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# Are Niche Parties Fundamentally Different from Mainstream Parties? The Causes and the Electoral Consequences of Western European Parties' Policy Shifts, 1976–1998

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*Do “niche” parties—such as Communist, Green, and extreme nationalist parties—adjust their policies in response to shifts in public opinion? Would such policy responsiveness enhance these parties’ electoral support? We report the results of statistical analyses of the relationship between parties’ policy positions, voters’ policy preferences, and election outcomes in eight Western European democracies from 1976 to 1998 that suggest that the answer to both questions is no. Specifically, we find no evidence that niche parties responded to shifts in public opinion, while mainstream parties displayed consistent tendencies to respond to public opinion shifts. Furthermore, we find that in situations where niche parties moderated their policy positions they were systematically punished at the polls (a result consistent with the hypothesis that such parties represent extreme or noncentrist ideological clienteles), while mainstream parties did not pay similar electoral penalties. Our findings have important implications for political representation, for spatial models of elections, and for political parties’ election strategies.*

In previous research on the dynamics of parties’ policy positions (Adams et al. 2004), we presented empirical evidence that political parties in Western European democracies tend to shift their ideological orientations in response to shifts in voters’ policy preferences, as suggested by the model of “dynamic representation” developed by Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995; see also Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). Here, we extend this analysis to consider whether the *type of party* makes a difference. Specifically, we explore whether the members of party families who present either an extreme ideology (such as Communist and extreme nationalist parties) or

a noncentrist “niche” ideology (i.e., the Greens) respond differently to shifts in public opinion than do the political elites who represent mainstream or catch-all parties such as Labor, Socialist, Social Democratic, Liberal, Conservative, and Christian Democratic parties. We label the members of the Communist, Green, and extreme nationalist party families as *niche parties*.

Our study, which encompasses eight Western European party systems over the period 1976–1998, produces two central findings. First, we conclude that while mainstream parties’ policy shifts during this period corresponded strongly to shifts in public opinion, niche parties

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did not display similar tendencies to adjust their policies in response to changes in the mass public's policy beliefs. We label this finding on niche parties' policy rigidity the *policy stability* result.

Our second finding, which concerns the electoral effects of parties' policy shifts, plausibly explains the policy stability result: namely, we find evidence that when niche parties moderated their policy positions to bring them more closely in line with public opinion, their national vote shares dropped relative to their support in the previous election. We label this finding the *costly policy moderation* result. By contrast, we find no evidence that voters penalized mainstream parties for changing their policies.

In summary, our findings suggest that the linkages between parties' policy programs, public opinion, and election outcomes are dramatically different for niche parties than they are for mainstream parties. Niche parties such as Green, Communist, and extreme nationalist parties do not appear to adjust their policy programs in response to shifts in public opinion, and when niche parties *do* shift their policies towards the center of the voter distribution, they are penalized at the ballot box. Neither of these conclusions applies to mainstream parties.

Our conclusions have important implications for political representation, for spatial models of elections, and for political parties' election strategies. With respect to the model of "dynamic representation" developed by Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995; see also Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002), which emphasizes the relationship between American parties' policies and public opinion, our findings suggest that when we export this representational model outside of the United States, we must account for the possibility that the relationship between public opinion, parties' policy shifts, and election outcomes differs across parties. Specifically, the policy stability result and the costly policy moderation result suggest that these relationships differ between niche and mainstream parties.

With respect to spatial models of elections, our costly policy moderation result is relevant to the assumption of *costless spatial mobility* that formal theorists frequently employ, i.e., that political parties/candidates can shift their positions in the policy space without paying an electoral penalty. Our empirical results support this assumption with respect to mainstream parties, but not with respect to niche parties. Our findings may thereby facilitate the development of more nuanced spatial models, particularly among the growing group of scholars who explore parties' policy strategies in real-world elections (see Adams and Merrill 1999, 2000; Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Alvarez, Nagler, and Bowler 2000; Budge 1994; Dow 2001; Enelow and Hinich 1984, 1994; Erikson and Romero 1990;

Lin, Chu, and Hinich 1996; Merrill and Grofman 1999; Quinn and Martin 2002; Schofield et al. 1998; Schofield and Sened 2005, 2006). In this regard, note that our results have an important implication for niche parties' election strategies: contrary to conventional wisdom, niche parties do *not* face a trade-off between articulating their sincere policy beliefs versus moderating their policy pronouncements in order to increase their electoral support. Instead, the costly policy moderation results imply that niche parties cannot moderate in the hopes of gaining electoral support, and so their optimal vote-seeking strategy is that which we actually observe, to stay put and maintain their policy appeal to those core voters who are drawn to them for ideological reasons.

## Hypotheses on the Causes and the Electoral Consequences of Niche Parties' Policy Shifts

Our aim here is to evaluate hypotheses on the relationship between parties' policy shifts, changes in public opinion, and election results. Of course numerous additional factors plausibly influence how parties position themselves in the policy space, including parties' linkages with important socioeconomic groups such as trade unions (Esping-Andersen 1985; Hillebrand and Irwin 1999; Share 1999); the characteristics of the state welfare system (Esping-Andersen 1985, 1990); economic conditions (Pennings 1998); the policy preferences of party activists (Aldrich 1983; McGann 2002; Miller and Schofield 2003); the voting system used to allocate seats in parliament (Cox 1990, 1997; Dow 2001; Grofman 2001; Powell 2000); the number of political parties (Cox 1990; Merrill and Adams 2002); and party elites' expectations concerning post-election bargaining over the governing coalition (Austen-Smith and Banks 1988). However, given the limits of our data in terms of both the time period and number of countries included, we choose here to focus specifically on the role public opinion plays in explaining party positioning.

Our first hypothesis is motivated in part by the empirical work of Kitschelt (1994), D'Alimonte (1999), and Tarrow (1989), who have conducted detailed studies of elites and activists belonging to Green and Communist parties:

*H<sub>1</sub> (The Policy Stability Hypothesis):* In comparison to mainstream parties, niche parties' policy programs are less responsive to shifts in public opinion.

The studies cited above report several findings that imply the Policy Stability Hypothesis. First, these studies suggest that the elites from niche parties place greater emphasis on policy objectives than do the elites associated with mainstream parties, who frequently emphasize vote- or office-seeking motivations. To the extent that this is true, we should expect niche parties to be less responsive to voters' policy preferences than mainstream parties.<sup>1</sup>

A second consideration is that even to the extent that niche and mainstream parties both emphasize electoral objectives, niche parties' elites may emphasize *long-run* support while mainstream party elites maximize support in the short term. Przeworski and Sprague advance this argument in their discussion of the distinction between communist parties versus mainstream leftist parties, noting that "while the Catholic Church is perhaps able to see the future in millennia and Communist ideologues in centuries, it is unreasonable to expect leaders of electoral parties to pay much attention to anything but the proximate future" (1986, 120).<sup>2</sup> To the extent that niche parties' elites and activists have longer electoral time horizons than do mainstream party elites, we would expect niche parties to be less responsive to short-term trends in public opinion.

A third, related, consideration is suggested by the work of Kitschelt (1994) and D'Alimonte (1999), who report findings suggesting that ideological stability may actually be an optimal *vote-seeking* strategy for niche parties. Specifically, these authors report that niche parties' activists are strongly policy oriented and are therefore highly resistant to ideological "compromises" in their party's policies. This suggests that when niche parties' elites attempt to change their party's policy orientations, this may provoke bitter internal divisions that can prove electorally damaging, in two ways. First, if these internal divisions

are widely publicized they may tarnish the party's standing along such "valence" dimensions of voter evaluation as competence and reliability (Clark 2005; Stokes 1963).<sup>3</sup> Second, internal divisions may demobilize the activists the party relies on to provide scarce campaign resources such as composing and disseminating newsletters, contacting voters, and transporting voters to the polls.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that either of these processes is at work, we might expect niche parties to pay substantial electoral penalties for policy changes per se, regardless of whether or not such changes bring the party closer to the mainstream of public opinion:

*H<sub>2</sub> (The Costly Policy Shift Hypothesis):* In comparison to mainstream parties, niche parties are penalized electorally for shifting their policy programs.

Finally, we develop a more nuanced hypothesis about the electoral effects of parties' policy shifts, one that accounts for the *direction* of these shifts relative to the voter distribution. The work of Kitschelt, D'Alimonte, and others cited above suggests that niche parties' activists are especially resistant to attempts by party elites to *moderate* the party's positions, that is, to shift the party's policies towards the center of the voter distribution. This resistance plausibly arises because niche parties' activists view such policy moderation as a sign of pandering or "selling out" by the party's elites, a strategy that niche party activists—who as discussed above appear to prefer pursuing policy objectives to maximizing short-term electoral support—may view as unacceptable. To the extent this is the case, it suggests that niche parties may pay a severe electoral penalty when they moderate their policy programs:

*H<sub>3</sub> (The Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis):* In comparison to mainstream parties, niche parties are penalized electorally for moderating their policy programs.

<sup>1</sup>We note that this implication holds regardless of whether we define policy-seeking politicians' motivations *instrumentally* (i.e., that politicians pursue strategies designed to enhance their abilities to implement their preferred policies) or if we define policy-seeking utility in terms of the *expressive benefits* politicians derive from articulating their preferred policy positions. In the former case—in which policy-seeking elites value voter support as a means towards gaining office in order to implement their preferred policies—spatial models of elections report results consistent with the Policy Stability Hypothesis. For instance, Groseclose's (2001) spatial model of two-party elections suggests that the greater the emphasis that parties place on policy objectives as opposed to office-seeking objectives, the greater their tendency to diverge from the center of the policy space; Merrill and Adams (2002; see also Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005, Chapter 12) report similar substantive conclusions for multiparty elections. In the case of expressive motivations (see Roemer 2001), we should also expect that policy-oriented politicians will not respond to public opinion shifts, since these politicians' expressive utilities do not depend on party support.

<sup>2</sup>We thank Andrea Haupt for bringing this quote to our attention.

<sup>3</sup>Internal divisions over policy may also increase voters' uncertainty about the party's policy position, which will depress the party's appeal to risk-averse voters. Several spatial modeling papers treat this form of uncertainty—which is modeled in terms of the variance of the probability distribution associated with the party's position—as a valence issue (see Austen-Smith 1987; Bernhardt and Ingberman 1985; Enelow and Hinich 1982; Hinich and Munger 1989; Hug 1995).

<sup>4</sup>Recent theoretical and empirical work by Schofield and his co-authors (Schofield and Sened 2005; Miller and Schofield 2003) supports the proposition that parties gain electoral benefits by appealing on policy grounds to party activists, thereby mobilizing these activists to increase their provisions of campaign resources.

Note that  $H_2$  and  $H_3$  are related, in that the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis is a component of the Costly Policy Shift Hypothesis, i.e.,  $H_3$  is a necessary but not sufficient condition for  $H_2$ .

To the extent that  $H_3$  is supported, this will suggest that, contrary to conventional wisdom, niche parties' elites do *not* face a trade-off between advocating their preferred policy beliefs, on the one hand, and moderating their policies in order to maximize electoral support, on the other (see Adams and Merrill 2000; Lin, Enelow, and Dorussen 1999). Instead the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis implies that niche parties are likely to incur stiff electoral penalties when they moderate their policy programs. Such a finding—as well as findings in support of the more general Costly Policy Shift Hypothesis ( $H_2$ )—would of course provide a powerful rationale for the Policy Stability Hypothesis ( $H_1$ ), since it is irrational for a niche party to shift its policies in response to public opinion, if such an adjustment depresses the party's support *and* moves the party farther away from its members' preferred policy positions. Indeed, if  $H_2$  and  $H_3$  are confirmed then niche parties can arguably be considered “prisoners of their ideologies,” for these hypotheses imply that niche parties have no real choice other than to cling to the policy ground they have staked out for themselves.

## **Testing the Policy Stability Hypothesis: Data, Measurement, and Model Specification**

### **Measuring the Dependent and Independent Variables**

Longitudinal measurements of party policy positions are necessary for testing the hypotheses formulated in the previous section. Ideally, these measurements will also be comparable cross-nationally so that we can pool our data. The Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) codes policy programs of parties competing in the elections of more than 30 democracies in the postwar period. Aside from being the only available longitudinal and cross-national estimates of parties' policies, these estimates of parties' policy priorities are plausibly reliable because policy programs provide comprehensive and authoritative statements about the parties' policy priorities at the time of elections. Historically, the heated debates within parties over the content of these public statements are also a sign of their importance.

The procedures used to map parties' policy positions from their election programs are described in detail in

several of the CMP-related publications, so that we only briefly review the process here.<sup>5</sup> The coders match up quasi-sentences in the policy program with a category of policy (e.g., welfare, defense, law and order, etc.), and take the percentages of each category as a measure of the party's priorities. Based on the mixture of policy priorities, the authors develop an index that measures the overall ideology for the program of each party in each election year. The ideological scores range from  $-100$  to  $+100$ , with higher scores denoting a more right-wing emphasis. The importance of the CMP data is that it allows us to “map” party positions over time in numerous postwar democracies. The CMP measures generally correspond with other measures of party positioning—such as those based upon expert placements, parliamentary voting analyses, election survey respondents' party placements, and “language-blind” word-scoring techniques—which gives us additional confidence in the longitudinal and cross-national reliability of these estimates (see Hearl 2001; Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; McDonald and Mendes 2001). We note that we have rescaled the CMP party scores to a 1–10 Left-Right scale so that the range of these scores matches that of the public opinion data described below.

Our longitudinal measure of public opinion is derived from the Eurobarometer surveys, which have been administered in the following Western European democracies beginning in the early 1970s: Britain, Italy, Denmark, France, Greece, Spain, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, and Germany. These surveys contain the same item each year in each country, asking approximately 1,000 respondents per country to place themselves on a scale running from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). The average self-placement within each country served as our measurement for the mean voter ideology. Huber (1989) reports empirical analyses suggesting that Eurobarometer respondents' Left-Right self-placements are meaningfully related to their preferences along specific dimensions of policy controversy, and, furthermore, that these self-placements are comparable cross-nationally with the exceptions of the data from Belgium, Ireland, and Germany. Accordingly, we have omitted these three countries from our study, so that our empirical analyses incorporate the data from Britain, Italy, Denmark, France, Greece, Spain, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. The time period covered in our analyses begins in 1976—the first year the Left-Right item was administered in the Eurobarometer surveys—and runs

<sup>5</sup>For a more thorough description of the coding process, see Appendix 2 in Budge et al. (2001).



through 1998, the final year for which the CMP data is available.<sup>6</sup>

### Model Specification for the Policy Stability Hypothesis

We specify a multivariate regression model in order to evaluate the Policy Stability Hypothesis, that niche parties' policy programs are less responsive to shifts in public opinion than are mainstream parties' programs. As we are interested in how parties adjust their policy positions in response to changes in public opinion, we specify a model with the dependent variable the change in a party's Left-Right position in the current election compared to the party's position in the previous election, as measured by the CMP's codings of the party's manifestos in these elections. We label this variable *party's policy shift* and denote the shift in election  $t$  for party  $J$  with  $\Delta P_{Jt}$ . Our core model specification captures the relationship between this variable and public opinion shifts for both mainstream and niche parties:

$$\Delta P_{Jt} = B_0 + B_1(\Delta V_t) + B_2(NP_J) + B_3(\Delta V_t \times NP_J). \quad (1)$$

where:

- $\Delta P_{Jt}$  = the change in party  $J$ 's Left-Right position in the current election  $t$  compared with  $J$ 's position in the previous election  $t - 1$ .
- $\Delta V_t$  = the change in the mean voter position in the country (as measured by the Eurobarometer surveys) in the year of the current election  $t$  as compared to the year of the previous election  $t - 1$ .
- $NP_J$  = 1 if the party is classified as a niche party (i.e., Communist, Nationalist, or Green), and 0 otherwise.

In equation (1) the term  $\Delta V_t$ , which we label the *public opinion shift* variable, denotes the direction and magnitude of the shift in the mean voter position in the country between the year of the current election and the year of the previous election, while the term  $NP_J$ , which we label the *niche party* variable, is a dummy variable that equals one if the party is classified in Budge et al. (2001) as a member of one of the niche party families (i.e., Communist, Green, or Nationalist), and zero otherwise (the

appendix presents the party family classifications for the parties in our data). The term  $(\Delta V_t \times NP_J)$ , which we label the *public opinion shift*  $\times$  *niche party* variable, is the interaction between public opinion shifts and the dummy variable for niche parties, which allows us to estimate differences in the degree to which public opinion influences niche parties as compared to mainstream parties.

While the interpretation of models that contain interaction terms can be convoluted (see Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006), in our case *public opinion shift* is interacted with a simple dummy variable for niche parties, leading to a straightforward interpretation of our model. First consider the effect of public opinion shifts on the policy positions of mainstream parties. The dummy variable for niche parties,  $NP_J$ , will equal zero in this case and thus the influence of public opinion shifts on mainstream parties will be captured solely by the coefficient on *public opinion shift* (the coefficient  $B_1$  in equation 1). If mainstream parties are responsive to shifts in public opinion, as the model of dynamic representation suggests, then  $B_1$  should be positive and statistically significant, indicating that as public opinion shifts, mainstream parties shift their policies in the same direction.

Next, consider the effect of public opinion shifts on the policy positions of niche parties. In this case the dummy variable for niche parties equals one, and the influence of changes in public opinion on niche parties' policy programs will be captured by the sum of the coefficients for the *public opinion shift* and the *public opinion shift*  $\times$  *niche party* variables (the coefficients  $B_1$  and  $B_3$  in equation 1). The Policy Stability Hypothesis ( $H_1$ ) posits that niche parties are less responsive to shifts in public opinion than are mainstream parties. In terms of our model, the Policy Stability Hypothesis predicts that  $(B_1 + B_3) < B_1$ , or  $B_3 < 0$ . Thus, if our estimate for  $B_3$  is negative and statistically significant, this will indicate that niche parties' policy programs are less responsive to shifts in public opinion than are the policy programs of mainstream parties, providing evidence in favor of the Policy Stability Hypothesis. Conversely, if our estimate of  $B_3$  is not statistically significant (or if the estimate is positive and statistically significant), we cannot reject the null hypothesis, that niche parties' are *not* less responsive to public opinion shifts than are mainstream parties.

In addition to the variables described in our core specification, we include several variables to control for other factors that might influence party policy shifts between elections. One plausible influence on party leaders' Left-Right strategies in the *current* election is the direction of the party's policy shifts in the *previous* election. Specifically, previous work by Budge (1994) and by Adams (2001) suggests that party elites have electoral incentives

<sup>6</sup>We have omitted the Italian elections after 1992 due to the drastic transformations in the party system during the period 1992–94, making comparison of parties' Left-Right positions and vote shares pre- and post-1992 problematic. In addition, we note that Eurobarometer surveys were not administered in Greece and Spain until they joined the European Community in 1981 and 1986, respectively. The appendix lists the parties included in our analysis.

to shift their party's policies in the *opposite* direction from their shifts in previous elections. Budge, who argues that party elites may pursue this strategy of "policy alternation" because they recognize the need to satisfy both the moderate and the radical wings of their parties, finds empirical support for the alternation hypothesis in his analysis of CMP data from 20 postwar democracies. Adams, meanwhile, develops a spatial model in which voters are moved by a combination of policy distance and nonpolicy considerations and concludes that voters' nonpolicy-related attachments (such as party identification) can give political parties electoral incentives to shift their policies back and forth over time, thereby creating a pattern that resembles Budge's alternation model.<sup>7</sup> Failure to control for any tendency of parties to shift their policy positions in this way could make some parties appear more or less responsive to shifts in public opinion than they actually are. Thus, we include a lagged measure of a party's policy shift (the shift from election  $(t - 2)$  to election  $(t - 1)$ ), which we label *previous policy shift*.

In a similar vein, past work has hypothesized that parties shift their policy positions in the same direction as their previous policy shift if they gained vote share in the previous election and in the opposite direction if they lost votes in the previous election. Budge (1994) argues that party elites may shift their policies in this way because they view past election results as the only clear electoral signal as to the effectiveness of their policy positions, while Adams et al. (2004) posit that these types of shifts could result from party leadership changes after unfavorable election outcomes (see also Andrews and Jackman 2005). Again, failure to control for any tendency of parties to shift their policy positions in response to past election results could produce misleading estimates of party responsiveness to public opinion. Thus, we include a measure of a party's change in vote share in the previous election—namely, the difference between the party's vote share at

election  $t - 1$  and its vote share at election  $t - 2$ —which we label *previous change in vote share*, and the interaction between this measure and *previous policy shift*. This variable is constructed so that a positive coefficient estimate implies that parties respond to past election results by shifting their policy positions in the same direction as the last time if they gained votes in the previous election, and in the opposite direction if their vote shares declined. Finally, we include dummy variables for each country in our data, which allows us to control for institutional effects or other country-specific factors that could influence party policy shifts.

### Evaluating the Policy Stability Hypothesis

Our analysis encompassed 158 policy shifts by voters and parties in Britain, Italy, Denmark, France, Greece, Spain, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, over 36 elections in the period 1976–98; the complete set of parties included in the analysis is reported in the appendix. Note that pooling our data across countries entails the assumptions that the data is comparable cross-nationally and that the same causal processes operate in each country. The sensitivity analyses we report below support these assumptions.

Our data contains 37 parties, each observed over an average of 4.3 elections, and should thus be regarded as time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) data. Estimating a simple regression on the pooled data can lead to erroneous conclusions if there are unobserved differences between parties (Hsiao 2003; Green, Kim, and Yoon 2001)—fortunately, tests for party-specific effects indicate that this is not a concern for the model we specify to examine the Policy Stability Hypothesis.<sup>8</sup> However, there are other methodological concerns to address. The "policy alternation" findings that emerge from the work of Budge (1994) and Adams (2001) suggest that serially correlated errors may be a problem. The lagged dependent variable included in our specification helps to address this concern (Beck and Katz 1995, 1996), and a Lagrange multiplier test fails to reject the null hypothesis of no serial correlation. Another concern is that there may be unobserved election-specific factors that influence all parties' policy shifts in a particular election, leading to correlated errors among the parties competing in a particular election. We address this concern through the use of robust standard errors clustered by election (Rogers 1993; Williams 2000). Table 1 reports the parameter estimates for our test of the Policy Stability Hypothesis.

<sup>7</sup>We note that there are two additional considerations that motivate our decision to control for parties' previous policy shifts. First, Burt (1997) points out that a pattern of policy alternation can be generated by a model in which, at each election, each party's policies are generated from a random probability distribution centered on some central tendency that is constant across elections and is specific to that party. Burt's model plausibly captures the dynamics of intraparty policy disputes in which, at each successive election, activists representing opposing policy views within the party compete to determine the party's policy direction. Second, we note that even if parties' "true" policy positions are stable over time, to the extent that the CMP's estimates of these positions contain measurement error, such errors can generate patterns similar to those produced by Burt's model. To the extent that any of these processes—Budge's and Adams's alternation models, Burt's random ideologies model, or measurement error—influence parties' observed policy dynamics as measured from the CMP's codings, failure to control for parties' past policy shifts may produce misleading inferences.

<sup>8</sup>An F-test for fixed-effects ( $F_{36,116} = 0.36, p = 1.00$ ) and a likelihood ratio test for random effects ( $\chi^2_1 = 0.00, p = 1.00$ ) both failed to reject the null hypothesis of no party-specific effects.

**TABLE 1** Explaining Parties' Policy Shifts

Independent Variables	
<i>Public opinion shift</i>	0.97** (0.19)
<i>Niche party</i>	0.02 (0.12)
<b><i>Public opinion shift</i> × <i>Niche party</i></b>	<b>-1.52** (0.33)</b>
<i>Previous policy shift</i>	-0.50** (0.09)
<i>Previous change in vote share</i>	0.02 (0.01)
<i>Previous policy shift</i> × <i>Previous change in vote share</i>	-0.01 (0.02)
<i>Country Dummies</i> <sup>†</sup>	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.33
N	158

Note: \*indicates a coefficient that is significant at the  $p = 0.05$  level, \*\*indicates a coefficient that is significant at the  $p = 0.01$  level, both two-tailed tests. Standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable was the party's ideological shift between election  $t - 1$  and election  $t$  (the current election), based on the CMP codings of parties' Left-Right positions. The definitions of the independent variables are given in the text.

<sup>†</sup>The estimated parameters for the country-specific intercepts were (standard errors in parentheses): Britain 0.28 (0.25); Denmark -0.11 (0.21); France 0.09 (0.18); Greece -0.12 (0.24); Italy 0.17 (0.26); Luxembourg 0.24 (0.23); The Netherlands 0.20 (0.20); Spain -0.12 (0.23).

The coefficient on the *public opinion shift* variable is positive and statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that there is strong evidence that mainstream parties adjust their policies in response to shifts in public opinion. However, the estimated coefficient for the *public opinion shift* × *niche party* variable is negative and statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that there is a statistically significant difference in the extent to which niche and mainstream parties adjust their policies in response to shifts in public opinion, with niche parties' policy programs less responsive to shifts in public opinion than are the policy programs of mainstream parties. This finding supports the Policy Stability Hypothesis.

Note that the Policy Stability Hypothesis makes a prediction about the difference in responsiveness between niche and mainstream parties, which means simply testing the coefficient for the *public opinion shift* × *niche party* variable is sufficient to evaluate our hypothesis. However, the substantive effect of a public opinion shift on party policy programs is also of interest. To determine this we must calculate the coefficients and standard errors for public opinion shifts conditional on the dummy variable

for niche parties.<sup>9</sup> The expected policy shift for a mainstream party in response to a one-unit shift in public opinion is simply given by the coefficient on the *public opinion shift* variable, which reveals that when public opinion in a country shifts by one policy unit along the 10-point Eurobarometer Left-Right scale, then, ceteris paribus, the mainstream parties in this country can be expected to shift approximately 0.97 units along the 10-point CMP Left-Right scale in the same direction as public opinion. For niche parties the expected policy shift in response to a one-unit shift in public opinion is -0.55, which is statistically significant (s.e. = 0.26,  $p = 0.04$ ). Thus, not only are niche parties less responsive to public opinion than mainstream parties, but we can reject the proposition that niche parties adjust their policy positions towards public opinion at all.

Among the control variables, the coefficient on *previous policy shift* is negative and statistically significant, revealing that parties tend to shift in the opposite direction to their previous policy shift, while the coefficients on *previous change in vote share* and the interaction between these control variables are not statistically significant, suggesting that previous election results do not influence party policy shifts. These results are consistent with the findings reported in Adams et al. (2004).

## Sensitivity Analyses

We performed several tests in order to evaluate the cross-national comparability of our data and model and to consider alternative explanations for our findings. First, we address the possibility that the reliability of the CMP's Left-Right coding procedures may vary across countries. Pelizzo (2003), for instance, argues that the CMP's coding procedures do not accurately measure shifts in the Italian parties' Left-Right positions (see also Kitschelt 1994). If the results in Table 1 are driven by measurement errors from a single country, omission of this country's data from our analysis should alter our substantive conclusions. Thus, we reestimated our model, omitting one country at a time from the pooled data. These estimates continue to support our substantive conclusions, and convince us

<sup>9</sup>Drawing on the notation from equation (1), these conditional coefficients are given by  $\frac{\partial \Delta P(t)}{\partial \Delta V(t)} = B_1 + B_3 \times NP_j$ , while the conditional standard errors are given by  $s.e.(\frac{\partial \Delta P(t)}{\partial \Delta V(t)}) = \sqrt{\text{var}(B_1) + NP_j^2 \times \text{var}(B_3) + 2NP_j \times \text{cov}(B_1, B_3)}$  (see Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006). For mainstream parties (when  $NP_j = 0$ ) the coefficient and standard error are simply  $B_1$  and  $s.e.(B_1)$  (the coefficient and standard error on *public opinion shift*), while for niche parties (when  $NP_j = 1$ ) the coefficient is  $(B_1 + B_3)$ , and the conditional standard error is given by a straightforward calculation.



that our results are not driven by measurement error or other factors specific to a single country.

Second, if the ideological spectrum within which parties compete is broader in some countries than in others, observations from these countries may display correspondingly larger shifts in party positions as coded by the CMP and may thus be more influential in our analysis. We therefore rescaled all of the CMP estimates of parties' Left-Right positions so that the difference between the furthest left position and the furthest right position observed in each country was identical, giving us the same ideological range in each country, and we then reestimated our model using this rescaled CMP data. Once again the results supported our substantive conclusions.

Third, we note that specifying our dependent variable as the difference in a party's policy position between the previous and the current election assumes that the coefficient on a lagged dependent variable in a model using the party's position in the current election as the dependent variable would be equal to one (Markus 1979). Reestimating our model using actual party positions (rather than changes in parties' positions) as the dependent variable and including a lagged dependent variable as an independent variable supported substantive conclusions identical to those using our original dependent variable.

Finally, we examined an alternative specification of our model that considered the direction of the public opinion shift relative to the party. Previous work by Adams et al. (2004) has concluded that parties display stronger tendencies to adjust their policies when public opinion shifts away from the party's policy positions (as when a leftist party responds to a rightward shift in public opinion) than when public opinion shifts closer to the party's positions, a tendency that could influence our estimates of parties' responsiveness to public opinion. This alternative specification produced substantive conclusions that were identical to those reported in Table 1. In toto, our empirical results consistently support the Policy Stability Hypothesis.

## Testing the Costly Policy Shift and the Costly Policy Moderation Hypotheses

### Model Specification for the Hypotheses

The Costly Policy Shift Hypothesis ( $H_2$ ) states that niche parties are penalized for shifting their policy programs to a greater extent than are mainstream parties regardless of the policy shift direction, while the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis ( $H_3$ ) posits that compared to mainstream parties, niche parties are penalized for moderating their policies. To evaluate both hypotheses we must examine

how parties' vote shares change in response to shifts in their policy positions. Thus, we specify a model in which the dependent variable is  $\Delta VS_{jt}$ , the change in the party's vote share between the current election and the previous election. We label this variable *vote share change*.

Our key independent variables are intended to capture the electoral effects associated with parties' policy shifts—specifically, how these effects differ for niche parties compared to mainstream parties and how these effects differ depending on the direction of the party's policy shift (i.e., whether the party has moderated its policies). Our core model specification is:

$$\Delta VS_{jt} = B_0 + B_1(\Delta P_{jt}^+) + B_2(\Delta P_{jt}^-) + B_3(NP_j) + B_4(\Delta P_{jt}^+ \times NP_j) + B_5(\Delta P_{jt}^- \times NP_j). \quad (2)$$

where:

$\Delta VS_{jt}$  = the change in party J's vote share at the current election t compared with its vote share in the previous election t - 1.

$\Delta P_{jt}^+$  = the change in party J's Left-Right position at election t compared with its position in the previous election t - 1 in a centrist direction (closer to the mean voter position).

$\Delta P_{jt}^-$  = the change in party J's Left-Right position at election t compared with its position in the previous election t - 1 in a noncentrist direction (further from the mean voter position).

$NP_j$  = 1 if the party is classified as a niche party (i.e., Communist, Nationalist, or Green), and 0 otherwise.

In equation (2) the term  $\Delta P_{jt}^+$ , which we label the *centrist policy shift* variable, denotes the shift in the party's policy position between the current election and the previous election towards the center of the voter distribution. We code this variable as the absolute value of the change in a party's policy position when a left-wing party shifted to the right or when a right-wing party shifted to the left, and zero otherwise.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the term  $\Delta P_{jt}^-$  (the *noncentrist*

<sup>10</sup>Our coding of the parties as left- or right-wing was based upon the CMP's classification of party "families," as reported in Appendix 1 in Budge et al. (2001). We code members of the Communist, Social Democratic, and Green party families as left-wing, and members of the Conservative, Christian, and Nationalist party families as right-wing. Thirty-five observations on six centrist parties (parties that were classified as members of the CMP's Liberal and Agrarian party families) were dropped from our analysis because these parties are typically viewed as presenting relatively centrist Left-Right positions, so that we could not be certain of the direction of their policy shifts relative to the mean voter position. We adopted this coding strategy in order to avoid assuming that positions on the

*policy shift* variable) denotes the shift in the party's policy position between the current election and the previous election away from the center of the voter distribution and is coded as the absolute value of the change in a party's policy position when a left-wing party shifted to the left or when a right-wing party shifted to the right, and zero otherwise.  $NP_j$  is the niche party dummy variable described in equation (1). Interacting this dummy variable with the *centrist policy shift* and *noncentrist policy shift* variables allows us to examine differences in the electoral effects of both centrist and noncentrist policy shifts for niche and mainstream parties.

As with the model we specified to test the Costly Policy Shift Hypothesis, our use of interaction terms with dummy variables leads to a relatively straightforward interpretation of this model. First, consider the electoral effect of policy shifts by a mainstream party. The dummy variable for niche parties,  $NP_j$ , will equal zero in this case, and thus the electoral effect of centrist and noncentrist policy shifts on a mainstream party's vote share will be captured solely by the coefficients on the *centrist policy shift* and *noncentrist policy shift* variables (coefficients  $B_1$  and  $B_2$  in equation 2). We expect mainstream parties to gain vote share when they shift their policies in a moderate direction and to lose vote share when they shift their policies in a noncentrist direction.

Next consider the electoral effect of policy shifts by niche parties. The dummy variable  $NP_j$  equals one in this case, and thus the influence of centrist policy shifts on the vote share of niche parties will be captured by the sum of the coefficients on *centrist policy shift* and *centrist policy shift*  $\times$  *niche party* ( $B_1 + B_4$ ). Similarly, the influence of extremist policy shifts on the vote share of niche parties will be captured by the sum of the coefficients on *noncentrist policy shift* and *noncentrist policy shift*  $\times$  *niche party* ( $B_2 + B_5$ ).

The Costly Policy Shift Hypothesis ( $H_2$ ) posits that in comparison to mainstream parties, niche parties are penalized electorally for shifting their policy programs, regardless of the direction of the policy shift. In terms of our model, the Costly Policy Shift Hypothesis makes two predictions. The first is that  $(B_1 + B_4) < B_1$ , or  $B_4 < 0$ —i.e., that niche parties are penalized electorally

for moderating policy shifts in comparison to mainstream parties. The second is that  $(B_2 + B_5) < B_2$ , or  $B_5 < 0$ —i.e., that niche parties are penalized electorally for noncentrist policy shifts in comparison to mainstream parties. Thus, if our estimates of the coefficients  $B_4$  and  $B_5$  are both negative and statistically significant, this will indicate that niche parties suffer an electoral penalty relative to mainstream parties when shifting their policy positions, regardless of the direction of the policy shift, providing evidence in favor of the Costly Policy Shift Hypothesis. Conversely, if either  $B_4$  or  $B_5$  is not statistically significant (or if either estimate is positive and statistically significant), we cannot reject the null hypothesis, that niche parties do *not* suffer an electoral penalty relative to mainstream parties for any type of policy shift.

The Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis ( $H_3$ ) is a component of the Costly Policy Shift Hypothesis ( $H_2$ ) and posits that in comparison to mainstream parties, niche parties are penalized electorally for moderating their policy programs. Regardless of our estimate of  $B_5$ , if our estimate of  $B_4$  is negative and statistically significant, this will imply that niche parties suffer an electoral penalty relative to mainstream parties when moderating their policy positions, providing evidence in favor of the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis. Conversely, if  $B_4$  is not statistically significant (or if it is positive and statistically significant), we cannot reject the null hypothesis, that niche parties do *not* suffer an electoral penalty relative to mainstream parties when moderating their policy positions.

In addition to the variables described in our core specification, we include several variables to control for other factors that previous researchers have identified as influencing party support independently of the parties' policy shifts. The first is constructed with a view to capturing electoral effects associated with shifts in voters' policy preferences. This variable, which we labeled *public opinion shift*, captures the direction and magnitude of shifts in the mean voter Left-Right position between the previous and the current election. This public opinion shift variable takes on a positive value when public opinion shifts in the direction of the party's policy positions (i.e., the variable is positive for right-wing parties when public opinion shifts to the right, and for left-wing parties when public opinion shifts to the left) and a negative value when public opinion shifts away from the party's policies.<sup>11</sup> Previous empirical work (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Ezrow 2005; McDonald and Budge 2005) finds that parties' electoral fortunes are affected by such public opinion shifts, so that

CMP and Eurobarometer 10-point scales are directly comparable (for instance, assuming that a 4.1 on one scale is to the right of 4.0 on the other scale). Note that this coding strategy assumes that the mean voter position in each country is invariably located to the right of all members of the party system that were classified as left-wing in our analysis, and to the left of all parties classified as right-wing. A comparison of the Eurobarometer respondents' Left-Right self-placements with their Left-Right placements of the parties, which were obtained in the 1989 Eurobarometer survey (Survey 31A), supports this assumption.

<sup>11</sup>Our procedure for classifying parties as leftist, centrist, or right-wing is described in footnote 10.

we expect the estimated coefficient for this variable to be positive and statistically significant.

Parties' electoral fortunes may also be affected by the policy shifts of *other* parties in the system. Intuitively, if parties shift their policy positions to form a more tightly bunched group in the ideological space relative to voters, compared to the party-voter positioning in the previous election, this may depress the vote shares of moderate parties that are being "squeezed" in the middle of this group, while enhancing support for noncentrist parties (including many niche parties). The opposite should be true if party policy positions have diverged relative to the voter distribution since the last election. To capture this effect we construct a variable that we label *party policy convergence*. For each election we calculate the sum of all centrist policy shifts over all parties, as captured by the *centrist policy shift* variable. Higher scores on the *party policy convergence* variable indicate that, in toto, the parties' positions are more centrist in the current election than they were in the previous election. We incorporated this variable into our specification, and we also interacted this variable with a dummy variable for peripheral parties (labeled the *peripheral party* variable), coded one for the two parties that had the furthest left and furthest right positions in the election, and zero for all other parties.

Another control variable, which we labeled *governing party*, was a dummy variable that equaled one if the party was a member of the government at the time of the current election, and zero otherwise. We incorporated this variable because prior empirical studies report that governing parties consistently suffer vote losses, for reasons largely unrelated to changes in their policy positions at the time of the current election (see McDonald and Budge 2005, Chapter 6; Paldam 1991). We also include a variable we label *governing in coalition*, a dummy variable that equaled one if the governing party was a member of a coalition, and zero if this party was governing alone. Governing in a coalition may reduce the vote penalty for being a governing party, as voters may find it difficult to determine how much responsibility each coalition member should bear for existing policies and conditions (e.g., Downs 1957; Lewis-Beck 1988; Powell and Whitten 1993).

Economic conditions are likely to be important in determining the electoral success of established political parties and may more specifically affect support for governing parties relative to opposition parties. We include two variables designed to measure economic conditions at the time of the election, which we label *change in unemployment rate* and *change in GDP*.<sup>12</sup> These variables

simply measure the change in these economic indicators from the year before the election to the election year. We also include interaction terms between these economic measures and the dummy variable for governing parties, since voters may hold governing parties accountable for the state of the economy and punish or reward them accordingly. Finally, we include dummy variables for each country in our data, which allows us to control for institutional effects or other country-specific factors that could influence party vote gains or losses.

### Evaluating the Costly Policy Shift and Costly Policy Moderation Hypotheses

A test for party-specific effects indicated that this was not a concern for the model we specify to evaluate the Costly Policy Shift and Costly Policy Moderation Hypotheses.<sup>13</sup> However, as with our test of the Policy Stability Hypothesis, there are other methodological concerns to address. Serially correlated errors are a possibility if parties tend to gain or lose support over time due to unobserved forces. We include a lagged dependent variable in our specification below to address this concern, and a Lagrange multiplier test fails to reject the null hypothesis of no serial correlation. Further, the error terms for the parties competing in each election are unlikely to be independent because if one party attains a greater than expected vote share in an election, this implies that other parties in that election will have lower than expected vote shares, so that the errors for all parties in the same election will be correlated. We address this concern through the use of robust standard errors clustered by election. Table 2 reports the parameter estimates for our test of the Costly Policy Shift and Costly Policy Moderation Hypotheses.

First, note that although statistically insignificant, the coefficient on *centrist policy shift* is positive and the coefficient on *noncentrist policy shift* is negative, suggesting that, *ceteris paribus*, mainstream parties gain modestly at the ballot box as they moderate their Left-Right positions and lose modestly as they shift to more extreme positions. These estimates are in line with the results reported in studies by Alvarez, Nagler, and their coauthors (Alvarez and Nagler 1995, 1998; Alvarez, Nagler, and Bowler 2000; Alvarez, Nagler, and Willette, 2000), Adams and Merrill (1999, 2000, 2005), and Erikson and Romero (1990), which estimate the electoral effects of parties' and

<sup>12</sup>This data was obtained from various years of the UN's *Economic Survey of Europe*.

<sup>13</sup>An F-test for fixed effects ( $F_{36,105} = 0.56, p = 0.98$ ) and a likelihood ratio test for random effects ( $\chi^2_1 = 0.00, p = 1.00$ ) both failed to reject the null hypothesis of no party-specific heterogeneity.

candidates' policy shifts in real-world elections via simulations on election survey data.<sup>14</sup>

Also note that the coefficient for the *noncentrist policy shift*  $\times$  *niche party* variable is not statistically significant, indicating that there is no evidence that the electoral fortunes of niche parties differ from those of mainstream parties when they shift their Left-Right positions in a noncentrist direction. This result does not support the Costly Policy Shift Hypothesis, which states that in comparison to mainstream parties, niche parties are penalized electorally for shifting their policy programs, regardless of the direction of the policy shift.

However, we do find evidence that compared to mainstream parties, niche parties are penalized for moderating their policies. The coefficient on the *centrist policy shift*  $\times$  *niche party* variable is negative and statistically significant ( $p < 0.02$ ). This result supports the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis, that in comparison to mainstream parties, niche parties are penalized for moderating their policy programs.

The estimated magnitude of the electoral penalties for niche parties that moderate their policy positions implies that these penalties are of considerable substantive significance. The expected electoral effect of a one-unit moderating shift by a niche party is  $-3.88$ , which is statistically significant (s.e. = 1.93,  $p = 0.046$ ).<sup>15</sup> This implies that when a niche party shifts its policy position one unit closer to the center of the voter distribution along the 1–10 Left-Right scale, then, *ceteris paribus*, the party's vote share will fall by nearly 4%. As discussed in the second section, this finding for niche parties may be due to the fact that policy shifts towards the center alienate party activists, who may view such policy moderation as a sign of pandering or "selling out" by the party's elites.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>For summaries and descriptions of these studies, see Adams and Merrill (2005, 902–4).

<sup>15</sup>The method for calculating this conditional coefficient and standard error is explained in footnote 9.

<sup>16</sup>In addition, we note that important recent work on "policy balancing" models of voting behavior by Kedar (2004, 2005) and Hinich, Henning, and Shakano (2004) may illuminate the finding that niche parties are punished for shifting to more moderate policy positions (see also Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Grofman 1985; Merrill and Grofman 1999). Roughly speaking, both sets of authors present arguments that moderately left-of-center or right-of-center voters may prefer that small parties present extreme policy positions (on the voter's side of the issue dimension) because voters believe that in subsequent legislative deliberations these small parties' extreme bargaining positions will "pull" government policy outputs in the voter's preferred direction. (By contrast, moderate voters may fear that a large extremist party will actually succeed in implementing most of its policy agenda). Given that the niche parties in our data are mostly small parties, the arguments of Kedar and Hinich et al. may explain why such parties are punished espe-

To the extent that niche parties' elites anticipate these effects, the specter of the electoral reverses associated with moderating policy shifts surely provides a powerful incentive to maintain noncentrist policy images. Taken together, the estimated effects of policy shifts on the vote shares of niche and mainstream parties provide strong support for the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis, that in comparison to mainstream parties, niche parties are penalized for moderating their policy programs.

Among the control variables, we estimate statistically significant electoral effects for public opinion shifts, with parties' vote shares increasing when public opinion shifts towards their policy positions. This is consistent with findings reported in previous research (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Ezrow 2005; McDonald and Budge, 2005). We also find that the vote shares of centrist parties are hurt in comparison to peripheral parties when party policy positions are converging to the center of the policy space, as evidenced by the negative and statistically significant coefficient on the *party policy convergence* variable. Our estimates also suggest that parties' vote shares decline when they are in government, with the electoral penalty being smaller for parties governing in a coalition than for a single-party government—however, these estimates are not statistically significant. Further, we do not find statistically significant evidence that voters hold governing parties responsible for the state of the economy, a result consistent with previous empirical research that reports only weak and inconsistent economic effects on support for governing parties in European elections (see Paldam 1991; McDonald and Budge 2005).

## Sensitivity Analyses

As with our test of the Policy Stability Hypothesis, we performed a series of tests to evaluate alternative explanations for our findings. First, several scholars have noted that institutional variables such as district magnitude can affect the electoral success of niche parties (e.g., Amorim Neto and Cox 1997; Golder 2003; Meguid 2005). While the electoral institutions of each country in our data remained stable over time, these institutions may have affected the electoral *strategies* of minor parties. For instance, minor parties in electoral systems with low district magnitude might have strategic reasons not to contest some districts in some elections (such as a desire to focus limited resources on a few districts or an election pact with another

cially severely when they moderate their positions—i.e., that voters on the party's side of the issue dimension believe that such policy moderation will dilute these parties' bargaining positions in the legislative arena.



party), even though this could depress their national vote share. If this is the case, the vote shares of niche parties could vary from election to election not because of shifting policy platforms, but because these parties do not compete for all voters in each election. To address this concern we calculated each party's vote share in each election as the proportion of the vote the party received in the districts it actually contested and created a new dependent variable that measured the change in this proportion between the current election and the previous election.<sup>17</sup> Reestimation of our model using this new dependent variable supported the same substantive conclusions that we report above.

Second, we examined an alternative specification of our model that used the difference in *logged* vote shares as the dependent variable, in order to address concerns about the bounded nature of vote shares and differences in party size. These estimates support the same substantive conclusions that we report above.

Third, to address concerns that our differenced dependent variable assumes that the coefficient on a lagged dependent variable in a model using the party's vote share in the current election as the dependent variable would equal one (Markus 1979), we reestimated our model using actual vote shares (rather than changes in vote share) as the dependent variable and including lagged vote share as an independent variable. This alternative specification again supported our substantive conclusions.

Finally, we considered a specification that used logged vote share as the dependent variable and the lag of logged vote share as an independent variable, and again this model supported substantive conclusions identical to those suggested by Table 2.

In toto, our empirical analyses consistently support the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis, that niche parties are penalized for moderating their policy programs to a greater extent than are mainstream parties. We find strong evidence that niche parties incur statistically *and* substantively significant electoral penalties when they shift their policies in a centrist direction. Specifically, our estimates suggest that, *ceteris paribus*, a niche party that shifts its position one policy unit closer to the center of the voter distribution along a 1–10 Left-Right scale can expect to lose about 4% of the popular vote, compared to the expected outcome when the party stands by its policy positions from the previous election. We find no evidence that mainstream parties similarly lose votes when they moderate their policy images (in fact our results suggest that

**TABLE 2** Electoral Effects of Parties' Policy Shifts

Independent Variable	
<i>Centrist policy shift</i>	1.30 (1.74)
<i>Noncentrist policy shift</i>	−1.74 (1.93)
<i>Niche party</i>	−1.18 (1.36)
<i>Niche party</i> × <i>Centrist policy shift</i>	−5.18* (1.93)
<i>Niche party</i> × <i>Noncentrist policy shift</i>	1.69 (2.19)
<i>Public opinion shift</i>	5.30* (2.31)
<i>Party policy convergence</i>	−1.07* (0.53)
<i>Peripheral party</i>	0.30 (1.57)
<i>Party policy convergence</i> × <i>Peripheral party</i>	1.00 (0.90)
<i>Governing party</i>	−2.75 (1.77)
<i>Governing in coalition</i>	0.38 (0.93)
<i>Change in unemployment rate</i>	−0.76 (0.47)
<i>Change in GDP</i>	−0.37 (0.26)
<i>Governing party</i> × <i>Change in unemployment rate</i>	−0.00 (0.99)
<i>Governing party</i> × <i>Change in GDP</i>	−0.04 (0.51)
<i>Previous Change in Vote Share</i>	−0.17 (0.09)
<i>Country Dummies</i> <sup>†</sup>	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.25
N	123

Note: \*indicates a coefficient that is significant at the  $p = 0.05$  level. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable was the change in the party's vote share between election  $t - 1$  (the previous election) and election  $t$  (the current election), based upon the party vote share data reported in the CD-ROM in Budge et al. (2001). The definitions of the independent variables are given in the text.

<sup>†</sup>The estimated parameters for the country-specific intercepts were (standard errors in parentheses): Britain −0.36 (1.91); Denmark 0.91 (1.41); France 1.82 (1.78); Greece −0.03 (1.45); Italy 1.22 (1.43); Luxembourg 3.44 (2.73); The Netherlands −0.08 (1.62); Spain 1.94 (1.31).

mainstream parties might reap modest electoral benefits from policy moderation). Further, we do not find statistically significant evidence that niche parties lose votes when they shift their policies in a noncentrist direction—thus, we do not accept the more general Costly Policy

<sup>17</sup>District-level electoral results were obtained from Caramani (2000).

Shift Hypothesis, that in comparison to mainstream parties, niche parties are penalized for shifting their positions regardless of policy direction.

## Conclusion and Discussion

We have reported empirical analyses of data from eight Western European democracies, on the linkages between parties' Left-Right positions, public opinion, and election results. Basing our computations on the Comparative Manifesto Project codings of party ideologies and the Eurobarometer surveys of citizens' Left-Right self-placements, we find results that consistently support the Policy Stability Hypothesis, that niche parties' policy programs are less responsive to shifts in public opinion than are mainstream parties' programs. We also find empirical support for the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis, that niche parties are penalized for moderating their policy programs to a greater extent than are mainstream parties.

From an empirical standpoint, our findings in support of the Policy Stability Hypothesis are relevant to the literature on dynamic representation (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995), which emphasizes the linkages between parties' policy positions and public opinion. In the U.S. context, which features two large, mainstream parties, this literature concludes that American politicians frequently adjust their policies in response to shifts in public opinion.<sup>18</sup> Our findings suggest that this pattern of dynamic representation generalizes to Western Europe: Specifically, we find strong evidence that mainstream parties in Western Europe systematically respond to shifts in the policy preferences of their national electorates, just as politicians do in the United States. However, we also find that niche parties in Western Europe do not display similar patterns of policy responsiveness. This suggests that when we export the dynamic representation perspective to Western Europe, we must account for the *types* of political parties that compete in these party systems.

Our findings in support of the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis—namely, our conclusion that niche parties, but not mainstream parties, suffer electoral penal-

ties when they moderate their policy positions—suggests a simple explanation for our finding that policy responsiveness differs dramatically between these two types of parties: namely, that it is often not *electorally feasible* for niche parties to adjust their policies in response to changes in public opinion, while such policy adjustments are electorally feasible for mainstream parties. We emphasize that, as discussed earlier, there are factors in addition to electoral considerations that plausibly motivate niche parties' elites to stand pat in the face of public opinion shifts, such as the importance these elites place on policy-related objectives. However, our findings in support of the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis suggest that for niche parties, *both* vote-seeking and policy-seeking objectives motivate a stand-pat strategy: for it makes little sense for a niche party to moderate its policy program in response to shifts in public opinion, if such an adjustment depresses the party's electoral support *and* moves the party away from its members' preferred policy positions.

From a theoretical standpoint, our findings suggest that the assumption of "costless spatial mobility" that spatial modelers typically employ—i.e., that political parties are not penalized for shifting their positions in the policy space—may be a reasonable assumption with respect to mainstream parties. While we support this interpretation up to a point, we caution readers against extrapolating our findings to party policy shifts that are larger than the shifts we actually observed in our study. In particular, given Budge's (1994) empirical finding that political parties in postwar Europe have tended to adjust their policies incrementally—a pattern that we also observe in our data<sup>19</sup>—we are highly skeptical that mainstream parties could completely repudiate their prior policy commitments without electoral cost. In this regard, we suspect that the British Labour Party's dramatic shift to the center under Tony Blair—one of the sharpest policy shifts registered in our data<sup>20</sup>—defines the upper limit on the extent to which mainstream parties can costlessly shift their programs. This caveat notwithstanding, we find no evidence that mainstream parties were penalized for shifting their

<sup>19</sup>For the parties in our data, the median magnitude of the policy shifts between elections was 0.43 policy units along the 1–10 Left-Right scale.

<sup>20</sup>Based upon the CMP codings, the British Labour Party shifted approximately two policy units to the right between 1992 and 1997, along the 1–10 Left-Right scale that we used for our analyses. This was the third largest policy shift observed in our data, behind only New Democracy's shift to the left in Greece between 1993 and 1996, and the Venstre Liberals' shift to the right in Denmark between 1990 and 1994.

<sup>18</sup>We note that the degree of American politicians' policy responsiveness has been found to vary across electoral domains (i.e., these effects vary depending on whether one focuses on the House of Representatives, the Senate, or the Presidency). See Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995; also Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002) for a discussion of these issues.

positions over the range of policy shifts that we observed in Western Europe between 1976 and 1998.

Finally, we emphasize that although our findings suggest that niche parties are limited in terms of the Left-Right strategies they can feasibly pursue, this is not necessarily a severe handicap, nor does it imply that niche party elites lack strategic options in pursuit of electoral and policy objectives. First, our findings in support of the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis suggest that niche party elites do not confront the difficult strategic trade-off between policy “compromise” and electoral gain that mainstream politicians typically confront. This plausibly simplifies niche party elites’ decision calculus and suggests a reason why niche parties need not confront the bitter internal debates between “pragmatists” and “ideologues” that often beset mainstream parties: namely that for niche parties, policy radicalism is an electorally pragmatic strategy! Second, there is extensive research documenting that elections turn in large part on “valence” dimensions of evaluation that are not directly tied to parties’ policy positions, such as party elites’ images with respect to competence, integrity, and unity (see Clark 2005; Stokes 1963). There is nothing in our findings to suggest that niche party elites cannot burnish their images with respect to these valence dimensions, thereby enhancing their party’s electoral appeal. Finally, by emphasizing new or emerging political issues (such as environmental protection and immigration policy) niche parties have opportunities to shape the “terms of the political debate,” thereby influencing the policy agendas of mainstream parties, and, ultimately, government policy outputs (see Meguid 2005).

Our findings raise questions that we plan to address in future research. For instance, while we have presented evidence on how Western European parties adjust their ideologies in response to public opinion—and on the electoral consequences of these adjustments—we have proposed only tentative explanations for these findings. We suspect that a satisfactory explanation for our findings may require “thick” descriptions of Western European parties’ organizational structures, and of the goals and decision-making processes of party elites and of rank-and-file supporters. Alternatively, a formal modeling approach may illuminate our empirical findings. Such analyses lie outside the scope of the kinds of statistical analyses that we report here. Nonetheless, our findings represent an important step in the search to understand the linkages between public opinion, parties’ policy programs, and election results in Western Europe. We show here that niche parties in Western Europe are not responsive to public opinion and can be considered “prisoners of their

ideologies”—they have no real choice other than to cling to the policy ground they have staked out for themselves.

## Appendix

### Parties Included in the Empirical Analyses

<b>Denmark</b>	<b>Italy</b>
Socialistisk Folkeparti (Communist)	PCI (Communist)
Socialdemokratiet (Social Democratic)	PSI (Social Democratic)
Radikale (Liberal)	AN (National)
Konservative (Conservative)	DC (Christian)
Venstre (Liberal)	PLI (Liberal)
Fremskridtspartiet (National)	<b>Luxembourg</b>
<b>France</b>	KP/PC (Communist)
PCF (Communist)	LSAP/POSL (Social Democratic)
PS (Socialist)	CSV/PCS (Christian)
UDF (Conservative)	DP/PD (Liberal)
RPR (Conservative)	<b>The Netherlands</b>
FN (National)	PPR/PvDA/D’66 (Social Democratic)
<b>Great Britain</b>	CDA (Christian Democratic)
Labour (Social Democratic)	VVD (Liberal)
Social and Liberal Democrats (Liberal)	GL (Green)
Conservative (Conservative)	<b>Spain</b>
<b>Greece</b>	IU (Communist)
K.K.E. (Communist)	PSOE (Social Democratic)
PA.SO.K (Social Democratic)	CIU/AP/CP (Conservative)
New Democracy (Christian)	CDS (Liberal)

*Note:* The names in parentheses indicate the “party families” to which parties belong. Party family designations are taken from the Comparative Manifesto Project, where the third digit of the party identification code represents a party’s family. We note that for the purposes of our empirical analyses, the parties that the CMP classified as members of the Communist, Social Democratic, and Green families were classified as left-wing parties in our analyses, while parties the CMP classified as belonging to the Conservative, Christian, and Nationalist families were classified as right-wing parties. We classified as centrist all parties belonging to the CMP’s Liberal family classification.

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