger. However, if a mainstream party *does* shift to a more Eurosceptic position it risks increasing the salience of the EU integration issue. This may be particularly detrimental when the Eurosceptic radical right competitor is electorally

successful – securing its issue ownership of EU integration. This drives voters away from mainstream parties and towards a Eurosceptic radical right party.

Taken together, it can be hypothesized:

H1: Mainstream party policy change towards a Eurosceptic position (between $t-1$ and t_0) will result in a lower vote share at t_0 for the mainstream party when the radical right party received a larger share of the vote in the previous election ($t-1$).

Further, mainstream party shifts towards radical right party positions should not affect all mainstream parties equally. Research on electoral volatility has found that voters are more likely to switch to ideologically closer parties than to switch between ‘blocks’ (Bartolini and Mair 1990; van der Meer et al. 2015). The competition for votes is therefore fiercest among proximate competitors. Although both centre-right and centre-left are shown to respond to the mobilization of culturally conservative positions to appeal to the culturally conservative working-class (Abou-Chadi 2016; Meijers 2017), voters are less likely to switch across ‘blocks’ from the centre-left to the radical right.

Also, because niche party issues appeal differently to the voter bases of different mainstream parties, we expect divergent electoral effects of shifting toward niche party positions. The European integration issue is a case in point. The radical right’s opposition to European integration is rooted in their nativist rejection of non-native elements in society and politics (Mudde 2007: 159). Pooling sovereignty beyond the nation-state, creating a common currency, and effectively removing borders between member-states contrasts with the radical right’s understanding of ‘the nation’ as the only legitimate political community. The positional shift towards an electorally successful radical right party would therefore increase the salience of such cultural Euroscepticism. Hence, voters concerned with the EU issue for these reasons are likely to abandon the mainstream party for the radical right party. Yet, Eurosceptic mobilization on such nativist bases is likely to appeal more strongly to centre-right than centre-left voters. Therefore, one would expect the negative electoral effect of shifting towards a less pro-EU position in the face of a successful radical right competitor to be more pronounced for the centre-right than the centre-left.

Thus, it can be hypothesized:

H2: Shifting towards a Eurosceptic position (between $t-1$ and t_0) when the radical right party received a larger share of the vote in the previous election ($t-1$) more strongly reduces the vote share for centre-right parties than for centre-left parties at t_0 .

Data and methods

The dependent variable for the above hypotheses is the vote share of mainstream political parties in national elections in 14 EU member-states (Austria,

Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, and United Kingdom). Our independent variables require that data is restricted to these 14 countries, as these are the only countries in which we have data on radical right party vote share in multiple elections. This data ranges from 1979 through 2015.

In measuring this variable, we use data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2017) to identify mainstream parties in a country at the time of an election. A mainstream party is defined according to its party family affiliation. We consider any social democratic, liberal, Christian democratic, or conservative party to be mainstream. The CMP reports the proportion of the vote each party received in an election. This value was multiplied by 100 to calculate the percentage of the vote each mainstream party received in an election. Thus, the theoretical range for this variable is 0–100, with a mean of 17.537 and standard deviation of 12.923.³

Hypothesis 1 expects that a mainstream party's shift in EU position affects its vote share when a radical right party has been more successful in a country. This hypothesis is tested by estimating the multiplicative interaction effect between the degree of mainstream party movement towards Euroscepticism, measured using data regarding the EU position of a mainstream party derived from CMP data, and the electoral success of the radical right party in a country on the mainstream party's vote share.

The degree of movement towards Euroscepticism is operationalized as the change in the difference in the log of the percentages of Eurosceptic and Europhilic 'quasi-sentences' in a party's manifesto (for more on why the difference in the log of the percentages is used, see Lowe et al. 2011) between the elections at times t_0 and t_1 .

Radical right parties are defined as any party that is designated 'nationalist' in the CMP data.⁴ The measure of electoral success of radical right parties is based on CMP data.⁵ The electoral success of radical right parties is measured as the percentage of the vote each radical right party received in the most recent national election before an observation's focal election. If the observation concerns a mainstream party in election t_0 , radical right electoral success is measured as the percentage of the vote the radical right party in a country received in the election at time t_1 . For example, if the mainstream party in an observation is the Dutch CDA in 2012, the measure of radical right party electoral success would be the percentage of the vote received by the PVV in 2010.⁶ In addition to the interaction term, the constitutive variables of the interaction are included as variables (see Brambor et al. 2006).

Hypothesis 2 expects different effects for centre-right and centre-left mainstream parties. In testing this hypothesis, the same independent variable as used in testing Hypothesis 1 is used, however, two tests are conducted. In the first test, we restrict the sample to centre-right mainstream parties (i.e., conservative parties, Christian democratic parties, and some liberal parties⁷).

The second test restricts the data to centre-left parties (i.e., social democratic parties and some liberal parties).

Beyond the main interaction term and its constituent parts, we also include a number of control variables in the analysis. As research regarding retrospective voting suggests that members of government can be rewarded or punished for actions taken in government (e.g., Lewis-Beck 2006), we include a dummy variable indicating whether a party is a member of the cabinet at election time. As economic factors may influence the fortunes of both mainstream and niche parties, we include a control for the GDP/capita (in 2018 US dollars) of a country at the time of an election. Additionally, we control for the logged right-left position of each mainstream party. Further, as the introduction of the single currency, the Euro, is often understood as a turning point in the politicization of the EU (Guinaudeau and Persico 2013; Schimmelfennig 2014), we may see different effects of positions regarding European integration on vote share after the introduction of the Euro. Therefore, we include a dummy variable indicating if an observation occurred after the country within which a party competes had adopted the Euro.⁸

It is also important to control for public attitudes towards the EU, thus we include a measure of aggregate public Euroscepticism in the year prior to an election.⁹ To account for changes in the salience of the European integration issue, we included a variable indicating the year of an observation. This accounts for salience as research suggests the EU has become more important to the public over time (Franklin and Wlezien 1997; Rauh 2018).¹⁰

Importantly, Meguid (2005, 2008) argued that the effect of a mainstream party response on niche party success depends, in part, on how the competing mainstream party responds. If a mainstream party is closer to another mainstream party, vote share may decrease as these two mainstream parties compete for the same voters. Therefore, we control for the distance between the focal mainstream party and the nearest mainstream party on the EU issue.

Following Spoon et al. (2014), who found that electoral system permissiveness influences vote choice, we have included a control for the average district magnitude in a country. This data is drawn from Bormann and Golder (2013).

In order to isolate the effect of focal party movements, we control for the average party system shift on the European integration issue. This is measured as the average of change in the difference in the log of the percentages of Eurosceptic and Europhilic 'quasi-sentences' in the manifestos for non-focal mainstream parties in a system. Further, we control for the average shift on the left-right spectrum for mainstream parties, excluding the focal party, in a system.

As radical left parties have been shown to take, at the very least, 'soft Eurosceptic' positions (see Williams and Ishiyama 2018), we control for the

strength of radical left parties in a party system. Thus, we have included a measure of the vote share of all radical left parties in a system at time $t-1$.¹¹

As our dependent variable is continuous, the most appropriate method is ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. However, as this data is time-series cross-sectional it is important to control for the effect of the dependent variable at time t_{-j} . Therefore, we include a lagged version of the dependent variable on the right-hand side of the equation. Further, we include fixed-effects and cluster the standard errors on the country.¹²

Findings

Model 1 (Table 1) is a baseline model in which the independent effects of mainstream party shifts regarding European integration are calculated for the entire sample (all mainstream parties) excluding the main interaction terms. The measure of mainstream party shifts regarding European integration shows a negative coefficient, suggesting that mainstream party vote share in an election is lower when they have moved towards greater Euroscepticism. However, this finding is not statistically significant, suggesting, a mainstream party shifting towards Euroscepticism does not increase or decrease its overall vote share.

Model 2 (Table 1), a direct test of Hypothesis 1, includes the interaction between mainstream party shifts regarding the issue of European integration and radical right party success in the previous election. This interaction is statistically significant and negative. This indicates that when mainstream parties move towards greater Euroscepticism, and the radical right party in a country was more successful in the previous election, mainstream party vote share will be lower in the current election. This shows support for Hypothesis 1.¹³

To investigate the substantive effects, we computed marginal effects plots (see Brambor et al. 2006). The left panel of Figure 1 (based on Model 2) demonstrates the marginal effect of a mainstream party shift towards Euroscepticism on its vote share (y-axis) as the electoral success of a radical right party in a country varies (x-axis). The solid black line represents the expected marginal effect, while the dashed lines represent the 95% confidence intervals. The tick marks along the x-axis are the distribution of radical right party electoral success.

The left panel of Figure 1 shows a negative effect for mainstream party shifts towards Euroscepticism on mainstream party vote share at differing levels of success in the previous election. When the radical right party in a country had little success in the previous election, a shift towards Euroscepticism by a mainstream party has no discernible effect on mainstream party vote share. However, if a radical right party in a country garnered about 18% of the vote (about 9 percentage points above average for the sample) in the previous election, there is a clear negative effect of mainstream party

Table 1. Effect of mainstream shifts on mainstream vote share.

DV: Mainstream party vote share	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Mainstream Party Vote Share _{<i>t-1</i>}	0.138	(0.182)	0.132	(0.178)	0.186	(0.158)
Δ MS Euroscepticism_{<i>t</i>}	-0.196	(0.455)	0.381	(0.455)	1.882***	(0.533)
Radical right Vote Share_{<i>t-1</i>}	0.014	(0.164)	0.015	(0.189)	0.158	(0.143)
Δ MS Euroscepticism_{<i>t</i>}*RR Vote Share_{<i>t-1</i>}	.	.	-0.063**	(0.028)	-0.143***	(0.034)
Member of Cabinet	-1.359	(1.685)	-1.255	(1.729)	-0.237	(1.049)
GDP/Capita _{<i>t</i>}	0.0002	(0.0002)	-0.0002	(0.0002)	-0.0001	(0.0002)
MS Right-Left Position	-0.750	(1.203)	-0.452	(1.194)	-2.862**	(1.281)
Single Currency Dummy	3.705*	(1.760)	3.589*	(1.872)	0.482	(3.091)
Public Euroscepticism _{<i>t-1</i>}	-17.108	(19.478)	-15.332	(18.917)	-6.306	(12.599)
Distance in Euroscepticism with Nearest Competitor	-1.239	(0.740)	-1.153	(0.766)	-0.303	(0.598)
Average District Magnitude	0.220	(0.137)	0.206	(0.137)	0.454***	(0.098)
Δ in Party System Euroscepticism	-0.601	(0.474)	-0.627	(0.481)	-0.568	(0.521)
Δ in Party System RL Position	-0.175	(0.912)	-0.239	(0.986)	0.743	(1.355)
Radical Left Vote Share _{<i>t-1</i>}	-17.631*	(9.897)	-18.000	(10.871)	12.055*	(5.717)
Year	-0.604	(0.399)	-0.642	(0.371)	-0.391	(0.402)
Intercept	1214.535	(798.7414)	1290.441	(741.538)	-780.111	(801.657)
<i>N</i>	192		192		100	
Clusters	14		14		14	
<i>R</i> ² Within	0.340		0.352		0.625	
<i>R</i> ² Between	0.024		0.030		0.018	
<i>R</i> ² Overall	0.003		0.003		0.002	
BIC	1172.045		1168.772		546.853	

Note: Table entries are OLS Regression coefficients with panel corrected standard errors, clustered by country, and fixed-effects. *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $p \leq 0.05$; * $p \leq 0.10$.

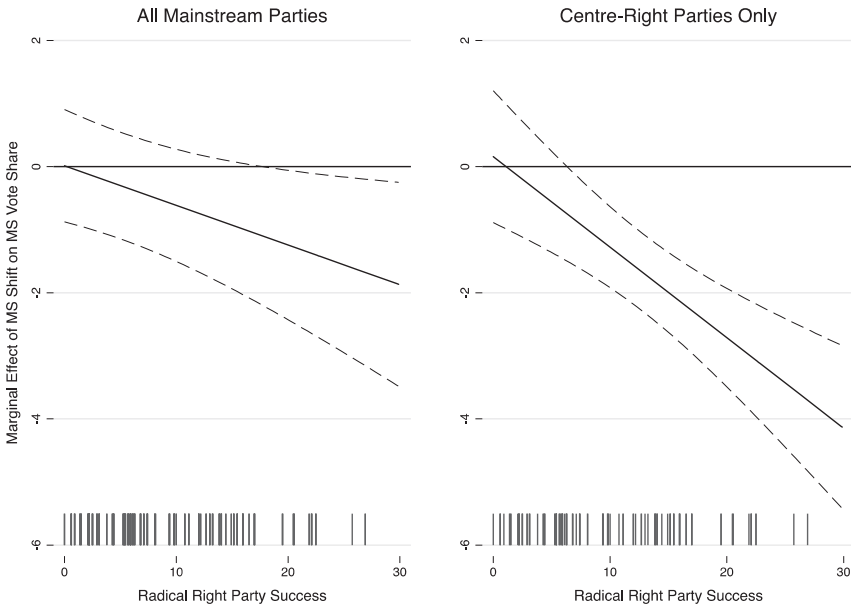


Figure 1. Effect of Mainstream Party Shifts on Vote Share as Radical Right Party Electoral Strength Varies.

Note: The left panel of this figure is based on Model 2 (Table 1). The right panel is based on Model 3 (Table 1).

shifts towards Euroscepticism on mainstream party vote share in the current election. These findings suggest, when all mainstream parties are pooled, radical right parties need to have a fairly sizable amount of success in order for accommodation to have a substantive effect on mainstream party vote share.

Yet, are these substantive effects equal for centre-right and centre-left parties? Theoretically, centre-right mainstream parties should be more affected by accommodation of radical right party positions on European integration, thus pooling centre-right and centre-left mainstream parties should produce smaller substantive findings. To test this, we estimate the effects of centre-left and centre-right parties separately. Model 3 (Table 1) shows the interaction between centre-right mainstream party shifts regarding European integration and radical right party success in the previous election is negative and statistically significant. This suggests that when centre-right parties shift towards greater Euroscepticism in the face of a more successful radical right party, they tend to lose votes.

The right panel of Figure 1 (based on Model 3) plots the marginal effect of a mainstream party shift towards Euroscepticism on mainstream party vote share (y-axis) as the electoral success of a radical right party in a country varies (x-axis) when restricting the sample to only centre-right parties.

When radical right parties saw less success in the previous election, centre-right mainstream parties shifting towards Euroscepticism has little discernible effect on centre-right mainstream party vote share in the current election. However, when radical right party electoral success in the previous election was greater, centre-right mainstream party shifts towards Euroscepticism have a greater effect on centre-right mainstream party vote share. This effect is much stronger than the effect found when pooling all mainstream parties. When the radical right party in a country received about 7% of the vote (about 2 percentage points below the average for the sample) in the previous election, a centre-right party moving towards Euroscepticism produces a clear negative effect on the centre-right party's vote share in the current election. These findings are in line with expectations of Hypothesis 2. Turning to the centre-left, as displayed in Model A1 (Table A.5), there is a positive, but statistically insignificant effect for the interaction between centre-left party shifts towards Euroscepticism and radical right party electoral success. In line with Hypothesis 2, therefore, the effect of accommodative strategies by centre-left mainstream parties on those parties' vote shares is not discernible from 0 (Model A2, Table A.5). Thus, it follows that the relatively small substantive findings seen in the left panel of [Figure 1](#) are a result of pooling centre-right and centre-left mainstream parties into the same model.

In sum, these results suggest support for both Hypotheses 1 and 2. Generally, when mainstream political parties shift towards Euroscepticism and radical right parties were more successful in the previous election, mainstream party vote shares in the current election are lower. This effect, however, is driven by centre-right parties, for which we find strongly significant effects. The findings for centre-left parties are more ambiguous, as we find a positive but statistically insignificant effect.

Conclusion

Research demonstrating that mainstream parties respond to niche parties by shifting their ideological positions has left an important question unanswered: what are the electoral consequences of such shifts? We have addressed this question theoretically and empirically. Combining insights from spatial theories of party competition and issue competition theory, we argue that positional shifts toward the niche party position are detrimental for a mainstream party's electoral success when the niche party is electorally successful. When a mainstream party responds to a niche party by moving its position on the issue in the direction of the niche party stance, it increases the salience of the niche issue and buttresses the niche party's issue ownership (Meguid 2008). Electorally successful niche parties, moreover, can assert stronger issue ownership – making the accommodative strategy risky. Voters attracted to the niche party issue are likely to vote for the

party they principally associate with the issue, the niche party, and are less likely to vote for the mainstream party.

We test this theoretical proposition with CMP data on the issue of European integration. European integration is an issue on which mainstream parties are shown to reposition themselves in response to Eurosceptic party success (Meijers 2017). Moreover, the EU issue has been increasingly subjected to politicization (Rauh 2018) and is an important element in determining vote choice (de Vries 2007, 2010). The empirical analysis was conducted on the basis of a fixed-effects panel regression analysis with a lagged dependent variable. We found empirical support for Hypothesis 1, which stipulated the expectation that a mainstream party shift on the niche party issue induces a lower vote share when the radical right competitor has been successful in the previous election. However, in line with Hypothesis 2, it appears that this finding is driven by centre-right parties losing votes when they move towards Euroscepticism.

Substantively, centre-right parties appear to lose vote share due to accommodation when radical right support reaches a fairly low threshold of about 7%. Thus, a radical right party receiving 14% of the vote in the previous election results in a mainstream centre-right party vote share being about 2 percentage points lower in the current election. For context, there have been multiple recent elections in European countries in which a radical right party was quite successful and the vote differential between a mainstream centre-right party and another mainstream party was about 2 percentage points. For example, in the 2012 French legislative election, the *Front National* received just shy of 14% of the vote, and the centre-right mainstream *Union Pour un Mouvement Populaire* fell short of the *Parti Socialiste* by a mere 2.3 percentage points. Further, we see in the 2012 Dutch election (which is a highly proportional system), the radical right PVV received 10% of the overall vote, while the difference between the centre-right VVD and the centre-left PvdA was 1.8 percentage points. This suggests that, while appearing relatively small, the substantive effects of radical right accommodation has the potential to greatly affect the results and overall outcome of elections.

Our finding that shifting toward the niche party's position is detrimental to a mainstream party's future vote share is in line with Meguid's argument that the ability to undermine a niche party depends on whether a mainstream party's accommodation of the niche party position occurs 'prior to the *reputational entrenchment* of the niche party as the only credible issue promoter' (Meguid 2008: 275, emphasis added).

These findings have important implications for the study of party competition. A wide range of studies have demonstrated that mainstream parties adapt their policy profile in the face of niche party challengers. The principal reason for shifting is that they regard the niche party competitor as an

electoral threat. By accommodating its position, it hopes to retain or re-establish its relative dominance in the party system. Our findings indicate that this is, electorally speaking, unwise. Mainstream parties, on average, do not win votes through policy accommodation, and may even lose votes when the niche party is electorally successful.

That said, these party-level estimates do not show how specific groups of voters have moved between parties. It is possible that the null effect of EU position change masks that some voters switch to the mainstream party, while others defect to the niche party or to a centrist competitor. Moreover, it is possible that the net outcome of vote loss for centrist parties that become more Eurosceptic when radical right parties are successful is a product of different groups of voters switching to and from the mainstream party. Future research should study these voter-level dynamics on the basis of individual-level panel data.

Moreover, the fact that mainstream parties generally lose votes, does not necessarily imply that a niche party competitor gains votes. It is also possible that voters opt for a different centrist party or do not turn out to vote at all. Future research should therefore study more explicitly the repercussions of mainstream policy change for niche parties. Further, while these findings are indicative of important short-term effects, the long-term effect might well be different (see Karreth et al. 2012). With the benefit of longer time-series, future studies can address this.

Our findings also have important consequences for the study of domestic party competition on European integration. In essence, we show that mainstream parties cannot afford to tone down their support for the European Union in the face of a radical right challenger, particularly when the radical right has become an established electoral force. If anything, mainstream parties' willingness to change their EU positions for strategic electoral reasons likely hurts their negotiation position in Brussels when in government. Moreover, as political parties also cue the mass public on the EU issue, lower levels of EU support among mainstream parties may well contribute to a more Eurosceptic public opinion (de Vries and Edwards 2009; Steenbergen et al. 2007).

What, then, can a mainstream party do to address the electoral threat posed by an already successful niche party? While definite answers to this question are beyond the scope of this study, it may be fruitful to speculate. Mainstream parties lose votes by shifting towards niche party positions, because they are further politicizing the issue(s) emphasized by a niche party. It may therefore prove beneficial for mainstream parties to adopt a proactive issue entrepreneurial strategy themselves, rather than being merely reactive. That is, mainstream parties may be able to draw voters back from niche parties if they can identify and (re)politicize an issue that has been previously ignored, thus drawing public attention away from the

issue owned by the niche party, and directing public attention to a 'new' issue over which the mainstream party can claim issue ownership.

Notes

1. Importantly, parties can be considered issue owners of multiple issue simultaneously. The radical right's ownership of the immigration issue does not preclude its ownership of 'hard Euroscepticism'.
2. While we do not report in the main body of this study the effects of accommodation of the radical left on mainstream party vote shares, we examine this effect, reporting the results in the appendix. The results suggest little effect of mainstream party accommodation of radical left EU positions on mainstream party vote share. This fits with the understanding in the existing literature of radical right parties as the 'issue owners' of Euroscepticism (de Wilde and Trezn 2012; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2000; Williams and Ishiyama 2018).
3. For descriptive statistics, see Table A.1-A.3 of the appendix.
4. The United Kingdom Independence Party is not included in the CMP data as a 'nationalist' party. However, we include UKIP as a radical right party as it has been included as such in previous research (see Williams and Ishiyama 2018). Models excluding the UK show similar results to the main findings of this study.
5. We supplemented missing data on radical right success with data from ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2018).
6. If multiple radical right parties competed in an election, the combined vote share was used.
7. Liberal parties with a right-left score above '0' in the CMP data are coded as centre-right parties. Liberal parties with a right-left score below '0' in the CMP data are coded as centre-left parties. Table A.4 shows how liberal parties were coded.
8. Models in which the Euro dummy variable are not included show similar effects for the main independent variables.
9. The Eurobarometer survey item which asks individuals if they believe their country's membership of the EU is a 'good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad' is available for 1979 to Spring 2010. Autumn 2010 onwards, the Eurobarometer survey series asked if individuals have a 'very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, or very negative' view of the EU. To get a full time-series, our measure of public Euroscepticism relies on both items by combining all 'negatives'.
10. Ideally, we would control for EU salience using a measure of the percentage of people in a country who report viewing the EU issue as one of the most important problems (MIP) facing their country. Unfortunately, MIP data cannot be obtained for all countries in this study for the examined time period.
11. We have also estimated models (see Table A.9 in the appendix) in which the main independent variable was an interaction between mainstream party shift towards Euroscepticism and radical left party success (defining radical left parties as parties that are coded as 'socialist' in the CMP data). Overall, we do not find a robust effect of the interaction between mainstream party shift towards Euroscepticism and radical left success.
12. To assess the robustness of the results, we have also conducted a number of alternative analyses. These are outlined in the appendix.

13. The interaction between mainstream party EU shifts and radical left party success ($t-1$) is not significant (See Table A.9 in the appendix).

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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