

When Can Political Parties Credibly Change Their Policies?

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When can a party credibly change its policy on an issue? No institution forces parties to keep their promises after being elected. Voters may thus view platform shifts as mere pandering, discounting their credibility. We propose that voters use the direction of a platform shift as a signal of the party's motives and policy commitment. Shifting to an unpopular position is a costly signal of principled motives, while moving toward a popular one suggests opportunistic ones. Two preregistered survey experiments, one evaluating a general setting and another focusing on a real case of mainstream party accommodation to the radical right, show that voters infer party motives and commitment from platform shifts in line with the predictions of our argument. Our study provides important insights into the electoral persistence of radical right parties, party system stability, and why platform shifts often fail to affect voter perceptions of party positions.

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In representative democracies, no institution binds parties to keep their election promises (Manin, 1997, p. 163).¹ A political party can campaign on a given set of policies and, once in power, implement different ones. This creates a fundamental challenge for the voter, who “cannot merely compare platforms; instead he must estimate in his own mind what the parties would actually do once in power” (Downs 1957, p. 39, Adams, Merrill and Grofman 2005). A party’s electoral incentives can make it particularly difficult for voters to overcome this challenge, since they can fuel the mismatch between the policies promised and the ones ultimately implemented. A vote-seeking party may endorse policies that are popular among voters even if it does not intend to implement them (Stokes, 2001).

When a party adopts a new policy position on an issue, do voters find the shift credible, trusting that the party will do what it says? While recent scholarship shows that voters tend to have reasonable beliefs about parties’ ideologies (e.g., Fortunato et al., 2021; Fortunato, Stevenson and Vonnahme, 2016; Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013), platform shifts often fail to change voters’ perceptions about parties’ policy positions (Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu, 2011; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009). One possible explanation is that voters do not find the shifts credible (Abou-Chadi, Cohen and Wagner, 2022; Adams, 2012; Spoon and Klüver, 2020). In particular, Fernandez-Vazquez (2019) argues that voters are especially prone to discount policy shifts toward popular policy positions, because voters cannot be sure whether the party sincerely has changed its position or is just saying this to win votes. Consistent with this argument, he finds that shifts toward electorally advantageous positions have smaller effects on voters’ perceptions of parties’ policy positions. The evidence for credibility discounting in the existing literature, however, remains indirect, relying on changes in perceived party positions rather than directly examining how voters interpret policy shifts. We know little about what inferences voters draw about the motives underlying the shift and the party’s commitment to the new policy.

We contribute to the literature by directly examining how voters interpret parties’ policy shifts. Building on Fernandez-Vazquez’s (2019) argument, we carefully trace the proposed mechanism from policy shifts to voters’ perceptions of party motives, policy commitment, and future behavior.

¹Replication materials and code can be found at Christensen and Fernandez-Vazquez (2026).

Our primary contribution, however, is empirical. Previous work inferred credibility discounting indirectly from voters' perceptions of party positions. Using two complementary preregistered survey experiments, we directly test whether voters interpret shifts toward unpopular positions as signals of principled motives and policy commitment, and shifts toward popular positions as signals of opportunistic and vote-seeking behavior.²

The first experiment evaluates the general implications of the theory in a highly controlled setting. Using hypothetical parties competing on an unnamed policy dimension, we manipulate whether parties shift toward or away from the position of most voters and examine how respondents interpret these shifts. The results provide strong support for the theory: shifts toward popular positions are perceived as more opportunistic and less credible, whereas shifts toward unpopular positions are perceived as more principled and committed. Yet, not shifting at all often signals credibility to an even greater extent than shifting toward an unpopular position.

The second experiment examines a substantively important application: mainstream party accommodation of the radical right (Meguid, 2005; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). Using the Swedish Social Democrats as a case, we examine the inferences voters draw from restrictive and generous immigration policy shifts. Consistent with our theory, respondents view the restrictive shift as less credible, inferring more opportunistic motives and weaker commitment to the policy. These effects are especially pronounced among supporters of the radical right, suggesting that voters discount popular policy shifts even when they prefer the policy itself.

Our findings have important implications for several literatures on party competition. We show that voters draw inferences about parties' motives and future behavior from their policy shifts, interpreting shifts toward popular positions as more opportunistic and less committed than shifts toward unpopular positions. First, they help explain the mixed success of accommodative strategies (Hjorth and Vinæs Larsen, 2022; Krause, Cohen and Abou-Chadi, 2023; Spoon and Klüver, 2020). If voters interpret shifts toward popular positions as opportunistic, accommodation may fail to attract supporters of competing parties despite reducing policy distance. Second, the

²The pre-analysis plans for both experiments are available at the Open Science Foundation: https://osf.io/s3j8f/?view_only=93d1538228fb4c0cb4ec90789d6ec3e9

results shed light on the stability of issue ownership (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Tresch, Lefevere and Walgrave, 2015). Since issue ownership requires parties to be perceived as sincere and committed (Petrocik, 1996), attempts to adopt popular positions associated with rival parties may undermine rather than strengthen ownership claims. Finally, the findings help explain why party brands are often difficult to change (Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu, 2011; Dalton and McAllister, 2015; Somer-Topcu and Tavits, 2023) and why new parties may enjoy an advantage when promoting emerging issues and positions (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). Established parties carry reputations built on past positions, whereas new parties are less constrained by credibility concerns when entering the political marketplace.

In essence, our study shows how voter perceptions of parties' motives have important consequences for political behavior and public opinion. Knowing what motivates parties allows voters to form expectations about what parties will do once in office, a fundamental aspect of representative democracy. Our evidence thus suggests that voters are capable of both inferring motives and using this information to overcome Downs's challenge.

The Credibility of Party Policy Shifts

For a policy shift to affect voters' views about a party, the shift must change beliefs about what the party actually stands for. Adopting new policy positions, however, often fails to change a party's image among voters (Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu, 2011, 2014; Fernandez-Vazquez, 2014). Previous work has sought to explain this by arguing that voters do not perceive the policy shifts, either because voters pay limited attention to party manifestos (Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu, 2011), and instead rely on informational shortcuts (Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu, 2014; Adams, Bernardi and Wlezien, 2020), or because parties deliberately make their policy appeals ambiguous (Somer-Topcu, 2015). But while policy shifts have limited effects on voters' perceptions of the parties, recent work shows that voters still appear to have reasonable beliefs about parties' ideologies and general policy positions (Fortunato, Stevenson and Vonnahme, 2016). At least to some degree, voters are paying attention.

Building on recent developments in the party politics literature (Campbell et al., 2019; Fernandez-Vazquez, 2019; Wagner, Vivyan and Glinitzer, 2020), we advance a different explanation for why platform shifts may fail to change voters' views about a party. We argue that, to change voters' beliefs about what a party stands for, voters must not only perceive the policy shifts, they must also believe them (Fernandez-Vazquez, 2019). Even if parties clearly communicate their shifts and voters pay attention, the new positions may suffer from a lack of credibility and therefore be discounted by voters. Since parties in representative democracies are free to deviate from their promises (Manin, 1997), it is not enough for voters to simply take party promises at face value.³ Rather, they must figure out what the parties would *actually* do once elected.

Understanding why a political party adopts a new position allows voters to form expectations about its post-election behavior (Persson and Tabellini, 2002; Strøm, 1990). An important distinction in parties' motives is whether they are (1) *principled* and intrinsically motivated by policy, or (2) *opportunistic*, viewing policy as a means of winning votes (Kartik and McAfee, 2007). Whether a party is principled or opportunistic may affect both what policies it will pursue once elected and the quality of such policies. Because a principled party cares about the policy itself, it will be less likely to renege on its promises in order to win votes, form coalitions, or obtain policy concessions on other issues. A principled party might also implement higher quality policies, since designing good policy takes time and effort (Callander, 2008). In contrast, an opportunistic party that is not committed to its policy platform will be more likely to renege on its promises if it is electorally advantageous. It is also more likely to implement lower-quality policies if it is convenient to do so. This underlines how important it is for voters to know what motivates a party.

³Could the electoral cost of breaking an election pledge ensure that parties always fulfill their promises? Three points speak against this. First, if public opinion on a policy changes after the election, the benefits of pursuing the popular policy may outweigh the reputational costs of deviating from the platform. Second, voters may be unsure whether a party intentionally deviated from its platform or whether it had no choice (Alesina and Cukierman, 1990; Tomz and Van Houweling, 2009). Third, in settings where clarity of responsibility is low, parties may avoid the reputational costs by shifting blame to opposition parties or coalition partners (Thomson et al., 2017).

Inferring Motives from Policy Shifts

While voters have good reasons to care about what motivates political parties, motives cannot be observed directly. How can voters learn what drives political parties to endorse specific policy positions? We propose that voters can use policy shifts as cues (Bullock, 2020), inferring a party's policy motives from its policy shifts.⁴ Fernandez-Vazquez (2019) argues that a particularly important cue for inferring a party's credibility is whether a party shifts to a popular or unpopular position. Building on this, we theorize that voters will infer that a party is opportunistic if the shift moves the party closer to the voters that it wants to appeal to for instrumental reasons.⁵ Typical examples of this would be to shift towards positions favored by public opinion or to move closer to a competitor that is luring the party's traditional basis of support. In contrast, if the party moves away from positions favored by most voters or from an important competitor, voters will infer that the party is principled and intrinsically motivated by policy.

Policy shifts provide cues about a party's motives because parties with different motives can be expected to campaign on different policies. A *principled* party has a strong commitment to certain policy goals. As a result, it chooses to campaign on such policies, whether they are popular or not. Because campaigning on unpopular positions risks losing votes, doing so becomes a costly signal of commitment to policy (Campbell et al., 2019; Wagner, Vivyan and Glinitzer, 2020). Conversely, an *opportunistic* party, one that is not intrinsically motivated by policy, views the issue position as a means to achieve other goals. For instance, its primary motive might be to reach office. Since the policy on the specific issue is subordinate to other goals, it is likely to campaign on a popular stance regardless of its intention to follow through with its promises. An opportunistic party will rarely endorse unpopular policies because it does not help it achieve its goals.

The resulting empirical pattern provides a useful informational shortcut for voters. If voters observe a party espousing positions that are largely unpopular, they can infer that the party is likely to be *principled* and that it is probably committed to pursuing such policies. On the other

⁴Bullock (2020, 2) defines a cue as "a message that people may use to infer other information."

⁵This means that a specific voter does not have to discount a policy shift toward her own position as opportunistic. For example, if a voter holds a minority view, the voter may interpret this shift as highly credible and informative.

hand, if a party endorses popular policies, this will lead voters to believe that the party is *opportunistic*. It does not mean that the party is opportunistic for sure. A principled party that is committed to policies that happen to be popular will still campaign on these. But since opportunistic parties will tend to campaign on popular policies, observing a shift to a popular position strengthens the belief that a party is opportunistic and not strongly committed to the policy. From this logic, we derive the following hypotheses:

Non-credible shift hypothesis: When a party shifts to a popular policy position, voters infer that the party is more likely to be driven by opportunistic motives and to be weakly committed to policy.

Credible shift hypothesis: When a party shifts to an unpopular policy position, voters infer that the party is more likely to be driven by principled motives and to be strongly committed to policy.

Our theory has less clear implications about what voters infer from not changing positions. Voters perhaps interpret staying put in a position as an average of shifting to a popular and an unpopular position. Or they might find that it signals principled motives even more effectively than shifting to an unpopular position.

The role of perceived motives may be especially important for understanding attempts by parties to change their positions on issues they do not own. Issue ownership implies that a party is perceived as “much more dependable” (Budge and Farlie, 1983, p. 287) and “sincere and committed” (Petrocik, 1996, p. 826) in handling a given issue. Consequently, voters may be less likely to question the credibility of policy shifts by issue owners than by parties that lack ownership of the issue. However, to the extent that issue ownership coincides with holding the popular position (Therriault, 2015; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020), it is predominantly parties who are not issue owners who will be shifting toward the popular position.

The hypotheses consequently have an important implication for party strategy. Shifting to a popular policy position implies endorsing a policy liked by many voters. However, when voters observe such a shift, they might doubt that the party is actually committed to the policy, which

ends up undermining the credibility of the shift. The net effect of a popular policy shift on voters' support for that party is thus ambiguous. In the next section, we discuss how this may limit the effectiveness of the accommodative strategy.

An Application to the Accommodative Strategy

The discounting of popular policy shifts can help to explain one of the most disruptive phenomena in West European party systems in recent decades: the rise of the radical right and the mainstream party response to this (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). Since the 1980s, radical right parties have effectively mobilized public support on the immigration issue and attracted voters from both the mainstream left and right (Givens, 2005), restructuring political competition around immigration in many countries. We focus on the dominant strategic response of mainstream parties to the rise of the radical right in the last 10-15 years: the “accommodative strategy”, wherein a mainstream party co-opts or emulates the policies of a challenger party in order to decrease the spatial distance between them (Meguid, 2005).

Meguid (2005) theorizes that accommodation should be effective in persuading voters to abandon the challenger for the policy-equivalent mainstream party because mainstream parties are more competent in governing and have greater access to voters. However, support for the radical right in many countries has increased over time (e.g., Abou-Chadi, 2016; Bale et al., 2010), and the empirical research on accommodation offers an inconsistent view of its effectiveness. Some studies find that accommodation mitigates vote losses to the radical right (Chou et al., 2021; Meguid, 2005), especially for Social Democratic parties (Hjorth and Vinæs Larsen, 2022; Spoon and Klüver, 2020). Other scholarship, however, suggests that accommodation is ineffective or might even fuel support for the radical right (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020; Abou-Chadi, Cohen and Wagner, 2022; Arzheimer and Carter, 2006; Dahlström and Sundell, 2012; Daur, 2025; Meijers and Williams, 2020). The lack of empirical consensus is surprising given the strong theoretical expectation that accommodation should work.

Scholars have primarily explained accommodation's inconsistent success by the difficulty of simultaneously catering to voter groups with conflicting attitudes on immigration. If the main-

stream left or right adopt more restrictive immigration policy to win over radical right voters, they risk alienating their supporters who hold more positive views of immigration (e.g., [Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020](#); [Hjorth and Vinæs Larsen, 2022](#)). This is especially pressing for Social Democratic parties, caught between their traditional working-class base and their increasingly influential, highly educated middle-class supporters, two groups that often diverge in their views on immigration ([Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2019](#); [De Vries and Hobolt, 2020](#)). This explanation can account for why mainstream parties, on average, do not increase their vote share when they accommodate and adopt stricter immigration policies. However, it cannot account for why the radical right does not lose voters to the mainstream parties when the latter emulate them.

Our theory helps make sense of these empirical patterns. We argue that the effectiveness of accommodation is hampered by a credibility problem that is inherent to the strategy itself: Accommodation signals that the party has opportunistic motives.⁶ When voters observe a party using accommodation to crowd out a challenger, they may conclude that the party lacks an intrinsic interest in the policy and expect it to renege or shirk on its promises once elected. This decreases the credibility of the mainstream party vis-à-vis the challenger. Our theory also implies that many radical right parties will be perceived as committed to the policy and typical issue owners, insofar as they have held these policy positions since before they became popular and salient among voters. Consequently, if “voters accord their support to the most credible proponent of an issue” ([Meguid, 2005](#), p. 350), the appeal of the accommodating mainstream party compared to the policy-equivalent challenger party will be limited. It may matter little to voters that the mainstream party is more competent and has extensive government experience if they do not trust the party to use its competence for the benefit of the voter ([Lupia and McCubbins, 1998](#)). Consequently, even though Social Democratic parties have held a dominant position in many Western European party systems after World War II ([Benedetto, Hix and Mastrorocco, 2020](#)), their use of accommodation could nevertheless fail because the strategy itself signals to voters that they are

⁶This credibility concern has been noted in prior research. For instance, both [Spoon and Klüver \(2020\)](#) and [Abou-Chadi, Cohen and Wagner \(2022\)](#) note that accommodation may be ineffective because the radical right “owns” the immigration issue, and that the shift towards more restrictive immigration policy might not be perceived as credible by voters. This is a key point, yet it does not explain why the radical right are credible and mainstream parties are not.

not committed to a restrictive immigration policy.

Experiment I: Testing the Core Logic of the Theory

The notion that voters discount certain policy shifts because of their lack of credibility is not new (e.g., [Abou-Chadi, Cohen and Wagner, 2022](#); [Adams, Merrill and Grofman, 2005](#); [Fernandez-Vazquez, 2019](#); [Spoon and Klüver, 2020](#)), but the existing evidence for this type of credibility discounting is indirect, focusing on the effect of policy shifts on perceptions of a party's position. We therefore conduct two experiments directly focusing on what inferences voters make about a party's motives and policy commitment from their platform shifts.

The first experiment aims to evaluate the general empirical implications of the theory. For that purpose, the design exposes participants to hypothetical scenarios in which political parties compete on an *unnamed* policy issue (for similar experimental designs, see [Johns and Kölln 2020](#); [Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012](#) and [Tomz and Van Houweling 2008, 2009](#)). This experiment allows us to test our theory in a setting without policy stakes, party reputations or identity considerations, providing an ideal environment to test the core logic of our argument ([Brutger et al., 2023](#)). By not using real parties and issues, we reduce the risk that the findings are idiosyncratic to the specific parties that compete on a particular issue. We also block any confounding effect of issue ownership. The hypothetical experiment also circumvents the problems of strong pretreatment and rival causal mechanisms, which could potentially attenuate or crowd out the treatment effect ([Druckman, 2022](#), pp. 50–53). Consequently, if we fail to reject the null hypothesis, this would be strong evidence against our theory. But if the findings corroborate our theory, this shows that our argument potentially generalizes to a number of issues, parties, and policies.

Experimental Design

In this experiment, each respondent evaluates three different party competition scenarios using vignettes. The scenarios involve two political parties, designated with arbitrary letters, competing on a one-dimensional policy space. Since the scenarios involve hypothetical parties, we use a

within-subjects design, which allows us to increase statistical power by presenting each respondent with multiple scenarios without compromising experimental realism.

It is crucial for the validity of the experiment that respondents are prevented from connecting the hypothetical parties to real parties. Our argument is that voters infer credibility from behavior. Consequently, our experiment would be compromised if respondents made inferences about possible real-world equivalents of the hypothetical parties, and drew on their perceptions of these when evaluating the credibility of the hypothetical parties. We prevent this by not using real party names, by not naming the policy dimension and by only including two parties in the scenarios while fielding the experiment in Sweden, a country with a multi-party system.⁷

In each scenario, one party is initially placed closer to what we call “the position of most voters,” located at the middle of the scale. The other party is placed farther from the voters.⁸ This signals that, unless there is a change in party positions, one party is favored to win the election. The vignette reinforces this message by stating that the party closer to most voters “won the previous election.” This emphasizes that the party farther from the voters has vote-seeking incentives to move closer to them. We will refer to the party initially closer to most voters as the *large party* and the other party as the *small party*.

Treatments The main treatment is the direction of the policy shift occurring between the previous and the upcoming election. We examine three types of shifts that broadly capture the strategies that are available to a party in a policy space. A *centrist shift*, toward the position of the voters and the other party. An *extremist shift*, away from the position of the voters and the other party. A *no-shift* treatment, where the party does not change its position between the elections. We also include an exploratory treatment, where we manipulate whether it is the small or the large party that is changing its policy. We only shift one party at a time and only ask about perceptions regarding the party that shifts to avoid overburdening the respondent.

⁷We do not include a post-treatment item asking respondents whether they had a specific issue or party in mind when evaluating the scenarios. Such a question could prime respondents to interpret subsequent scenarios through a real-world lens, potentially affecting responses in the within-subjects design. A limitation of this design choice is that we cannot rule out that some respondents mapped the hypothetical parties onto real-world parties or issues.

⁸For tractability, the voters are always placed in between both parties.

Figure 1 shows the treatment vignettes for when the small party shifts (the large party vignettes are available in Section B.5 in the supporting information). The vignettes share the same structure across treatments, and the differences between them are highlighted for the reader, but not for the respondents. The vignettes first introduce the situation at the previous election. They mention that one party was closer to the voters than the other, and that this party got more votes and won the election. This is illustrated with a complementary graphic. Because the theory concerns how respondents interpret party movements relative to voters and competing parties, the graphical representations complement the textual descriptions by illustrating the spatial relationships between parties and voters. Second, we include a brief section informing respondents that the reasons for the policy change may be that facts on the ground have changed. Third, we present the policy shift treatment. In addition to explaining the shift, we emphasize that when the small party makes the centrist shift or the large party makes the extremist shift, both parties end up equidistant to voters.⁹

Implementation, outcomes and expectations We sampled about 2,000 attentive respondents in Sweden using Dynata in July 2021. We use a soft-launch approach, where we first collected 10% of the full sample. After establishing that the randomization procedure worked, we preregistered and fielded the survey to the remaining 90% of the sample without any changes.¹⁰ We use respondents from both sampling periods in the analysis.

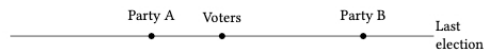
We block randomize treatment assignment. For each respondent, we randomly choose a party that moves—the large or the small one—and whether the large party is to the left or the right of the voters. Once the party and its position is determined, the respondent will see all three scenarios in random order: shifting away from voters, shifting towards voters, and not shifting.

⁹Section B.1 in the SI presents results from a manipulation check showing that respondents comprehend the treatment scenarios and correctly identify the direction of the policy shifts.

¹⁰We included two attentiveness screeners before the experiment and excluded respondents who did not pass the attention checks (Berinsky, Margolis and Sances, 2014). Table B1 in the SI shows that treatment randomization was successful.

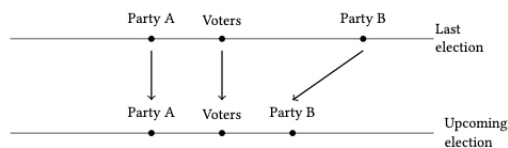
Figure 1: Examples of Hypothetical Party Competition Vignettes

In the last election Party A was closer to a majority of voters than Party B. Party A also got more votes than Party B and won the election. The figure below illustrates the voters' and the parties' positions in the last election:

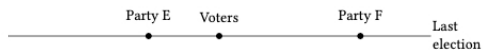


Since the last election some people claim that the problems facing society have changed, which requires new political solutions from the parties. Others claim that the problems are the same and do not require new policy.

Now imagine the following: In the run-up to the upcoming elections Party B decides to change the policy it campaigns on. Party B shifts closer to the voters and Party A. Neither Party A nor the voters change their positions. The voters are now equally distant from Party A and Party B. The figure below illustrates how Party B has changed its policy while Party A and the voters have not moved:

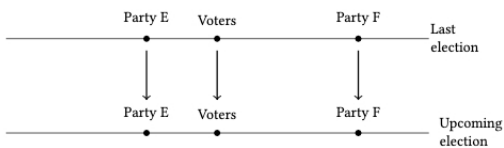


In the last election Party E was closer to a majority of voters than Party F. Party E also got more votes than Party F and won the election. The figure below illustrates the voters' and the parties' positions in the last election:

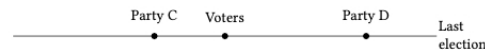


Since the last election, some people claim that the problems facing society have changed, which requires new political solutions from the parties. Others claim that the problems are the same and do not require new policy.

Now imagine the following: In the run-up to the upcoming elections Party F decides not to change the policy it campaigns on. Neither Party E nor the voters change their positions. The voters are still closer to Party E than Party F. The figure below illustrates how neither the parties nor the voters have changed their positions before the upcoming election:

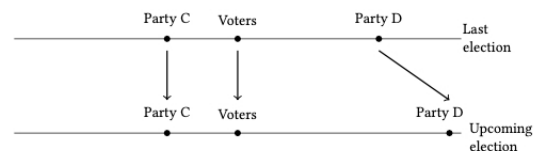


In the last election Party C was closer to a majority of voters than Party D. Party C also got more votes than Party D and won the election. The figure below illustrates the voters' and the parties' positions in the last election:



Since the last election, some people claim that the problems facing society have changed, which requires new political solutions from the parties. Others claim that the problems are the same and do not require new policy.

Now imagine the following: In the run-up to the upcoming elections Party D decides to change the policy it campaigns on. Party D shifts away from the voters and Party C. Neither Party C nor the voters change their positions. The voters are now even further from Party D than Party C. The figure below illustrates how Party D has changed its policy while Party C and the voters have not moved:



We examine how the treatments affect (1) beliefs about political motives and (2) whether the party is perceived to be committed to the position it campaigns on. We measure the first set of beliefs with two types of questions. First, whether they believe that the party is primarily driven by the pursuit of votes or by policy ideals. Second, for the two scenarios where the party changes its policy, whether this change reflects a sincere change of view or is a short-term tactic to attract votes. We measure the second set of beliefs by asking about the likelihood that the party will implement the policies it campaigned on if elected and the likelihood that the party would change its policies if public opinion changes. We measure all variables on 11-point Likert scales. The full question wordings are available in Section B.6 in the supporting information.

Our preregistered baseline model does not distinguish whether the party that moves is large or small, and we estimate

$$y_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 \text{extreme}_i + \beta_2 \text{center}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where i is the respondent and α_i are respondent fixed effects using OLS with respondent-clustered standard errors. The reference category is the *no-shift* condition. We test the difference between the *extreme* and *center* shift—our main focus—using an F-test. For the two outcomes that measure the *reason* underlying the shift, we instead estimate

$$y_i = \alpha_i + \gamma_1 \text{extreme}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

using *center* as the reference category, since these questions are not asked in the no-shift condition. Our preregistered expectations compare the two shifts against each other. We expect that extremist shifts, compared to centrist shifts, strengthen perceptions that the party will pursue the stated policy ($\beta_1^{\text{pursue}} > \beta_2^{\text{pursue}}$), that the policy change reflects a sincere change of mind ($\gamma_1^{\text{sincere}} > 0$), and that the party is motivated by policy goals ($\beta_1^{\text{policy}} > \beta_2^{\text{policy}}$). Conversely, we expect that centrist shifts strengthen perceptions that the party is motivated by votes ($\beta_1^{\text{votes}} < \beta_2^{\text{votes}}$), that the policy shift reflects strategic considerations ($\gamma_1^{\text{strategic}} < 0$), and that the party is more likely

to change its policy in the future ($\beta_1^{\text{change}} < \beta_2^{\text{change}}$).¹¹ In contrast, we do not preregister specific directional expectations regarding the no-shift condition or whether the shifting party is large or small, and therefore treat these analyses as exploratory.

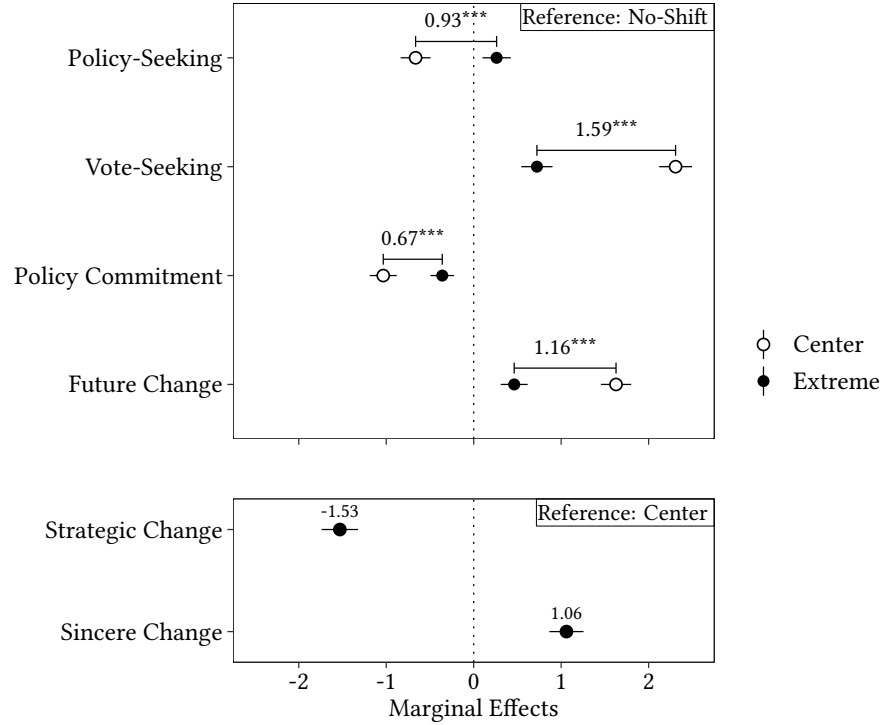
Results

Figure 2 shows the marginal effects of the policy shifts on our six outcome measures. The figure shows that the direction of the policy shift has a strong effect on the party's perceived motives and commitment. Centrist shifts, compared to extremist shifts, decrease perceptions that the party is policy-seeking by 0.93 scale steps (37% SD) and increase perceptions that it is vote-seeking by 1.59 (55% SD). Likewise, centrist shifts decrease perceptions that the party is committed to policy by 0.67 (27% SD) and increase the perceived likelihood of future change by 1.16 (45% SD) compared to extremist shifts. Finally, the treatments have strong effects on the perceived reason for changing policy. When the shift is extreme, perceptions that the policy shift is strategic decrease by 1.53 (58% SD), and perceptions that it is sincere increase by 1.06 (41% SD). The differences between the treatments are all statistically significant. This is precisely in line with our theory and clearly supports our hypotheses.

One potential concern is that these results could be mechanically induced by the experimental design itself. When respondents infer that the centrist shift is vote-seeking, are they simply restating the information from the graphic or do they reason about party motives? Several aspects of the results suggest that respondents are doing more than mechanically identifying movement toward voters. A purely mechanical interpretation would primarily predict higher perceptions of vote-seeking for centrist shifts, since the vignette explicitly depicts movement toward voters. Yet the effects extend well beyond this: respondents also view parties making centrist shifts as less policy-seeking, less sincere, less committed to their new position, and more likely to reverse course in the future. Conversely, when parties move away from voters, respondents draw the conceptually

¹¹Our preregistrations for both experiments did not include the exact verbal formulations of the hypotheses in the theory section, but they did include the directional expectations for the outcome variables, the statistical specifications, and the planned hypothesis tests.

Figure 2: Policy Shifts Affect Perceived Motives and Commitment



Note: The figure shows the results from six regression models with respondent fixed effects and standard errors clustered on the respondent. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Numbers indicate the absolute distance between the point estimates and stars indicate significance levels for testing for equivalence of the shifts. The minimal number of observations for the outcomes with all three treatments is 5922 and 3953 for the outcomes with two treatments. Full tables, question wordings, and response scales are available in Section B in the SI. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

opposite inference, viewing these parties as more policy-seeking, more sincere, more committed to the policy change, and less likely to renege in the future. If respondents were merely reacting mechanically to movement toward a fixed electorate, extremist shifts should instead produce relatively neutral or ambiguous responses. This broader and internally coherent pattern suggests that respondents are reasoning about what the parties' actions reveal about their intent and motivation.

Exploratory analyses The experiment includes two exploratory design features, for which we did not have strong expectations. First, how do respondents interpret the no-shift condition against the extremist and centrist shifts? A core finding in the literature on candidate repositioning from the U.S. is that changing policy stances generally hurts the candidate's credibility (Tavits 2007,

Tomz and Van Houweling 2012), but we do not know whether this is also true for unpopular policy shifts. In the pre-analysis plan, we conjecture that the no-shift treatment might either be interpreted as an average between the two shifts, or signal principledness to an even greater degree than the extremist shift. Figure 2 shows more support for the latter interpretation, which is in line with the candidate repositioning literature. The only case where extremist shifts signal principled characteristics more strongly than the no-shift condition is for policy-seeking motives. For the three other outcomes for which we measure effects of the no-shift treatment, no-shift signals principle slightly stronger than the extremist shift. This may not be particularly surprising for the measures of policy commitment, but the effect also holds for vote-seeking motives. We cannot say for sure why this is, but we speculate that some respondents perceive policy shifts to be motivated by votes regardless of the direction of the shift.¹² Politically, this is a highly interesting finding, since it shows that parties' credibility suffers whenever a party changes policy—albeit that the price to pay in terms of credibility when shifting to a popular policy position is substantially higher. This suggests that new parties might have a competitive advantage over established parties, because they are not burdened by their previous positions on the issue. Crucial for our argument, however, is that the centrist shift has a consistent negative effect on credibility compared to the extremist shift.

Second, do respondents make the same inferences when the party changing its policy is not under electoral pressure? The large party, winning the previous election, might be able to change its policy more freely without being perceived as vote-seeking. The results, available in Section B.4 in the supporting information, suggest that this is the case. The results are qualitatively very similar for the small and the large party. The large party, however, is generally perceived as less opportunistic when it makes the centrist shift and more principled when it makes the extremist shift compared to the small party. Yet, even for the large party, the centrist shift has significant and negative effects on credibility. In sum, these findings strongly support our theory.

¹²This may be particularly likely in this case, since the experiment was conducted in a country with a multi-party system, where niche parties may undertake extremist shifts for vote-seeking reasons (Adams et al., 2006). The open-ended results for experiment 2 in SI Section C.3 lends support to this conjecture.

Robustness A potential concern with the within-subject design is that exposure to multiple treatment conditions makes the experiment too transparent. It may allow respondents to infer the purpose of the study and adjust their responses accordingly, generating demand or contrast effects (but see [Mummolo and Peterson 2019](#)). We address this concern in Section [B.3](#) in the SI by re-analyzing the data as a clean between-subjects experiment using only the first vignette each respondent observed. The results are substantively unchanged: effect sizes are somewhat attenuated, as would be expected from the loss of within-subject leverage, but remain statistically significant and in the predicted direction. In the same section, we further show that the findings are robust to imputing missing values as mid-scale responses, dropping the first treatment vignette respondents were exposed to, and estimating the models without respondent fixed effects.

Experiment II: Accommodating to the Radical Right

The first experiment tested our argument using general hypothetical scenarios. The second design focuses on a particularly important real-world application of our theory: mainstream party accommodation to the far-right. Specifically, we focus on Sweden, where the Social Democratic Party has made efforts to emulate the anti-immigrant far-right *Sweden Democrats* (by shifting its immigration policy in a more restrictive direction). In the experiment, we treat respondents with information about the Social Democratic immigration policy shift and examine how this affects perceptions of the Social Democrats' policy position, policy commitment, and political motives.

The purpose of the experiment is to isolate the effect of the direction of the shift on perceptions of political motives and policy commitment. By using an experimental approach, we avoid the confounding problem that always poses a risk for observational studies of party strategies. In the real world, policy changes tend to correlate with other factors that can also affect voters' evaluations, such as prior electoral performances, polling numbers and leadership changes. This makes it very difficult to isolate the effect of the policy change with observational data (see the discussion in [Hjorth and Vinæs Larsen 2022](#)).¹³ By contrast, with our experimental approach,

¹³For instance, we know that parties tend to shift their policies toward more successful competitors when they themselves are performing poorly ([Abou-Chadi and Stoetzer, 2020](#)). If the reason for the poor performance also has an

the policy shift that citizens are exposed to is determined at random, which ensures that we can identify a causal effect of the direction of the policy shift on perceived credibility.

The challenge of experimentally manipulating party policy changes is that real-world parties have reputations, and our ability to shift perceptions of the parties may be limited. Pretreatment—respondents having strong prior beliefs about parties’ policy positions and motives—is inevitable in experiments involving real parties on salient issues, and will attenuate the treatment effects (Slothuus, 2016). Immigration has arguably been the most salient political issue in many European countries over the last two decades, and we have good reason to believe that pretreatment would be considerable. Real parties and issues also risk activating other political considerations, which could crowd out the treatment effect. Motivated reasoning, for instance, could lead voters to view policy shifts that move parties closer to their own position as principled and trustworthy (Taber and Lodge, 2006). Both phenomena make us more likely to reject our theory even when it is true. Consequently, this application is a hard case for our theory, and the treatment effects we estimate are conservative estimates of the effect of shifting policies on credibility.

The Case: The Immigration Issue in Sweden

Our argument applies best to salient issues because the expected electoral cost of holding an unpopular position, and the benefit of holding a popular one, are greater when salience is high. We therefore focus on the specific case of Sweden, where the immigration issue has been at the top of the political agenda for over 10 years. Sweden is today a typical case for how electoral competition on the immigration issue has played out in Western European politics (Rydgren and van der Meiden, 2019). First, similar to many European countries (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020), the immigration issue in Sweden is dominated by the presence of an anti-immigrant party, the Sweden Democrats. In elections to the national parliament in 2002, the Sweden Democrats received a meager 1.44% of the votes. Despite the bleak political outlook, the Sweden Democrats persisted in their anti-immigrant position, emphasizing their commitment to this policy (Kokkonen, 2015). Since then, effect on the credibility of the party—for example, the party leader might not be rhetorically skilled and be perceived to be non-credible by voters—this would bias our estimated effect of the accommodative strategy on credibility.

they have steadily risen in electoral support, becoming the second-largest party with 20.5% support in the last general election (September 2022). Second, many mainstream parties in Europe have reversed their stance on migration policy over the last two decades (Abou-Chadi, 2016). Yet, there is considerable disagreement about whether this reflects the shifting landscape of immigration—and the increase in immigrant inflows, especially post-2015—or whether it is simply a strategic shift made in response to the growth of anti-immigrant parties. The response of the Swedish mainstream parties to the electoral success of the Sweden Democrats has similarly shifted over time. While these parties initially upheld a *cordon sanitaire* and shifted to even more generous positions on the immigration issue (Backlund, 2020), both the Social Democrats and the largest center-right alternative, the Moderates, have in recent years adopted a much more restrictive stance (Aylott and Bolin, 2023).

We focus our experiment on the Social Democrats because they provide a hard but substantively important test of our theory.¹⁴ First, the Swedish Social Democrats have unrivaled government experience and have held the dominant position in Swedish politics since the 1930s. If highly competent parties are better able to make accommodative policy shifts appear credible, the Swedish Social Democrats constitute a most-likely case (Meguid, 2005). Research also suggests that accommodation works better for Social Democratic parties (Hjorth and Vinæs Larsen, 2022; Spoon and Klüver, 2020). Second, whereas the restrictive shift of the Moderates has not met much internal opposition, the Social Democratic shift sparked substantial internal critique. Like its voter base, the Social Democrats have been internally divided on the immigration issue.¹⁵ As late as 2021, important party districts motioned to adopt a more generous migration policy and criticized the party leadership’s strict stance at the national party congress.¹⁶ This division allows

¹⁴Importantly, our focus is not on whether accommodative policy shifts successfully attract new voters, a question that depends on many factors beyond parties’ positions on a single issue. Rather, we are interested in how voters interpret accommodative policy shifts and whether such shifts are perceived as credible or opportunistic.

¹⁵See, for instance, Olsson, Lova and Runblom, Karin, “S-förbund säger nya migrationspolitiken [Social Democratic Party Districts Criticize the New Migration Policy],” *Sveriges Radio*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.sverigesradio.se/artikel/6948365>.

¹⁶Stark, Emeli and Gerin, Emma, “S-förslag: Sväng om till en mer human flyktingpolitik [Social Democratic Proposal: Shift Toward a More Humane Refugee Policy],” *Expressen*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/s->

us to credibly portray the Social Democrats’ policy shift as either generous or restrictive while maintaining high treatment consistency and minimizing deception by using real policy proposals (Brutger et al., 2023).

Experimental Design

The experiment manipulates the direction of the Social Democrats’ shift on migration policy. The shift is either towards a generous (unpopular) or a restrictive (popular) position. As we show in section C.8 in the supporting information, public opinion in Sweden clearly leans in favor of restrictive positions on immigration and refugee policy. Respondents are then asked a series of questions that measure the perceived sincerity, credibility, and motives for the Social Democratic policy shift. Importantly, in this real-world setting, the restrictive position is both the more popular position and one closely associated with the Sweden Democrats. Consequently, this experiment cannot disentangle whether credibility discounting is driven by shifting to the popular position, the issue owner, or both.

Treatments The purpose of the experiment is to treat perceptions of the policy position of the oldest and most important party in the Swedish party system on the most important political issue in the last 15 years to see whether this changes perceptions of the position’s credibility. Clearly, pretreatment both with respect to the independent (the Social Democrats’ policy position) and dependent variable (its credibility) is likely extraordinarily strong and moving perceptions of these variables is very difficult. In settings like these, the greatest threat to an experiment is using “weak and ineffective treatments” that fail to “systematically and substantially change the independent variable in the intended direction” (Mutz, 2021, pp. 220f). We thus cannot resort to minimalist treatments, but need to use “hard-hitting”, i.e., strong and substantial, treatments, that have a greater chance to shift perceptions of the Social Democrats’ immigration policy position.

Figure 3 shows the treatment vignettes. We highlight the differences between the two treatments in the figure, but not in the experiment. The treatments begin with a common introduction

forslag-svang-om-till-mer-human-flyktingpolitik/.

describing the political context surrounding immigration in Sweden. Specifically, respondents are informed that public opinion has become increasingly favorable toward restrictive immigration policies and that the Social Democrats have lost voters to the Sweden Democrats. This information serves two purposes. First, it establishes which position is electorally popular. Because our theory concerns how voters interpret policy shifts in light of electoral incentives, respondents need information about whether a shift moves toward or away from majority opinion and competing parties. Second, it mirrors a central feature of the real-world debate surrounding the Social Democrats' immigration policy. The Sweden Democrats have frequently portrayed mainstream parties' restrictive turn on immigration as an attempt to win back voters.¹⁷ The common introduction therefore captures important features of the political context within which voters may encounter the policy shift. After this description of the political context, we describe the Social Democrats' policy shift. The treatment is presented as a generous or restrictive shift, coupled with a substantive quote about the reason underlying the shift. The shift is described using three real policy proposals made by the Social Democrats. We selected the proposals to maximize information equivalence between the treatments without having to resort to fictional ones.

To increase the probability that the respondents are actually treated, the vignettes are structured similarly to policy briefs or newspaper articles, and the treatment information is delivered in three different ways. First, the treatment vignette is briefly summarized in italics. Second, the headlines summarize the content of the treatment vignette, independently from the body text. Third, the body text describes the context and policy shift in slightly more detail. Thus, even respondents who only read the summary of the vignette or the headlines will be exposed to the treatment, albeit in less detail.

¹⁷For example, see this op-ed by the leader of the Sweden Democrats, accusing the Social Democrats of trying to fool voters about their immigration policy shift: Jimmie Åkesson, "Socialdemokraterna ljuger om sin invandringspolitik [The Social Democrats Are Lying About Their Immigration Policy]," *Dagens Nyheter*, January 13, 2024, <https://www.dn.se/debatt/socialdemokraterna-ljuger-om-sin-invandringspolitik/>

Figure 3: Treatment Vignettes Describing the Social Democratic Policy Shifts

The Social Democrats' new migration policy - genuine or strategic change?

*Public opinion on migration policy has become more restrictive. The Sweden Democrats are growing and the Social Democrats are losing voters. Now the Social Democrats are arguing for a more **restrictive** stance. Is the change genuine or strategic?*

Most voters now want more restrictive migration policy

In recent years, Sweden is the country in the EU that has received the most asylum seekers per capita. Most of these come from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, public opinion on migration policy has become increasingly restrictive. Almost 70 percent of Swedish voters want stricter migration policy.

This is reflected in the election results. In the last few parliamentary elections, the Sweden Democrats is the party that has grown the most. Above all, they have received support from voters who want a more restrictive migration policy.

The Social Democrats are losing voters to the Sweden Democrats

The Social Democrats have lost large groups of voters to the Sweden Democrats. For example, the Sweden Democrats are now the most popular party among male LO-workers, a group where the majority has previously voted for the Social Democrats.

The Social Democrats have proposed a more **restrictive migration policy**

Now the Social Democrats have changed their migration policy and argued for a more **restrictive** stance. They have said that **Sweden has received too many asylum seekers and that Sweden should not take on more asylum seekers than the EU average**. Among other things, the Social Democrats have proposed that

- **temporary residence permits should be the norm and replace permanent residence permits**
- **the maintenance requirement must be tightened to make family reunification more difficult**
- **more resources will be used to deport individuals whose asylum applications have been rejected.**

The Social Democrats' new migration policy - genuine or strategic change?

*Public opinion on migration policy has become more restrictive. The Sweden Democrats are growing and the Social Democrats are losing voters. Now the Social Democrats are arguing for a more **generous** stance. Is the change genuine or strategic?*

Most voters now want more restrictive migration policy

In recent years, Sweden is the country in the EU that has received the most asylum seekers per capita. Most of these come from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, public opinion on migration policy has become increasingly restrictive. Almost 70 percent of Swedish voters want stricter migration policy.

This is reflected in the election results. In the last few parliamentary elections, the Sweden Democrats is the party that has grown the most. Above all, they have received support from voters who want a more restrictive migration policy.

The Social Democrats are losing voters to the Sweden Democrats

The Social Democrats have lost large groups of voters to the Sweden Democrats. For example, the Sweden Democrats are now the most popular party among male LO-workers, a group where the majority has previously voted for the Social Democrats.

The Social Democrats have proposed a more **generous migration policy**

Now the Social Democrats have changed their migration policy and argued for a more **generous** stance. They have said that **Sweden should be a role model in the EU and that as long as people are on the run, it is Sweden's responsibility to follow international conventions and stand up for the right to asylum**. Among other things, the Social Democrats have proposed that

- **permanent residence permits should be the norm and replace temporary residence permits**
- **the maintenance requirement must be eased to facilitate family reunions**
- **more people who are not entitled to asylum for security reasons will nevertheless be allowed to stay in Sweden.**

Implementation, outcomes and expectations We fielded the experiment in June 2022. We preregistered the experiment and sampled 3,254 attentive respondents in Sweden with Dynata using the same procedure as the first experiment.¹⁸

We measure four preregistered outcome variables, all captured on 7-point Likert scales. First, we ask whether the shift reflects a sincere change of mind or is strategic. Second and third, we ask whether the shift would be well described as motivated by vote-seeking or by policy-seeking considerations. Fourth, we ask how likely it is that the Social Democrats would implement the policy even if this would cost them votes. We present the full question wordings and response scales in Section C.9 in the SI.

To capture the treatment effect, we estimate:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{restrictive}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (3)$$

using OLS with robust standard errors, where y is one of the four outcome variables and *restrictive* is an indicator for the restrictive immigration treatment. The *generous* condition is the reference category. The β_1 estimate, thus, is the mean effect of receiving the restrictive treatment instead of the generous one on the respective outcome measures. Based on our theory and hypotheses, we expect that shifting to a restrictive position should signal strategic rather than sincere considerations ($\beta_1^{\text{sincere}} < 0$), stronger vote-seeking motives ($\beta_1^{\text{vote}} > 0$), weaker policy-seeking motives ($\beta_1^{\text{policy}} < 0$), and a lower likelihood of costly implementation ($\beta_1^{\text{implement}} < 0$).

Results from Mainstream Party Accommodation

Figure 4 presents the effects of the restrictive compared to the generous immigration treatment. The figure shows that respondents draw different inferences depending on the direction of the Social Democrats' shift. All of these inferences are in the expected direction. With the exception

¹⁸In the preregistration, we state that we will collect 3000 completes. Because the survey completion time was slightly shorter than expected, we were able to collect 234 additional completes. The preregistration can be accessed in the OSF repository: https://osf.io/s3j8f/?view_only=93d1538228fb4c0cb4ec90789d6ec3e9. Table C2 in the SI shows that treatment randomization was successful.

of policy-seeking motives, they are also statistically significant.

Regarding the *motives* underlying the shift, respondents perceive a restrictive shift to reflect strategic rather than sincere considerations, and to be motivated by the pursuit of votes. The difference in sincere vs strategic considerations is 0.12 scale steps (7.5% SD), and the difference in vote-seeking motives is 0.15 (9% SD). The effect, however, is less pronounced on policy-seeking motives, decreasing perceptions by 0.06 (less than 4% SD), suggesting that this concept is not as easy to grasp for the respondents as vote-seeking motives. While the effect is in the expected direction, it is not statistically significant. We find the strongest treatment effect on the *expected behavior* of the Social Democrats. Respondents who received the restrictive treatment were 0.21 (13% SD) less likely to believe that the Social Democrats would implement the policy if it would cost them votes. These effect sizes, approximately a tenth of a standard deviation, are consistent with what Coppock (2023, p. 4) identifies as typical for persuasive information treatments. The findings are strongly in line with our theory. They show that the direction of a platform shift affects perceptions about what motivates the party and whether the party is committed to pursuing the new policy.¹⁹

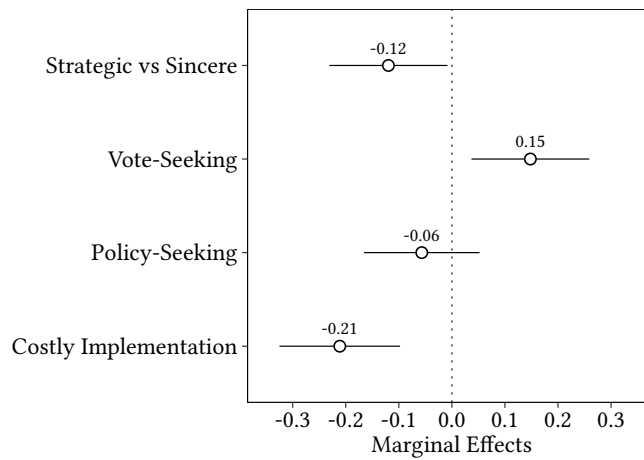
Open-ended responses While it is important that the vignette highlights what type of policy shift should be understood as popular, a potential concern is that the vignette is effectively telling respondents what to think. We address this by examining how respondents make sense of these policy shifts without constraining them to the logic of closed-ended questions using an open-ended question about why they believed the Social Democrats had changed position.²⁰ The question was asked immediately after the treatment vignette and before the closed-ended outcome measures. Using a dictionary-based content analysis, we classify open-ended responses into theoretically motivated categories reflecting different types of substantive and strategic reasoning. The keyword dictionaries, validation results and analysis details are described in Section C.3 in the SI.

The open-ended responses provide evidence against a purely mechanical interpretation. Overall, we find strong evidence that strategic reasoning was much more common in the restrictive

¹⁹Section C.7 in the SI shows that these results are robust to imputing missing values as mid-scale responses.

²⁰This analysis was not preregistered.

Figure 4: Shifting Migration Policy Affects Perceived Social Democratic Motive and Commitment



Note: Marginal effects of the restrictive shift compared to the generous one, using four regression models with robust standard errors. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The minimal number of observations is 3,250. Full tables, question wordings, and response scales are available in Section C in the SI.

condition compared to the generous condition. But rather than simply reproducing the vignette framing, respondents generated strategic and substantive policy rationales that were closely tied to the specific treatment conditions but were not mentioned in the treatment text. Substantively, respondents in the restrictive condition frequently referred to immigration problems, crime, and social strain, whereas respondents in the generous condition emphasized humanitarian obligations, solidarity, and the situation of refugees. Respondents also articulated treatment-specific electoral logics that went well beyond the sincere-versus-strategic framing of the closed-ended questions. For instance, some respondents inferred a strategic logic even in the generous condition: they were more likely to explain the shift by saying that the Social Democrats were trying to get votes from immigrants, to please their pro-immigration coalition partners or to distance themselves from the Sweden Democrats in order to get pro-immigration voters. None of these interpretations were provided in the vignette itself. In the restrictive condition, the principal strategic rationale was winning back voters from the Sweden Democrats or simply following the majority opinion. Taken together, these responses suggest that respondents were not merely restating the treatment material, but were actively reasoning about the political motives and electoral logic

underlying the perceived policy shift.

Treatment Perception and Misperception Because the design does not include a control group it is difficult to infer whether both treatments were equally effective in shaping perceptions of the Social Democratic platform change. A pilot study, presented in Section C.1 in the supporting information, shows that the voters give high and very similar ratings to the comprehensibility, credibility and information value of the two treatments. The manipulation check, presented in the same section, paints a more nuanced picture and underscores the difficulty of manipulating perceptions of party policy shifts. Roughly half of respondents correctly identified the direction of the shift (51% in the restrictive condition and 48% in the generous condition), while around one third perceived no meaningful shift and between 15 and 24% perceived the shift in the opposite direction. Importantly, these misperceptions are asymmetric. Treatment perception reversals are substantially more common in the generous condition (24%) than in the restrictive condition (15%). This pattern is consistent with the real-world political context, where the Social Democrats have in recent years moved toward more restrictive immigration policies. A generous shift may thus run against respondents' prior expectations about the party and is correspondingly more difficult to perceive correctly, even when explicitly communicated in the treatment.

To examine the implications of the misperceptions, we replicate our main analysis on three respondent groups: correct perceivers, no-shift perceivers and misperceivers.²¹ Among respondents who correctly perceived the shift ($n = 1,639$), the difference between the treatment groups is large and consistent across all outcomes (10-38% SD). They substantially exceed the intention-to-treat estimates, consistent with full-sample effects being attenuated by imperfect perception of the treatment. Among respondents who perceived no shift ($n = 1,030$), only one of the four variables remain significant and the differences between the treatment groups are strongly attenuated. This is what the mechanism would predict: if respondents do not perceive a policy shift, there is little information on which to update their perceptions. The most striking evidence comes

²¹We note that dropping respondents or conditioning the analysis based on manipulation checks will compromise the causal interpretation of the estimated coefficients (Aronow, Baron and Pinson, 2019) and treat this evidence as descriptive.

from the misperceivers ($n = 658$). Their responses are fully reversed in sign: respondents in the *generous* treatment arm see the Social Democrats as more sincere, less vote-seeking, more policy-driven, and more likely to implement the policy. These respondents reason as if they were in the restrictive shift condition, because they seem to believe that this is what occurred. This reversal suggests that respondents are genuinely reasoning about the electoral logic of the perceived shift. The details of these analyses are available in Section C.1 in the supporting information.

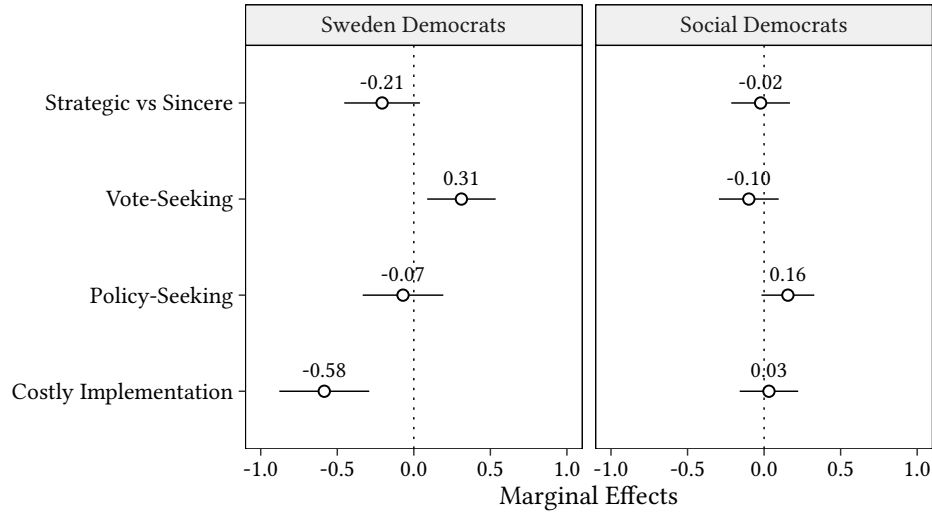
Partisan heterogeneity Our results show that respondents, on average, infer a party’s motives and policy commitment from its platform shifts. Inferences, however, may be heterogeneous depending on voters’ own political beliefs and allegiances (Brutger et al., 2023). Since the very purpose of accommodation on immigration is to win over supporters of the anti-immigration party while ensuring the loyalty of the mainstream party’s core backers, we examine how the treatment response differs for supporters of the Social Democrats ($N = 951$) and the Sweden Democrats ($N = 669$).²²

Figure 5 shows the conditional marginal effects from regression models where we interact the restrictive shift treatment with pre-treatment support for the Social Democrats and the Sweden Democrats. The results show a clear difference in how these groups respond to the treatments. Social Democratic supporters make few inferences based on the policy shifts. None of the effects are statistically significant, and the point estimates are often very close to zero. The muted pattern could be explained either by Social Democratic voters having strong priors about their party or by their greater willingness to follow and trust the party regardless of the policy shift (Bullock, 2020). In stark contrast, Sweden Democratic supporters react strongly to the platform shifts. Their perceptions of vote-seeking motives increase by 0.31 (19% SD) and their perceptions of the likelihood of costly implementation decrease by 0.58 (35% SD) when the Social Democrats shift to more restrictive instead of more generous immigration policy. The effects are much more pronounced compared to the average treatment effects in Figure 4.²³ This is also true for the insignificant

²²In the preregistration, we state that we will examine heterogeneity for Social Democratic and Sweden Democratic supporters, but do not provide an exact specification for this analysis. All moderators are measured pre-treatment.

²³Section C.4 in the supporting information shows that respondents who support neither the Sweden Democrats

Figure 5: Perceived Motives and Commitment among Sweden Democrats and Social Democrats



Note: The figure shows marginal effects of the restrictive relative to the generous shift for supporters of the Social Democrats and the Sweden Democrats from four regression models with robust standard errors. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The minimal number of observations is 3,250. Full tables, question wordings and response scales are available in Section C in the SI.

effect of strategic vs sincere motives, which appears to be driven by a lack of power: the point estimate -0.21 (13.1% SD) is greater in magnitude than the point estimate in the main model -0.12. The effect on policy-seeking motives, on the other hand, is insignificant just as in the main model. These results offer an important insight into why successful accommodation appears so difficult. Sweden Democratic supporters infer opportunistic motives from a policy shift which they, at least for policy reasons, should support.

Further analysis in the supporting information reinforces the notion that successful accommodation is hard. While Sweden Democrat supporters perceive the restrictive shift as especially opportunistic, they also view the generous shift as quite opportunistic (SI Section C.2). If we instead condition our analysis on immigration attitudes (SI Section C.6), we find that the treatment effects are driven primarily by pro-immigration respondents. Anti-immigration respondents, who are dominated by right-of-center respondents in addition to Sweden Democrats, are not moved by nor the Social Democrats (N = 1,913) react much like the Sweden Democratic voters, and perceive the Social Democratic party to be significantly more vote-seeking and less committed when exposed to the restrictive shift.

the treatments but ascribe strategic motives to the Social Democrats regardless of the direction of the shift. This suggests that, if voters strongly perceive a party not to be trustworthy, even a costly signal from that party may fail to convince them that the shift is credible.

Lastly, using real political actors and issues enables us to explore how the policy shifts affect post-treatment voting intentions.²⁴ As we note in the preregistration, our theory is agnostic about the net effect of policy shifts on the probability to vote for the Social Democrats. On the one hand, the restrictive shift should for policy reasons make the Social Democratic party more attractive among voters who want more restrictive immigration policy. On the other, it should also strengthen perceptions that the party is not committed to this policy. A proper experimental design that seeks to identify the effect of credibility on voting intention would need to keep the direction of the shift constant while manipulating credibility. With this caveat in mind, the analysis, presented in Section C.5 in the supporting information, shows that the restrictive shift significantly increases the probability of voting for the Social Democrats among their own constituency. Among Sweden Democrat supporters, the propensity to vote for the Social Democratic party is higher when exposed to the restrictive shift than when exposed to the generous one, but the difference is smaller and not statistically significant. Sweden Democrat supporters' low baseline propensity to vote for the Social Democrats suggests that winning them over would require substantially more effort and persuasion than the single policy shift in our experimental treatments can achieve. While the results are consistent with the perceptual mechanism that credibility perceptions are updated in ways that would limit the electoral returns to accommodation, definitive conclusions about accommodation's electoral efficacy lie beyond the scope of this study.

Conclusion

Our paper examines when voters view party policy shifts as credible. Across two preregistered survey experiments, we find that voters use the direction of policy shifts to infer parties' motives. Shifts toward more popular positions are more likely to be interpreted as opportunistic and vote-

²⁴This specification was not preregistered.

seeking, whereas shifts toward less popular positions are more likely to be interpreted as principled and sincere. These inferences, in turn, shape expectations about parties' commitment to their newly adopted positions.

The two experiments provide complementary evidence for this argument. The first uses a highly controlled hypothetical setting that isolates the causal effect of policy shifts while holding constant factors that are difficult to disentangle in real-world politics, such as issue ownership, party reputations, and prior attitudes toward specific parties or issues. The second examines a substantively important real-world case: the Swedish Social Democrats' shift toward a more restrictive immigration policy. Despite these differences, both experiments point to the same conclusion: voters evaluate not only where parties move, but also what those movements reveal about their motives.

Our study contributes to a growing literature showing that electoral competition is not only about what positions parties take, but also about how those positions relate to competing parties and public opinion (e.g., [Campbell et al., 2019](#); [Fernandez-Vazquez, 2019](#); [Meijers and Dassonneville, 2025](#); [Wagner, Vivyan and Glinitzer, 2020](#)). More broadly, the findings suggest that policy shifts can affect electoral competition not only through spatial proximity but also through their effects on credibility and perceived commitment. This has important implications for our understanding of the electoral consequences of party repositioning, the stability of issue ownership and party brands, and the dynamics of party system change.

First, our findings provide new insights into when spatial mobility may be costly for mainstream parties ([Adams et al., 2006](#)). Existing explanations for the mixed success of accommodative strategies toward radical right competitors have largely focused on spatial proximity (e.g., [Meguid, 2005](#); [Hjorth and Vinæs Larsen, 2022](#)). We offer a complementary explanation. When mainstream parties move toward a popular position associated with a competitor, voters may discount the shift as opportunistic, reducing its credibility. As a result, accommodation may fail to attract voters from the competitor while simultaneously weakening confidence among existing supporters. Our argument, however, does not imply that accommodation never works ([Chou et al., 2021](#); [Hjorth and Vinæs Larsen, 2022](#); [Meguid, 2005](#); [Spoon and Klüver, 2020](#)). Rather, it suggests that

accommodation creates a credibility problem that parties may need to overcome through complementary strategies, such as leadership change (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2019) or issue reframing (Feddersen, 2023).

Second, our findings help explain why issue ownership and party brands are often remarkably stable (Petrocik, 1996; Seeberg, 2017; Dalton and McAllister, 2015). Existing research has highlighted several obstacles to changing party reputations, including limited voter attention (Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu, 2011), counter-messaging by competing parties (Somer-Topcu and Tavits, 2023), and skeptical media coverage. Our findings identify an additional obstacle. To own an issue, a party must be perceived as more dependable (Budge and Farlie, 1983, p. 287), sincere, and committed than its competitors (Petrocik, 1996, p. 826). At the same time, issue ownership often requires holding the position favored by most voters on that issue (Therriault, 2015; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). This creates a dilemma for parties seeking to steal issue ownership from a competitor. Although adopting the competitor's popular position may be necessary to become associated with the issue, such a shift may simultaneously be interpreted as opportunistic rather than sincere, undermining the credibility required to alter established reputations. This helps explain why accommodative strategies often fail to erode issue ownership (Meguid, 2005) and may even reinforce the association between an issue and its existing owner (Daur, 2025; Meijers and Williams, 2020).

Finally, while we show that shifting to an unpopular position is more credible than shifting to a popular one, the most credible action appears to be not shifting at all. This provides a potentially important insight into party system change (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020; Meijers and Dassonneville, 2025). As issues evolve, established parties may be forced to reposition themselves, potentially undermining the credibility of their policy commitments. New parties, by contrast, are unburdened by past positions and may therefore be better able to establish credible reputations on emerging issues. This dynamic may help explain why established parties often struggle to compete on new dimensions of conflict and why new parties can successfully challenge them.

More broadly, our findings suggest that party competition cannot be understood solely through spatial proximity (Adams, Merrill and Grofman, 2005). Policy shifts affect not only the distance between parties and voters but also parties' credibility and perceived commitment. This may create

a first-mover advantage, whereby parties that establish a position early are perceived as more credible than later adopters. Understanding the empirical importance of this credibility-based first-mover advantage, and its implications for party competition and party system change, remains an important task for future research.

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Online Supporting Information for

When Can Political Parties Credibly Change Their Policies?

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A Consistency with Pre-Analysis Plans

The pre-analysis plans for both experiments are available at the Open Science Foundation:

https://osf.io/s3j8f/?view_only=93d1538228fb4c0cb4ec90789d6ec3e9.

Main analyses The main analyses in both experiments, presented in Figures 2 and 4, were conducted exactly as registered in our pre-analysis plans. While the preregistrations did not include the exact verbal formulations of the hypotheses used in the manuscript, they did preregister the directional expectations for the outcome variables, the statistical specifications, and the planned hypothesis tests.

The preregistration for Experiment 1 described the design as varying which party shifted (large, small, neither) and if it shifted, the direction of the shift (center, extreme). In the manuscript, we describe the same design in terms of whether a party shifts (large, small) and, if so, the direction of the shift (center, extreme, none). These are alternative descriptions of the same five conditions.

Heterogeneity and sensitivity: hypothetical experiment We examine if respondents make different inferences depending on whether the shifting party was the party under electoral pressure or not. In the pre-analysis plan, we only stated that we would explore this heterogeneity, but did not register an exact specification. We also registered two sensitivity analyses: excluding fixed effects and dropping the first treatment scenario that the respondents were presented with. The sensitivity analyses are presented in SI Section B.3.

Heterogeneity and sensitivity: accommodation experiment For the accommodation experiment, we stated that we would explore the heterogeneous response among Social Democrat and Sweden Democrat supporters, but did not provide an exact specification. In SI Section C.6, we present three additional heterogeneity analyses (immigration attitudes, gender and political knowledge) that we stated that we would explore in our pre-analysis plan. We did not specify the precise analyses that we would perform.

B Experiment I: Testing the Core Logic

B.1 Randomization check and manipulation check

Randomization check Since we rely on a within-subject design, we examine treatment group equivalence by testing whether the order in which respondents received the vignettes was random. For each respondent, we cross-tabulate treatment assignment against presentation position (1st, 2nd, 3rd). The results in Table B1 show that each condition (center, extreme, and no-shift) appeared in each position at approximately equal rates, with cell proportions ranging from 32.0% to 34.7%. A χ^2 -test confirms that condition assignment is independent of presentation order ($\chi^2(4) = 4.47$, $p = 0.346$), providing direct evidence that vignette order was successfully randomized across respondents.

Table B1: Vignette order randomization check.

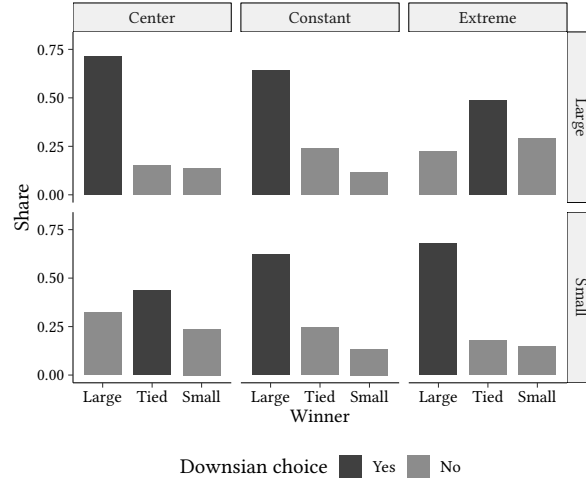
	Presentation position		
	1st	2nd	3rd
Center	729 (33.6%)	747 (34.4%)	693 (32.0%)
Extreme	719 (33.1%)	727 (33.5%)	723 (33.3%)
No-shift	721 (33.2%)	695 (32.0%)	753 (34.7%)

Note: The reported p-value comes from a chi-square test of whether treatment condition was independent of presentation position. $\chi^2(4) = 4.47$, $p = 0.346$.

Manipulation check To check whether respondents comprehend the information in the vignettes, we ask them who they think would win the upcoming election. Figure B1 shows the share of respondents who said that the large party would win, the small party would win, or whether the parties were tied. We group the answers across columns according to the direction of the shift and across rows according to which party shifted. We mark the “correct” answer, according to a Downsian spatial logic, in dark gray (i.e. the party closest to the voters in the policy space). The dark grey bar is the tallest in all scenarios, clearly demonstrating that the respondents comprehend the information in the vignettes. When the large party is closer to the majority of voters than the small party, a clear majority of respondents always pick the large party as the probable winner.

And when the parties are equally distant from the voters (such as when the large party shifts to the extreme and the small party shifts to center), the tied alternative is the most popular one.

Figure B1: Manipulation Check



Note: The figure shows the share of respondents who say that the large party is going to win, the small party is going to win, or that they are equally likely to win. The columns show these shares for the different policy shift treatments and the rows show the shares for when the small and large parties shift.

B.2 Table for main results (Figure 2)

Table B2: Effect of Treatments on Perceived Motivations and Commitment

	Policy-Seeking	Vote-Seeking	Commitment	Future Change	Strategic	Sincere
Centrist shift	-0.66*** (0.09)	2.31*** (0.10)	-1.03*** (0.08)	1.63*** (0.09)		
Extremist shift	0.26** (0.08)	0.72*** (0.09)	-0.36*** (0.07)	0.46*** (0.08)	-1.53*** (0.11)	1.06*** (0.10)
F-test: Centrist = Extremist (p)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Observations	5922	5931	5937	5930	3953	3960

Note: OLS estimates with robust standard errors clustered on respondents and respondent fixed effects. For Policy-Seeking, Vote-Seeking, Commitment, and Future Change, the no-shift treatment is the reference category. Strategic and Sincere were measured only when the party changed position; for these outcomes, the centrist shift is the reference category.

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

B.3 Sensitivity and robustness

Table B3: Effect of Treatments on Perceived Motivations and Commitment with Imputed Missing Values

	Policy-Seeking	Vote-Seeking	Commitment	Future Change	Strategic	Sincere
Centrist shift	-0.61*** (0.08)	2.10*** (0.09)	-0.95*** (0.07)	1.47*** (0.08)		
Extremist shift	0.24** (0.07)	0.66*** (0.08)	-0.33*** (0.06)	0.41*** (0.07)	-1.38*** (0.10)	0.96*** (0.09)
F-test: Centrist = Extremist (p)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Observations	6519	6519	6519	6519	4346	4346

Note: OLS estimates with respondent fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by respondent. For Policy-Seeking, Vote-Seeking, Commitment, and Future Change, the no-shift treatment is the reference category. Strategic and Sincere were measured only when the party changed position; for these outcomes, the centrist shift is the reference category. Missing outcome values are imputed as midscale responses; structurally missing values for Strategic and Sincere under no shift remain missing.

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

Table B4: Effect of Treatments on Perceived Motivations and Commitment without Fixed Effects

	Policy-Seeking	Vote-Seeking	Commitment	Future Change	Strategic	Sincere
Intercept	6.52*** (0.06)	5.54*** (0.06)	6.84*** (0.05)	5.76*** (0.06)	8.01*** (0.05)	5.54*** (0.06)
Centrist shift	-0.67*** (0.07)	2.30*** (0.08)	-1.04*** (0.06)	1.62*** (0.07)		
Extremist shift	0.27*** (0.07)	0.72*** (0.07)	-0.36*** (0.06)	0.46*** (0.06)	-1.52*** (0.07)	1.06*** (0.07)
F-test: Centrist = Extremist (p)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Observations	5922	5931	5937	5930	3953	3960

Note: OLS estimates with robust standard errors clustered by respondent. For Policy-Seeking, Vote-Seeking, Commitment, and Future Change, the no-shift treatment is the reference category, and the intercept is its mean. Strategic and Sincere were measured only when the party changed position; for these outcomes, the centrist shift is the reference category, and the intercept is its mean.

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

Table B5: Effect of Treatments on Perceived Motivations and Commitment without First Vignette

	Policy-Seeking	Vote-Seeking	Commitment	Future Change	Strategic	Sincere
Centrist shift	-0.66*** (0.14)	2.20*** (0.15)	-0.95*** (0.12)	1.59*** (0.14)		
Extremist shift	0.32* (0.13)	0.37** (0.14)	-0.18 (0.11)	0.30* (0.12)	-1.73*** (0.26)	1.15*** (0.25)
F-test: Centrist = Extremist (p)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Observations	3917	3928	3929	3926	2617	2619

Note: OLS estimates with respondent fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by respondent. The first vignette presented to each respondent is excluded. For Policy-Seeking, Vote-Seeking, Commitment, and Future Change, no shift is the reference category.

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

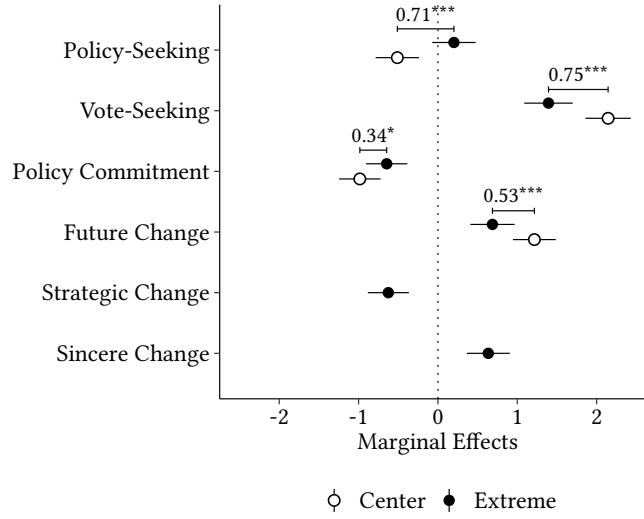
Table B6: Effect of Treatments on Perceived Motivations and Commitment With Only First Vignette

	Policy-Seeking	Vote-Seeking	Commitment	Future Change	Strategic	Sincere
Intercept	6.05*** (0.10)	5.93*** (0.12)	6.46*** (0.09)	6.15*** (0.11)	8.16*** (0.09)	5.26*** (0.10)
Centrist shift	-0.51*** (0.14)	2.14*** (0.15)	-0.98*** (0.13)	1.22*** (0.14)		
Extremist shift	0.20 (0.14)	1.39*** (0.16)	-0.65*** (0.13)	0.69*** (0.14)	-0.62*** (0.13)	0.63*** (0.14)
F-test: Centrist = Extremist (p)	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00
Observations	2005	2003	2008	2004	1336	1341

Note: OLS estimates with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors, using only the first vignette presented to each respondent. For Policy-Seeking, Vote-Seeking, Commitment, and Future Change, the no-shift treatment is the reference category, and the intercept is its mean. Strategic and Sincere were measured only when the party changed position; for these outcomes, the centrist shift is the reference category.

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

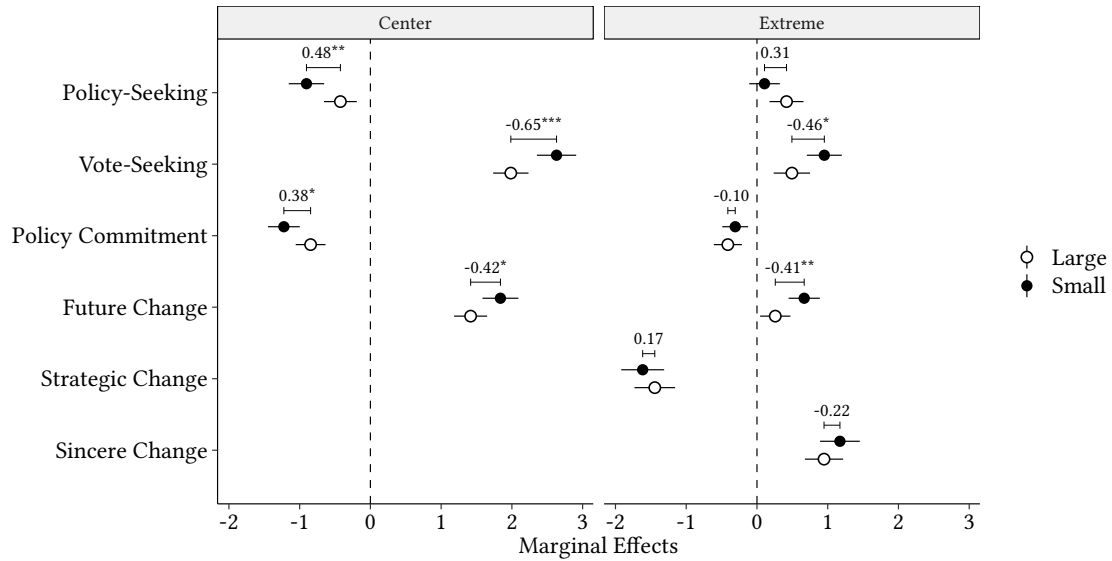
Figure B2: Effects of Treatments on Perceived Motives and Commitment Using Only First Vignette Shown



Note: The figure shows the results from six regression models with standard errors clustered on the respondent. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Numbers indicate the absolute distance between the point estimates and stars indicate significance levels for testing for equivalence of the shifts. Full estimates are reported in in Table B6 Section B in the SI. $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$

B.4 Heterogeneity: large or small party shifting

Figure B3: Effects of Treatments on Perceived Motives and Commitment by Large and Small Party



Note: Both panels show the results from six regression models with respondent fixed effects and standard errors clustered on the respondent. Left panel shows effects of a centrist shift and right panel shows effects of an extremist shift for the large and small party respectively. The distance in effects and its significance is indicated by the error bars between the coefficients. In all models, except when outcomes are reasons for shifting, not shifting is the reference category. For “the reason for shift” outcomes, centrist shift is the reference category. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Table B7: Effect of Treatments on Perceived Motivations and Commitment for Large and Small Party

	Policy-Seeking	Vote-Seeking	Commitment	Future Change	Strategic	Sincere
Centrist shift	-0.90*** (0.13)	2.63*** (0.14)	-1.22*** (0.11)	1.84*** (0.13)		
Centrist $\times$ Large	0.48** (0.17)	-0.65*** (0.19)	0.38* (0.16)	-0.42* (0.18)		
Extremist shift	0.11 (0.11)	0.95*** (0.13)	-0.31*** (0.09)	0.67*** (0.11)	-1.62*** (0.15)	1.17*** (0.14)
Extremist $\times$ Large	0.31 (0.16)	-0.46* (0.18)	-0.10 (0.14)	-0.41** (0.16)	0.17 (0.21)	-0.22 (0.20)
F-test (Small Party): Centrist = Extremist (p)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
F-test (Large Party): Centrist = Extremist (p)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Observations	5922	5931	5937	5930	3953	3960

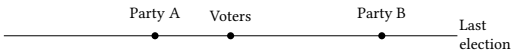
Note: OLS estimates with respondent fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by respondent. The small party is the reference party. For Policy-Seeking, Vote-Seeking, Commitment, and Future Change, the centrist- and extremist-shift coefficients report effects for the small party relative to no shift. The interaction coefficients indicate how these effects differ when the large party changes position. Strategic and Sincere were measured only when the party changed position. For these outcomes, the centrist shift is the reference category; the extremist-shift coefficient reports the effect for the small party, and its interaction indicates how the effect differs for the large party.

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

B.5 Large party vignettes

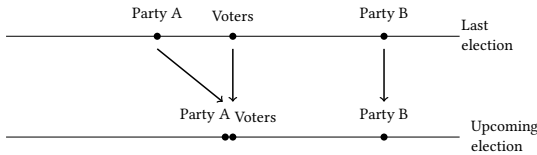
Figure B4: Hypothetical Party Competition Vignettes for Large Party

In the last election Party A was closer to a majority of voters than party B. Party A also got more votes than party B and won the election. The figure below illustrates the voters' and the parties' positions in the last election:

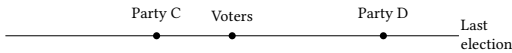


Since the last election, some people claim that the problems facing society have changed, which requires new political solutions from the parties. Others claim that the problems are the same and do not require new policy.

Now imagine the following: In the run-up to the upcoming elections Party A decides to change the policy it campaigns on. Party A shifts closer to the voters and Party B. Neither Party B nor the voters change their positions. The voters are now even closer to Party A than Party B. The figure below illustrates how Party A has changed its policy while Party B and the voters have not moved:

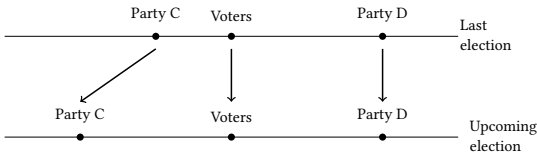


In the last election Party C was closer to a majority of voters than Party D. Party C also got more votes than Party D and won the election. The figure below illustrates the voters' and the parties' positions in the last election:



Since the last election, some people claim that the problems facing society have changed, which requires new political solutions from the parties. Others claim that the problems are the same and do not require new policy.

Now imagine the following: In the run-up to the upcoming elections Party C decides to change the policy it campaigns on. Party C shifts away from to the voters and Party D. Neither Party D nor the voters change their positions. The voters are now equally distant from Party C and Party D. The figure below illustrates how Party C has changed its policy while Party D and the voters have not moved:



B.6 Question wordings for screeners and outcome variables

- **Screener battery**

I have a pretty good understanding of the societal issues facing Sweden today

Most people can be trusted

It is important to know what is going on in politics

Please choose 'partly agree' for data quality purposes

Please choose 'partly disagree' for data quality purposes

[Fully disagree, Partly disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Partly agree, Fully agree]

- **Manipulation check: what party shifted**

Which party, if any, has changed its policies since the last election?

[Party X, Party Y, Both parties, Neither party]

- **Manipulation check: expected winner**

What party do you think will win the upcoming election?

[Party X, Party Y, Both are equally likely to win]

- **Reason for change: sincere**

In the run-up to the upcoming election Party X decided to change its policy. According to you, how likely is it that they had sincerely changed their view on this issue?

[0 - not at all likely, 10 - very likely]

- **Reason for change: votes**

In the run-up to the upcoming election Party X decided to change its policy. According to you, how likely is it that it is a tactical change to get more votes?

[0 - not at all likely, 10 - very likely]

- **Motive: votes**

Some people claim that parties only care about getting as many votes as possible and that they are prepared to do anything just to get elected. Based on Party X's behavior, how well do you think this description fits Party X?

[0 - Does not fit at all, 10 - Fits very well]

- **Motive: policy**

Other people claim that parties are driven by the will to bring about political change and that they want to make a difference. Based on Party X's behavior, how well do you think this description fits Party X?

[0 - Does not fit at all, 10 - Fits very well]

- **Commitment: follow voters/future change**

Imagine that the voters before the next election change their minds on what policy they want. How likely do you think it is that Party X would change their politics to follow voters?

[0 - Not at all likely, 10 - Very likely]

- **Commitment: reneging**

There is nothing that forces political parties to keep their election promises after they have been elected, but they can implement policy as they see fit. Imagine that Party X wins the upcoming election. Based on Party X's behavior, how likely is it according to you that they will implement the policy that they campaigned on?

[0 - Not at all likely, 10 - Very likely]

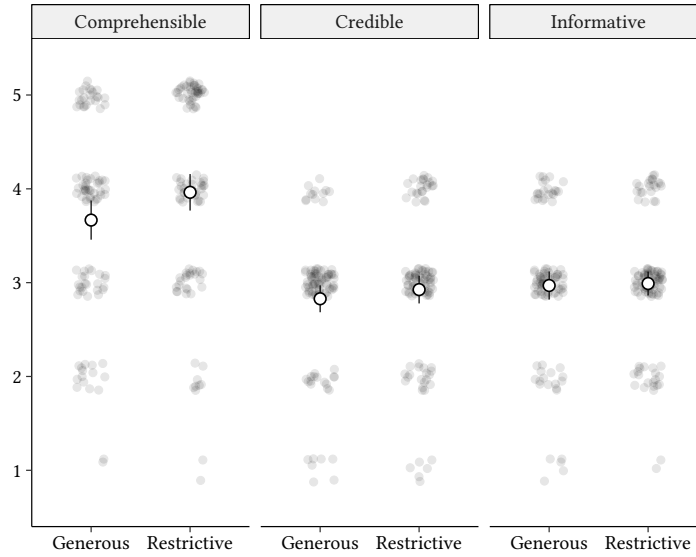
C Experiment II: Accommodating to the Radical Right

C.1 Treatment equivalence, randomization check and manipulation check

A challenge in our experiment on accommodation is that real parties have reputations. The Social Democrats are the oldest party in Sweden and many Swedish voters will have strong perceptions of what motivates the party. We ameliorate this issue in our experiment by asking our respondents about the motives underlying the policy change rather than what motivates the Social Democrats as such. A drawback of this approach is that we cannot easily fit a control group into the design. The control group is important to infer whether the experimental treatments are equally effective in shifting perceptions. This is important to know since, as the experiment with hypothetical party competition scenarios shows, not changing policy often signals principled motives more strongly than shifting to an unpopular position. If one of our treatments does not affect beliefs about the policy shift, our treatment effect may be confounded.

In the absence of a control group, we investigate whether the treatments are equivalent in two ways. First, in a pilot study fielded before the proper experiment ($N = 202$), we include three questions on the vignettes' comprehensibility (1 - very hard; 5 - very easy), credibility (1 - not at all credible; 4 - highly credible) and informational value (1 - not at all informative; 4 - highly informative). Figure C1 shows the results. Reassuringly, the distribution of responses in the two treatment groups are very similar across the questions and the respondents give high ratings to both vignettes. For credibility, and informational value, there are no differences to speak of. Respondents in the restrictive treatment group, however, seem to perceive the vignette as slightly more comprehensible (a mean difference of about 8%) than respondents in the generous treatment group. We suspect that this may be due to the vignettes focusing quite strongly on the electoral incentive to change to more restrictive immigration policies while giving comparatively less attention to the substantive reasons for switching to generous policies.

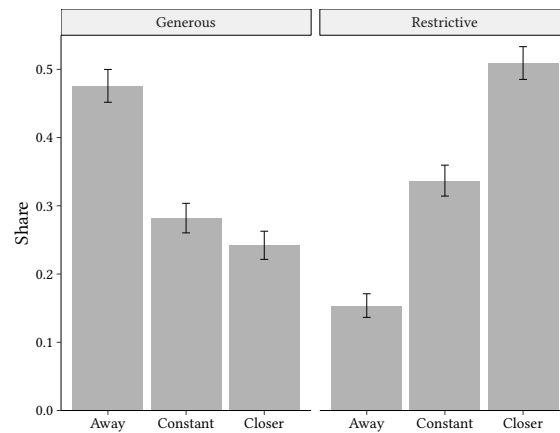
Figure C1: Similar Vignette Evaluations Across Treatments in Pilot Study



Note: The figure shows the distribution and the average response for the two vignette treatments. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Second, we include a manipulation check in the proper experiment, which asks whether the Social Democrats have attempted to (a) move closer to the Sweden Democrats, (b) move away from the Sweden Democrats, or (c) have not changed their policy much. Figure C2 shows the results. The figure shows that the “correct” response is by far the most common answer in both treatment groups. 48% of respondents in the generous condition say that the Social Democrats have shifted away from the Sweden Democrats and 51% of respondents in the restrictive condition say that they have shifted closer to the Sweden Democrats. The “incorrect” response (i.e., saying that the Social Democrats have moved closer to the Sweden Democrats when the vignette describes a generous shift) is the least common response in both treatment groups. It is clear that the treatments overall have substantially influenced the perceived policy shift of the Social Democrats.

Figure C2: Perceptions of Policy Shifts Differ Across Treatments



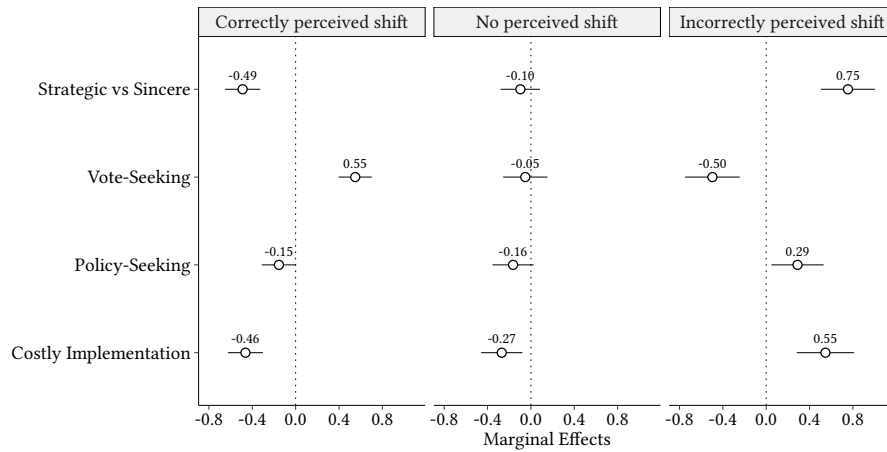
Note: Figure shows the share of respondents per treatment. Bars indicate 95% confidence interval.

Yet, the figure also shows that many respondents did not perceive the treatment as intended. In the generous condition, 24% of the respondents claim that the Social Democrats have shifted closer to the Sweden Democrats, compared to only 15% who claim that the Social Democrats have shifted away from them in the restrictive condition. This suggests that the average respondent's prior belief is that the Social Democrats have shifted toward more restrictive immigration policy. Respondents in the restrictive condition are also more likely to say that the Social Democrats have not changed much compared to the respondents in the generous treatment condition (a mean difference of 6 percentage points). Importantly, both patterns would attenuate the treatment effects, producing a conservative estimate of the policy shift.

Treatment perception analysis To formally examine this, we code a new variable, treatment perception, which indicates whether the respondent correctly perceived the shift (i.e., indicating that the Social Democrats moved toward the Sweden Democrats in the restrictive condition), did not perceive any shift, or misperceived the shift (i.e. indicating that the Social Democrats moved toward the Sweden Democrats in the generous condition). We note that dropping respondents or conditioning the analysis based on manipulation checks will compromise the causal interpretation of the estimated coefficients (Aronow, Baron and Pinson, 2019) and treat this evidence as descrip-

tive. Figure C3 and Table C1 present the results separately for these three respondent groups. Among correct perceivers, the coefficient estimates are large and consistent with the theory, substantially exceeding the intention-to-treat estimates and suggesting considerable attenuation from treatment dilution in the full sample. Among respondents who perceived no shift, we only see a significant coefficient for costly implementation, consistent with the idea that respondents who do not perceive a policy shift have little basis on which to update their evaluations. Most strikingly, respondents who misperceived the direction of the shift display associations that are almost perfectly reversed in sign relative to our theoretical predictions. These respondents evaluate the *generous* shift as more sincere, less vote-seeking, more policy-driven, and more likely to be implemented, effectively responding as if they had been exposed to the restrictive condition. In fact, their evaluations are in line with the direction of shift they incorrectly perceive.

Figure C3: Effects of Restrictive Shift Conditional on Treatment Perception



Note: Marginal effects of restrictive shift relative to generous shift. Full models in Table C1. Bars are 95% confidence intervals with robust standard errors.

Table C1: Treatment Effects Conditional on Perceived Shift

	Strategic vs Sincere	Vote-Seeking	Policy-Seeking	Costly Implementation
Intercept	3.20*** (0.06)	4.68*** (0.06)	3.62*** (0.06)	3.53*** (0.06)
Restrictive shift	-0.49*** (0.08)	0.55*** (0.08)	-0.15 (0.08)	-0.46*** (0.08)
Perception: No shift	0.23** (0.09)	-0.08 (0.10)	0.29** (0.09)	0.21* (0.09)
Perception: Wrong	-0.40*** (0.10)	0.42*** (0.10)	-0.19 (0.10)	-0.23* (0.11)
Restrictive $\times$ Perception: No shift	0.39** (0.12)	-0.60*** (0.13)	-0.01 (0.13)	0.19 (0.13)
Restrictive $\times$ Perception: Wrong	1.24*** (0.15)	-1.05*** (0.15)	0.44** (0.15)	1.01*** (0.16)
Observations	3253	3254	3253	3250

Note: OLS estimates with robust standard errors. Reference categories are correctly perceived shift and generous shift.

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

Covariate balance Table C2 shows the covariate balance across the treatment conditions. The differences between the conditions are generally small and insignificant, suggesting that the randomization procedure was successful.

Table C2: Covariate Balance Across Treatment Conditions

	Generous (N=1731)		Restrictive (N=1733)		Diff. in Means	p
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.		
Female	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.0	0.195
Age	46.4	18.2	46.5	17.9	0.1	0.871
Education	5.0	1.7	4.9	1.7	-0.1	0.287
Household income	4.5	2.4	4.7	2.6	0.1	0.110
Knowledge index	3.2	1.8	3.1	1.8	-0.1	0.157
Trust	3.1	1.0	3.0	1.0	0.0	0.919
Left-right	6.0	2.6	6.1	2.6	0.0	0.814
Immigration attitude	4.9	3.1	4.9	3.1	-0.1	0.479

Note: Means and standard deviations by treatment group. The rightmost column reports the p -value from a difference-in-means test. *Restrictive* = restrictive framing condition; *Generous* = generous framing condition.

C.2 Table for main results (Figures 4 and 5)

Table C3: Main Results from Accommodation Experiment

	Strategic vs Sincere	Vote-Seeking	Policy-Seeking	Costly Implementation	PTV Soc Dem	PTV Swe Dem
Intercept	3.17*** (0.04)	4.76*** (0.04)	3.66*** (0.04)	3.53*** (0.04)	5.26*** (0.09)	4.52*** (0.10)
Restrictive shift	-0.12* (0.06)	0.15** (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.21*** (0.06)	0.14 (0.13)	0.16 (0.14)
Observations	3253	3254	3253	3250	3223	3217

Note: OLS estimates with robust standard errors.

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

Partisan heterogeneity results We measure party support pretreatment with two variables from the Swedish National Election Survey. First, we ask if there is a party that the respondent likes the most. Second, if they indicate that there is not, we ask them if there still is a party that they perceive themselves to be closer to. We code a respondent as a supporter of a party if they name a specific party in either the first or the second question. Supporter group sizes (Social Democrats $N = 951$, Sweden Democrats $N = 669$, neither $N = 1,913$) reflect pretreatment party support among all assigned respondents. The regression samples are slightly smaller owing to item nonresponse on the outcome measures.

Party support was largely balanced across conditions. The share of Social Democrat supporters was not significantly different across treatments ($\mu_{\text{generous}}^{\text{SocDem}} = 0.273$, $\mu_{\text{restrictive}}^{\text{SocDem}} = 0.271$, $p_{\text{diff}}^{\text{SocDem}} = 0.892$), nor was support for other parties ($\mu_{\text{generous}}^{\text{other}} = 0.552$, $\mu_{\text{restrictive}}^{\text{other}} = 0.526$, $p_{\text{diff}}^{\text{other}} = 0.125$). The share of Sweden Democrat supporters was marginally higher in the restrictive condition than in the generous condition ($\mu_{\text{generous}}^{\text{SweDem}} = 0.175$, $\mu_{\text{restrictive}}^{\text{SweDem}} = 0.203$, $p_{\text{diff}}^{\text{SweDem}} = 0.035$), though the substantive difference is small (2.8 percentage points).

Table C4 presents the estimates that are plotted in Figure 5 in the main text.

Table C4: Treatment Effects Conditional on Party Support

	Strategic vs Sincere	Vote-Seeking	Policy-Seeking	Costly Implementation	PTV Soc Dem	PTV Swe Dem
Intercept	3.07*** (0.05)	4.86*** (0.05)	3.59*** (0.05)	3.40*** (0.05)	4.34*** (0.10)	3.66*** (0.11)
Restrictive	-0.09 (0.07)	0.15* (0.07)	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.18* (0.08)	0.07 (0.14)	-0.01 (0.15)
Restrictive × Social Democrat	0.07 (0.12)	-0.25* (0.12)	0.26* (0.11)	0.21 (0.12)	0.36 (0.21)	-0.15 (0.24)
Restrictive × Sweden Democrat	-0.12 (0.15)	0.16 (0.13)	0.03 (0.15)	-0.41* (0.17)	0.27 (0.24)	0.13 (0.20)
Social Democrat	0.77*** (0.08)	-0.88*** (0.09)	0.80*** (0.08)	0.60*** (0.09)	4.64*** (0.15)	-0.95*** (0.17)
Sweden Democrat	-0.64*** (0.10)	0.82*** (0.10)	-0.86*** (0.11)	-0.17 (0.13)	-2.02*** (0.17)	6.39*** (0.15)
F-test: Conditional effect of restrictive shift (<i>p</i>)						
Social Democrat	0.82	0.32	0.08	0.74	0.00	0.37
Sweden Democrat	0.10	0.01	0.60	0.00	0.08	0.37
Other	0.23	0.03	0.15	0.02	0.63	0.94
Observations	3253	3254	3253	3250	3223	3217

Note: OLS estimates with robust standard errors. Respondents not supporting the Social Democrats or Sweden Democrats are the reference category.

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

C.3 Exploring open-ended responses

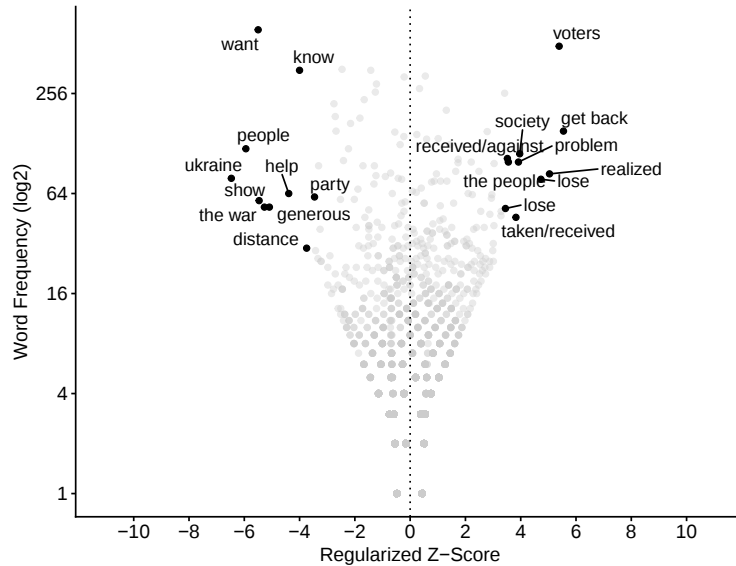
Immediately after presenting respondents with the vignettes and before presenting the closed-ended questions, we ask them an open-ended question about why they think that the Social Democrats decided to shift policy this way. This provides an insight into their spontaneous interpretation of the treatment material. We explore the answers using two approaches. First, using the approach in [Monroe, Colaresi and Quinn \(2008\)](#), we simply examine what words are most commonly used in the two different treatment conditions.²⁵ Figure C4 shows the results. The x-axis shows the regularized Z-score, which in essence is the logged odds-ratio of a word being mentioned across the two treatment conditions divided by its estimated standard deviation.²⁶ Positive Z-scores indicate that a word is used more in the restrictive condition and negative Z-scores indicate that it is used more in the generous condition. The y-axis shows the frequency of the words. We label the 20 words that most strongly differentiate the treatment conditions according to this

²⁵ Monroe, B. L., Colaresi, M. P., & Quinn, K. M. (2008). Fightin' words: Lexical feature selection and evaluation for identifying the content of political conflict. *Political Analysis*, 16(4), 372-403.

²⁶ We use an uninformative prior when estimating the odds-ratios and the variance.

analysis.

Figure C4: Exploratory Analysis of Open-Ended Responses



In line with our theory, one of the words that most strongly discriminates the restrictive condition is “voters.” Respondents also write about “get back” and “lose” in the restrictive condition. This suggests that respondents spontaneously reason about the strategic incentives to shift policy in a restrictive direction to combat vote losses. Looking across the two treatment conditions, we also notice patterns consistent with two different policy-motivated reasons for shifting the policy. In the generous condition, respondents write about “ukraine”, “the war”, “help” and “humans.” This suggests that wanting to help refugees, especially Ukrainian ones, is perceived to be a plausible policy-based explanation for the generous shift. In contrast, respondents in the restrictive condition write about “problem”, “realize”, “many”, “received/against” and “the people.” This echoes arguments from immigration critics about how politicians have come to realize what problems accompany high refugee admittance and what policies the people want.

To gain further insight into respondents’ reasoning, we classify the responses using a dictionary-based content analysis. We developed eight keyword categories (one general electoral strategy category and seven theoretically motivated subcategories reflecting specific types of substantive

and electoral reasoning) by reading a random sample of open-ended responses and constructing Swedish-language keyword patterns for each category. The categories, keyword patterns, and an example response for each are shown in Table C5. Categories are not mutually exclusive, and a single response may be classified into more than one. To validate the classification, 215 responses, separate from those used to develop the keyword patterns, were human-annotated by the authors blind to treatment condition. These included a random sample of 100 responses and category-enriched supplemental cases. F1 scores calculated using the random sample range from 0.67 to 1.00 across categories (Table C5), indicating moderate to excellent agreement between the keyword classifier and human judgment. We regress the different categories (where an open-response is either coded as 1 or 0 for each category) on the experimental treatments. The results are shown in Figure C5 and Table C6.

Table C5: Keyword classification scheme for open-ended responses.

Category	Direction	Logic	Pattern	Example	F1
Electoral strategy		Attributes shift to electoral strategy in any form	röst, väljare, val, strategi, taktik, makt, populis, valfläsk, fiska, locka, vinna röster	“För att vinna röster” (To win votes)	0.94
Immigration considerations	Restrictive	Frames immigration in terms of social problems or costs	brott, kriminalitet, integr, bostad, gäng, trygghet, segregat, utanförskap, kostnad, jobb, arbete, kravall, skjut, otrygg, våld	“Högre brottsstatistik, mycket skjutningar, färre jobb till svenskar.” (Higher crime statistics, many shootings, fewer jobs for Swedes.)	0.77
Humanitarian considerations	Generous	Frames immigration in terms of human need or solidarity	hjälp, solidaritet, humanitär, human, ukraina, krig, mänsklig	“Vi har god ekonomi i Sverige och har råd att hjälpa människor på flykt.” (We have a good economy in Sweden and can afford to help people who are fleeing.)	1.00
Majority chasing	Restrictive	Attributes shift to following majority or public opinion	opini, majorit, folkvilj, folk.*vill, anpass.*folk, lyssna.*väljare, lyssna.*folk, lyhörd, valmanskår	“Närma sig folkopinionen.” (Getting closer to public opinion.)	0.85
Immigrant vote-seeking	Generous	Attributes shift to courting immigrant voters	invandrare/migrant/flykting/utländsk/utlänning/asylsök within 40 chars of röst/väljare/vinn/fiska/locka; OR röstboskap/valboskap	“För att få fler röster av invandrare och därigenom vinna valet i höst.” (To get more votes from immigrants and thereby win the election this autumn.)	0.67
Coalition logic	Generous	Attributes shift to maintaining left-bloc coalition partners	koalition, vänsterblock, regeringsalternativ, vänsterpart, miljöpart, centerpart, MP, V, C	“Gör att säkra makten via stödpaket dom MP, V och C.” (To secure power through support from MP, V, and C.)	0.83
Anti-SD positioning	Generous	Attributes shift to differentiating S from SD	distansera, särskilj, differenti; OR sverigedemokrat/sd within 30 chars of avstånd/profilera/kontrast	“Särskilja sig från Sverigedemokraterna. Ta väljare från andra migrationsvänliga partier.” (To differentiate from the Sweden Democrats. To take voters from other migration-friendly parties.)	0.86
SD voter competition	Restrictive	Attributes shift to winning back voters lost to SD	sverigedemokrat/sd/högerväljare AND väljare/röst/vinn/förlora/tappa/tillbaka/locka/fånga	“För att kanske få några röster från de som tidigare röstat på Sverigedemokraterna.” (To perhaps get some votes from those who previously voted for the Sweden Democrats.)	0.89

Overall the electoral strategy category is significantly more common in the restrictive condition than the generous condition (44% vs. 34%). The subcategory results reveal that this aggregate difference masks opposing patterns across the two conditions. In the restrictive condition, respondents are more likely to invoke concerns with immigration (19% vs. 6%), majority chasing (8% vs. 3%), and competition for SD voters (12% vs. 6%). In the generous condition, respondents are more likely to invoke humanitarian concerns (15% vs. 3%), immigrant vote-seeking (6% vs. 1%), coalition logic (4% vs. 1%), and anti-SD positioning (3% vs. 0%). All differences are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

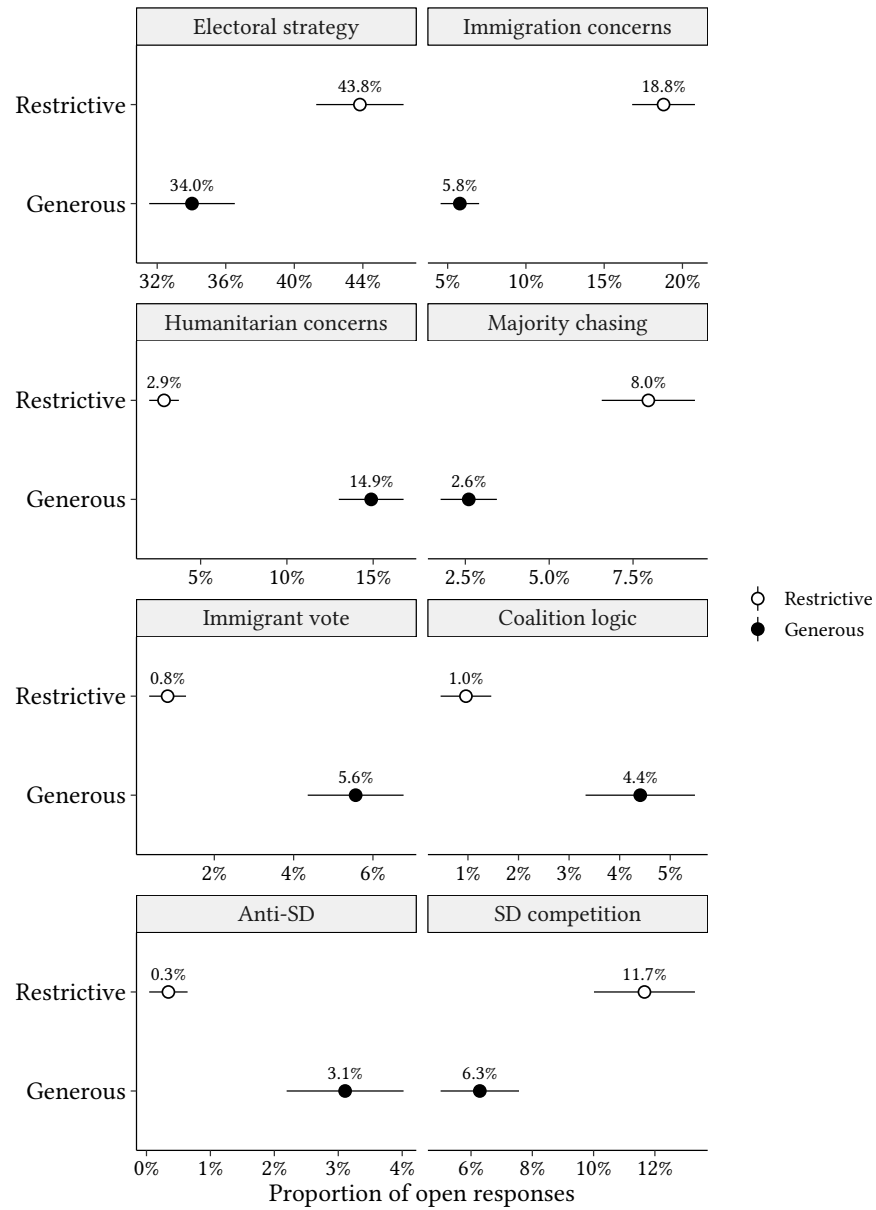
Table C6: Partitioning Open-Ended Responses

	Elect. strat.	Imm. Cons.	Hum. Cons.	Majority	Imm. Vote	Coalition	Anti-SD	SD Comp.
Intercept	0.34*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)	0.15*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.06*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.06*** (0.01)
Restrictive shift	0.10*** (0.02)	0.13*** (0.01)	-0.12*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.00)	0.05*** (0.01)
Observations	2842	2842	2842	2842	2842	2842	2842	2842

Note: OLS estimates with robust standard errors. The reference category is generous shift.

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

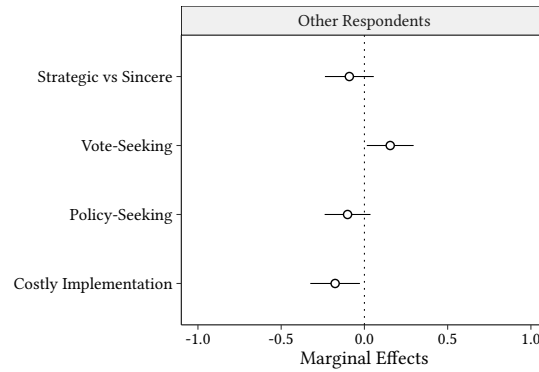
Figure C5: Open-Ended Response Categories by Treatment Condition



Note: The figure shows the predicted proportion of respondents mentioning each keyword category by treatment condition (generous vs. restrictive shift). Points show predicted means and bars show 95% confidence intervals. Estimates from Table C6.

C.4 Results for respondents who are neither Social Democrats nor Sweden Democrats

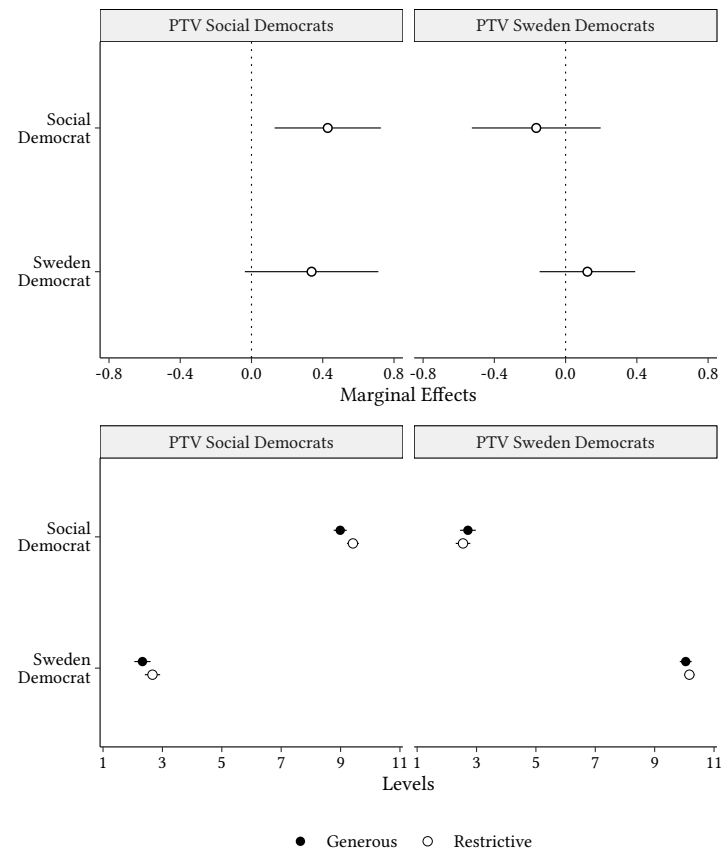
Figure C6: Effects on Perceived motives and Commitment for Other Respondents



Note: The figure shows marginal effects of the restrictive shift compared to the generous shift for respondents who support neither the Social Democrats nor the Sweden Democrats. Bars show 95% confidence intervals. The effect on vote-seeking corresponds to 0.1 SD and that on costly implementation 0.11 SD. Estimates from Table C4.

C.5 Results for propensity to vote

Figure C7: Treatment Effects on the Propensity to Vote (PTV) for the Social Democratic party and for the Sweden Democrats among their supporters

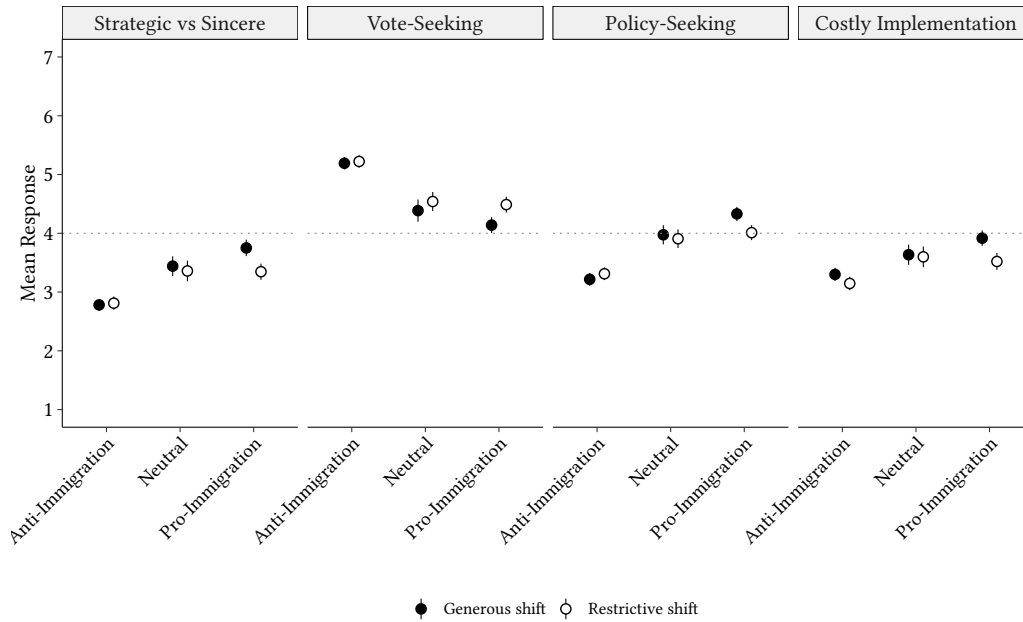


Note: The figure shows marginal effects of the restrictive shift compared to the generous shift from two regression models with robust standard errors. Bars (barely visible in bottom panel) indicate 95% confidence intervals. Based on estimates in Table C4.

C.6 Heterogeneity: immigration attitudes, political knowledge, and gender

Immigration Attitudes We measure immigration attitudes pre-treatment on an 11-point Likert scale, and define those who answered 1-5 as anti-immigration (55% of our sample), 6 as neither pro- nor anti-immigration (15%), and 7-11 (29%) as pro-immigration. The average immigration attitude was not significantly different across treatments ($\mu_{\text{generous}}^{\text{imatt}} = 4.94$, $\mu_{\text{restrictive}}^{\text{imatt}} = 4.87$, $p_{\text{diff}}^{\text{imatt}} = 0.479$).²⁷ We then regress our dependent variables on the treatment variables interacted with our anti-immigration classification. The results are shown in Figure C8 and Table C7.

Figure C8: Effects Conditional on Immigration Attitude



Note: Bars are 95% confidence intervals with robust standard errors. Model estimates on all respondents.

²⁷The question is taken from the Swedish National Election Studies 2018. The exact wording is: “Where would you place yourself on the following scale on how many refugees Sweden should admit?” The endpoints were labeled as “we should be restrictive with respect to how many refugees we admit” and “we should be generous with respect to how many refugees we admit.”

Table C7: Heterogeneity by Immigration Attitudes

	Full sample				Correctly perceived			
	Strategic vs Sincere	Vote-Seeking	Policy-Seeking	Costly Implementation	Strategic vs Sincere	Vote-Seeking	Policy-Seeking	Costly Implementation
Intercept	2.78*** (0.05)	5.19*** (0.05)	3.22*** (0.06)	3.30*** (0.06)	2.75*** (0.08)	5.17*** (0.08)	3.09*** (0.08)	3.27*** (0.08)
Restrictive shift	0.03 (0.08)	0.03 (0.08)	0.10 (0.08)	-0.15 (0.08)	-0.17 (0.11)	0.30** (0.10)	0.12 (0.11)	-0.31** (0.12)
Neutral	0.66*** (0.10)	-0.81*** (0.11)	0.76*** (0.10)	0.34** (0.10)	0.70*** (0.16)	-0.81*** (0.18)	0.87*** (0.16)	0.40* (0.16)
Pro-Immigration	0.97*** (0.09)	-1.05*** (0.09)	1.11*** (0.08)	0.62*** (0.09)	1.09*** (0.13)	-1.17*** (0.12)	1.30*** (0.12)	0.67*** (0.12)
Restrictive shift × Neutral	-0.11 (0.15)	0.12 (0.15)	-0.16 (0.14)	0.12 (0.15)	-0.46* (0.24)	0.27 (0.23)	-0.20 (0.22)	-0.02 (0.23)
Restrictive shift × Pro-Immigration	-0.43*** (0.13)	0.32* (0.12)	-0.41*** (0.12)	-0.24 (0.13)	-0.78*** (0.18)	0.62*** (0.16)	-0.71*** (0.17)	-0.44* (0.18)
F-test: Conditional effect of restrictive shift (<i>p</i>)								
Neutral	0.51	0.22	0.56	0.77	0.00	0.01	0.68	0.09
Pro-Immigration	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Observations	3253	3254	3253	3250	1617	1617	1617	1615

Note: OLS estimates with robust standard errors. Anti-immigration and generous shift are reference categories. Correctly perceived subsample restricted to respondents who correctly identified the direction of the policy shift.

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

The results show that it is primarily pro-immigration respondents who react in line with our theory: they perceive restrictive shifts to be more opportunistic than restrictive shifts. Anti-immigration respondents, on the other hand, do not seem to update their perceived motives based on the direction of the policy shift. What explains this? One potential explanation is that respondents tend to find policy shifts that they agree with to be more credible than policy shifts that go against their views. This could explain why pro-immigration respondents rate the generous shift as more principled. However, this alternative explanation also implies that anti-immigration respondents should rate the restrictive shift as more principled, which they do not.

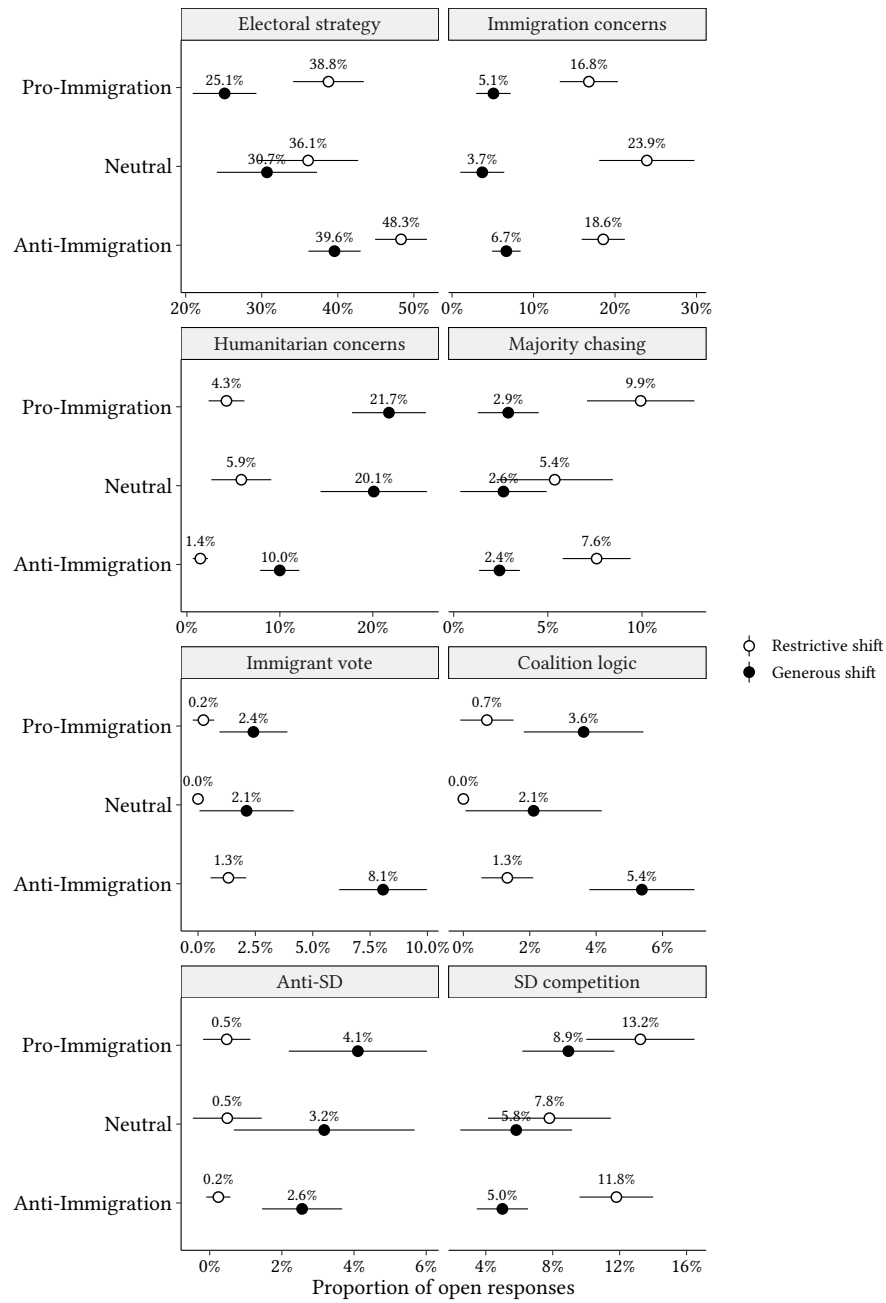
What is noticeable in the figure, however, is that anti-immigration respondents consistently rate the Social Democrats' policy shift as being opportunistic compared to the two other groups. This suggests that one alternative explanation for this pattern is that anti-immigration respondents have stronger priors about how the Social Democrats have changed their policy or what motives drive their behavior. We examine this alternative explanation in two ways.

First, if anti-immigration respondents have especially strong priors about how the Social Democrats have changed their policy, the treatment effects might be attenuated because they do not believe the policy shifts. To test this, we re-estimate our interaction model on the subset of respondents who correctly perceived the treatment. The results, also in Table C7, show that for this group respondents rate the restrictive shift as more vote-seeking and less likely to be implemented, in line with our theoretical argument. The estimated coefficients for strategic vs. sincere and policy-seeking have the expected sign but are not statistically significant.

Second, further evidence from the open-ended responses suggests that anti-immigration respondents interpret the Social Democrats' policy shifts through a broadly strategic lens regardless of the direction of the shift. Figure C9 and Table C8 show that anti-immigration respondents are about as likely to explain the generous shift in electoral strategy terms as pro-immigration respondents are to explain the restrictive shift. At the same time, anti-immigration respondents are even more likely to interpret the restrictive shift strategically. This suggests that they remain skeptical of the Social Democrats' motives even when the party adopts a policy direction they themselves prefer. What differs is the content of strategic reasoning: in the generous condition, anti-immigration

respondents rarely invoke humanitarian concerns and instead more often portray the shift as electorally motivated catering toward immigrant voters or coalition partners. These patterns suggest that anti-immigration respondents, compared to the other respondents, infer that strategic motives drive the Social Democrats regardless of the direction of the policy shift. This underlines the difficulty of successfully accommodating in the real world if voters have strong distrust of a party.

Figure C9: Open-Ended Responses by Immigration Attitude



Note: Bars are 95% confidence intervals with robust standard errors.

Table C8: Open-Ended Response Categories by Immigration Attitudes

	Elect. strat.	Imm. Cons.	Hum. Cons.	Majority	Imm. Vote	Coalition	Anti-SD	SD Comp.
Intercept	0.40*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)
Restrictive shift	0.09*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	-0.07*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.02*** (0.01)	0.07*** (0.01)
Neutral	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.03 (0.02)	0.10** (0.03)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)	-0.03* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
Pro-Immigration	-0.14*** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.04* (0.02)
Restrictive shift × Neutral	-0.03 (0.05)	0.08* (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.05** (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.05 (0.03)
Restrictive shift × Pro-Immigration	0.05 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.09*** (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.03)
F-test: Conditional effect of restrictive shift (p)								
Neutral	0.25	0.00	0.00	0.17	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.43
Pro-Immigration	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.05
Observations	2842	2842	2842	2842	2842	2842	2842	2842

Note: OLS estimates with robust standard errors. Anti-immigration and generous shift are reference categories.

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

Political Knowledge We measure political knowledge pre-treatment with six quiz-like questions about Swedish politics. We add up the correct responses, and classify respondents as having high political knowledge if they got 5-6 correct responses, medium if 2-4 correct responses, and low if 0-1 correct responses. The average political knowledge index was not significantly different across treatments ($\mu_{\text{generous}}^{\text{knowledge}} = 3.18$, $\mu_{\text{restrictive}}^{\text{knowledge}} = 3.01$, $p_{\text{diff}}^{\text{knowledge}} = 0.157$). Table C9 shows that it is voters with medium and high levels of political knowledge that respond to the treatment. Whenever the treatment effects are significant, they are also in line with our theory. We are not well-powered enough, however, to identify any differences between the groups.

Table C9: Treatment Effects Conditional on Political Knowledge

	Strategic vs Sincere	Vote-Seeking	Policy-Seeking	Costly Implementation
Intercept	3.26*** (0.08)	4.86*** (0.08)	3.68*** (0.08)	3.79*** (0.08)
Restrictive shift	0.05 (0.11)	0.03 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.11)	-0.20 (0.11)
Restrictive $\times$ Medium Knowledge	-0.26 (0.14)	0.13 (0.13)	-0.10 (0.13)	-0.03 (0.14)
Restrictive $\times$ High Knowledge	-0.15 (0.16)	0.16 (0.16)	0.05 (0.16)	-0.01 (0.16)
Medium Knowledge	-0.06 (0.10)	-0.13 (0.10)	0.03 (0.10)	-0.23* (0.10)
High Knowledge	-0.22 (0.11)	-0.12 (0.12)	-0.13 (0.11)	-0.48*** (0.11)
F-test: Conditional effect of restrictive shift (p)				
Medium	0.01	0.04	0.11	0.00
High	0.36	0.09	0.82	0.06
Observations	3252	3253	3252	3249

Note: OLS estimates with robust standard errors.

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

Gender Table C10 shows that both men and women respond to the treatments in the expected direction. The average share of female respondents was not significantly different across treatments ($\mu_{\text{generous}}^{\text{female}} = 0.59$, $\mu_{\text{restrictive}}^{\text{female}} = 0.57$, $p_{\text{diff}}^{\text{female}} = 0.195$). For women, however, the only significant effect is on costly implementation, while men respond significantly to all outcomes except for perceptions of policy-seeking motives. Once again, however, we emphasize that the results should be taken with a grain of salt, as the experiment is not well-powered enough for us to identify any significant differences between men and women.

Table C10: Treatment Effects Conditional on Gender

	Strategic vs Sincere	Vote-Seeking	Policy-Seeking	Costly Implementation
Intercept	3.24*** (0.05)	4.68*** (0.05)	3.77*** (0.05)	3.65*** (0.05)
Restrictive shift	-0.07 (0.07)	0.09 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.07)	-0.23** (0.07)
Restrictive $\times$ Male	-0.09 (0.12)	0.11 (0.12)	0.03 (0.12)	0.09 (0.12)
Male	-0.19* (0.08)	0.22** (0.08)	-0.28*** (0.08)	-0.30*** (0.08)
F-test: Conditional effect of restrictive shift (p)				
Male	0.07	0.03	0.74	0.12
Observations	3208	3209	3208	3209

Note: OLS estimates with robust standard errors.

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

C.7 Sensitivity and robustness

Table C11: Main Results from Accommodation Experiment with Imputed Missing Values

	Strategic vs Sincere	Vote-Seeking	Policy-Seeking	Costly Implementation	PTV Soc Dem	PTV Swe Dem
Intercept	3.22*** (0.04)	4.71*** (0.04)	3.68*** (0.04)	3.56*** (0.04)	5.32*** (0.08)	4.64*** (0.09)
Restrictive shift	-0.12* (0.05)	0.15** (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.21*** (0.05)	0.12 (0.12)	0.13 (0.13)
Observations	3464	3464	3464	3464	3464	3464

Note: OLS estimates with robust standard errors. Missing values on the outcome variables are imputed as midscale responses.

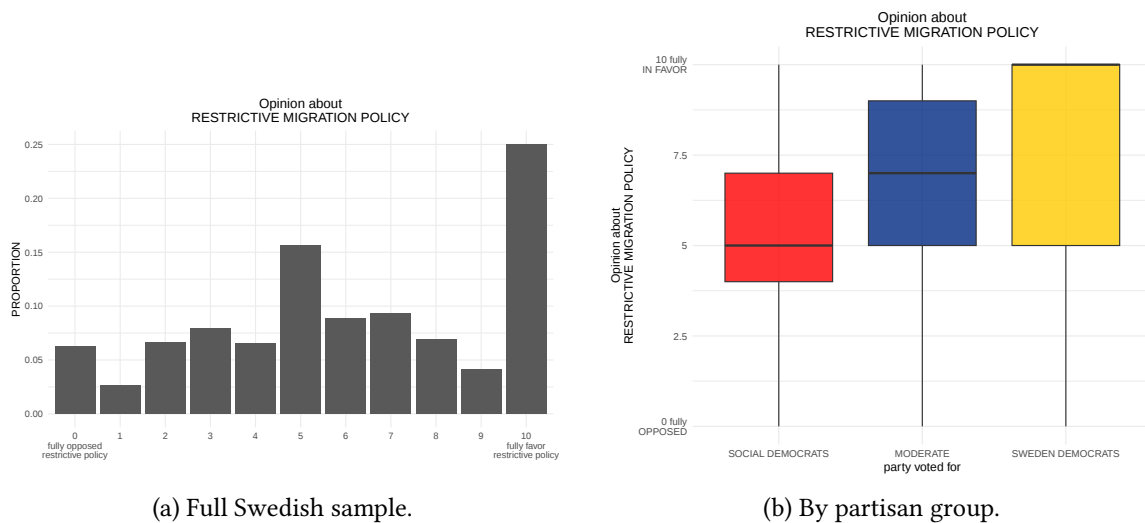
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

C.8 Public opinion on immigration in Sweden

Most citizens in Sweden support restrictive options on immigration and refugees. This can be documented with recent mass surveys, such as the 2024 European Election Study (Popa et al., 2024) or the 2022 Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) (Oscarsson et al., 2024).²⁸

The left panel of Figure C10 presents the distribution of preferences in Sweden towards a restrictive migration policy. Data are drawn from the 2024 European Election Study. The survey item reads as follows: ‘What do you think about immigration policies?’, where the answers range from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates ‘Fully opposed to a restrictive policy on immigration’ and 10 indicates ‘Fully in favor of a restrictive policy on immigration.’²⁹

Figure C10: Swedish Public Opinion on Immigration Policy



Note: Panel (a) shows a histogram with the opinion of the full Swedish sample. Panel (b) shows a boxplot with the opinion of supporters of the three biggest parties in Sweden in the last parliamentary election: Social Democrats, Moderates, and Sweden Democrats. Source: 2024 European Election Study (Popa et al., 2024).

²⁸Oscarsson, H., Karlsson, R., Lindskog, H., & Oleskog Tryggvason, P. (2024). *The Swedish National Election Study 2022—CSES edition* (Version 1) [Data set]. University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.5878/2ty4-tk98>

Popa, S. A., Hobolt, S. B., van der Brug, W., Katsanidou, A., Gattermann, K., Sorace, M., Toygür, I., & de Vreese, C. H. (2024). *European Parliament Election Study 2024, voter study* (ZA8868; Version 1.0.0) [Data set]. GESIS Data Archive. <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14409>

²⁹The scale is reversed from the original questionnaire so that the most restrictive position on immigration appears on the right of the issue dimension.

The plot confirms that citizens in Sweden tend to favor restrictive immigration policies. As many as 25% of the entire sample place themselves on the most extreme anti-immigration policy. Furthermore, almost 60% of the respondents hold positions between 6 and 10, i.e. positions that favor restrictive policies. In contrast, only 29% have positions that oppose restrictive options (between 0 and 4). Both the median position (6) and the average position (6.1) lean in favor of restrictive policies.

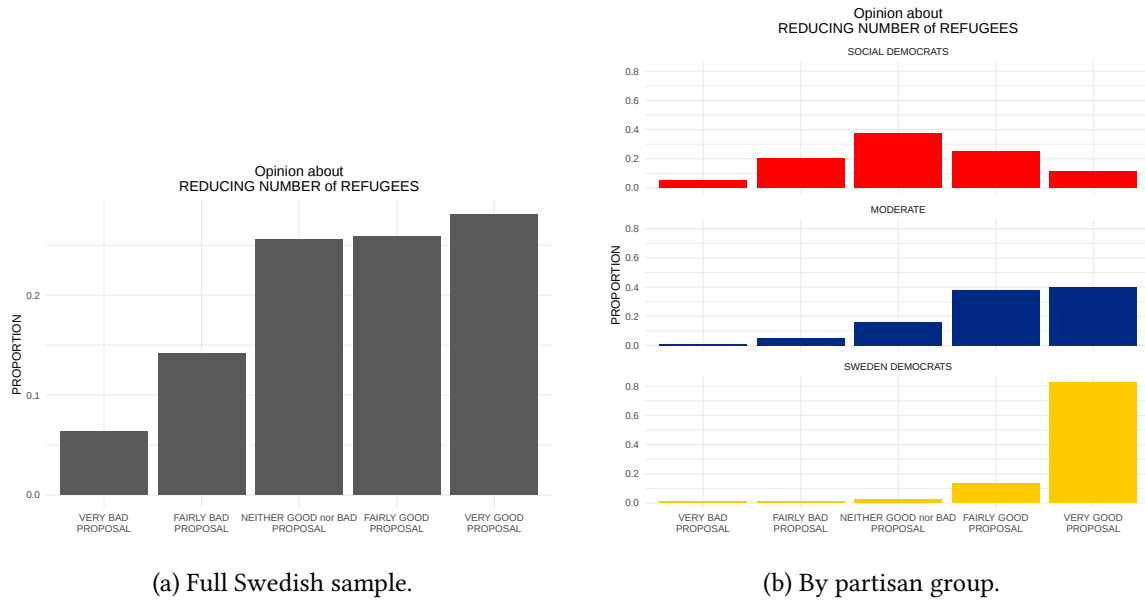
The preference for restrictive immigration is not exclusive to supporters of the far-right anti-immigration *Sweden Democrats*. It extends to voters of the two main mainstream parties in the country: The Social Democratic party and the Moderates. The right panel of Figure C10 presents the evidence. The median preference for the Sweden Democrats is the most extreme position (10). Moderate Party voters also clearly lean in favor of restrictive policies: The median Moderate voter placement on this issue is 7, and the average lies at 6.7. The constituency of the Social Democrats is more divided, but it still leans in favor of restrictive positions: The average placement is 5.5. Moreover, there are significantly more social democratic voters supporting restrictive positions than generous ones: Only 30% endorse positions from 0 to 4, while 46% endorse positions from 6 to 10.

Public opinion around the theme of immigration in Sweden can further be illustrated with data from a survey item fielded in the 2022 wave of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. The questionnaire item reads: *What is your opinion on the following proposal? 'Accept fewer refugees into Sweden'*, where answers are coded using a Likert-like scale with the values *very bad proposal*, *fairly bad proposal*, *neither good nor bad proposal*, *fairly good proposal*, and *very good proposal*.

The left panel of Figure C11 presents the distribution of responses. As can be seen, respondents tend to favor options to reduce the number of incoming refugees. About 55% of respondents declare that reducing refugees is a “fairly good” or a “very good” proposal. Only 20% think that it is not a good proposal.³⁰

³⁰The remainder considers that such a proposal is neither good nor bad.

Figure C11: Swedish Public Opinion on Refugee Policy



Note: Panel (a) shows a histogram of opinion about a proposal to reduce the number of refugees in the full Swedish sample. Panel (b) shows the same distribution broken down by partisan group. Source: 2022 CSES (Oscarsson et al., 2024).

Again, it can be shown that this trend applies to the three major parties in Sweden: The Sweden Democrats, the Moderates, and the Social Democrats (see the right panel of Figure C11). Among voters of the far-right Sweden Democrats, preferences are clear: 95% of them favor reducing the number of refugees. Moderate voters also overwhelmingly support such policies: 78% of them do so. Even among voters of the Social Democratic Party, opinions lean towards a reduction in refugee inflows. Only 26% of social democratic voters oppose such a reduction, whereas 37% favor it.³¹

³¹The rest present a rather indifferent position: they see the proposal as "neither good nor bad".

C.9 Question wordings for screeners and outcome variables

- **Screener battery**

I have a pretty good understanding of the societal issues facing Sweden today

Most people can be trusted

It is important to know what is going on in politics

Please choose 'partly agree' for data quality purposes

Please choose 'partly disagree' for data quality purposes

[Fully disagree, Partly disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Partly agree, Fully agree]

- **Manipulation check**

Consider the Social Democrats' policy change. Do you think that they have attempted to move closer to or further away from the Sweden Democrats or has the distance not changed much?

[Moved closer, Moved away, Not changed much]

- **Open-Ended**

The Social Democrats have proposed a more [generous/restrictive] migration policy. Why do you think that the Social Democrats have changed their position? List as many thoughts as you have.

Please be as detailed as you can and take as much time as you need. Most people write several sentences, but you can also write keywords.

[Open-ended response]

- **Reason: strategic or genuine**

As public opinion has become more restrictive and the Sweden Democrats' voter support has grown at the expense of the Social Democrats, the Social Democrats have presented a more [generous/restrictive] migration policy.

Do you think it is a strategic change to win more votes or that they genuinely have changed their position?

[1 - Strategic change, 4 - Neither strategic nor genuine change, 7 - Genuine change]

- **Motives: votes**

Some people claim that parties only care about getting as many votes as possible and that they are prepared to do anything just to get elected. How well do you think that this describes the Social Democrat's recent [generous/restrictive] policy change?

[1 - Does not fit at all, 7 - Fits very well]

- **Motives: policy**

Other people claim that parties are driven by the will to bring about political change and that they want to make a real difference. How well do you think that this describes the Social Democrat's recent [generous/restrictive] policy change?

[1 - Does not fit at all, 7 - Fits very well]

- **Commitment to policy**

Imagine that the Social Democrats would lose voters by implementing the [generous/restrictive] policy change. How likely do you think it is that the Social Democrats would implement the policy change in spite of this?

[1 – Not at all likely, 7 – Very likely]

- **Intention to vote**

In light of the Social Democrats' policy change, how likely is it that you would vote for [each party in parliament]? Please answer on a scale where 0 means "not at all probable" and 10 means "very probable".

[0 – Not at all probable, 10 – Very probable]