The multidimensional disadvantages of centrist parties in Western Europe[*]

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Abstract

Empirical evidence suggests that most parties in Western Europe do not take moderate policy positions, despite the centripetal force of the voter distribution. While most scholars focus on the reasons for parties' divergence, this paper focus on the reasons for the electoral failures of parties that take centrist Left-Right positions. This paper demonstrates that centrist parties, such as the British Liberal Democrats and the German FDP, suffer from multidimensional disadvantages. Using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey and the European Election Studies post-election surveys I show that centrist parties are systematically disadvantaged regarding non-policy issues, such as competence, integrity, and party unity (i.e. valence issues). Second, using mathematical simulations I demonstrate that given their valence image there is no set of policy positions centrist parties can take to substantially improve their vote shares. These results have important implications for the study of political representation, electoral campaigns, and parties' policy shifts.

The multidimensional disadvantages of centrist parties in Western Europe

Why are centrist parties, for the most part, much smaller than their counterparts on the moderate Left and Right? Despite holding very popular Left-Right positions, centrist parties, predominantly members of the Liberal party family, such as the British Liberal-Democrats (LibDems) and the German Free Democratic Party (FDP) fail to translate their popular Left-Right positions to high vote-shares. The data used in this paper shows that more than 26% of voters in the European Parliament Election study place a centrist party as the closest to their preferred Left-Right position, but centrist parties received only 10% of the votes. Put differently, given the salience of the Left-Right dimension and the distribution of party placements, the Downsian (1957) framework expects centrist parties to be more electorally successful than they are (Adams, Merrill, and Zur 2019; Zur 2019). Moreover, empirical research has shown that most European parties diverge from the center of the Left-Right dimension, despite the strong centripetal force of the voter distribution (e.g. Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Budge et al. 1987; Laver and Budge 1992). This limited congruence between the non-centrist policies offered by parties and voters' demand for centrist ideology has been a major puzzle in the study of democratic representation (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Adams, Merrill, and Zur 2019; Bølstad and Dinas 2017; among others).

To better understand the limited electoral success of centrist parties, this paper studies the multidimensional disadvantages encountered by centrist parties. First, I argue that most centrist parties are disadvantaged with respect to non-positional attributes. That is, voters prefer voting for parties that are more distanced from their ideological ideal point because they perceive centrist parties as lacking valence attributes such as competence, integrity, leadership ability, and

party unity. These valence attributes have been shown related to parties' electoral success (Clark 2009; Clark and Leiter 2014). A second disadvantage that centrist parties encounter is that, given their unfavorable valence image, they have no realistic and feasible positional strategy that can substantively increase their vote-shares. This is true for both unidimensional positional party competition and (although to a lesser extent) for multidimensional positional competition. A third disadvantage of centrist parties is that their only available strategy toward a substantive vote-share growth is improving their valence image. Yet, their perceived negative valence image relative to major-Left and major-Right parties would make this strategy less successful than similar strategy by their counterparts.

To support these arguments, I examine both unidimensional and three-dimensional voting models of the 2014 European Parliament election. European elections provide a great opportunity to test the multidimensional disadvantages of centrist parties because they are regarded as second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Hix and Marsh 2007), in which issues such as immigration and European integration are salient (Hobolt et al. 2009; Hobolt and Spoon 2012; Hong 2015; Hobolt and de Vries 2016). Moreover, second-order elections free voters from considerations such as government formation in their country or coalition management. Therefore, EP elections are considered to be elections in which voters vote more sincerely than national elections. In the context of EP elections, centrist parties should be able to meet the Downsian expectation. Yet, as I demonstrate below, even under these promising conditions, centrist parties still lose votes due to their negative valence image. Additionally, using mathematical simulations based on election survey data, I show that even under very weak set of assumptions, centrist parties are unable to compensate for their negative valence by taking

vote-maximizing positions on Left-Right ideology, on immigration, and on EU integration issues. Moreover, the mathematical simulations show that centrist parties' best strategy for vote-share growth is to improve their valence image. Yet, even if they were able to do so, they cannot grow as much as major-Left and major-Right parties can by improving their valence.

Theory

Centrist parties in Western democracies often fail to capitalize on their popular Left-Right position and become major vote-winning parties (Close and Delwith 2019; Zur 2017, 2019). Centrist parties' electoral results are especially puzzling given the distribution of voter preferences (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Adams, Merrill, Zur 2019) and the positions of rival parties (Polk et al. 2017). Put differently, based on the spatial theory of voting (Downs 1957), centrist parties enjoy fruitful conditions to win a large percentage of the votes in both national and European Parliament elections. How, then, we can reconcile these favorable spatial conditions with their lack of electoral success?

Centrist parties, I argue, suffer from systematic disadvantage due to their perceived valence images relative to other parties. Negative valence image both decreases centrist parties' ability to gain votes and limits their ability to strategically announce policy positions that improve their electoral prospect. Valence is defined in this paper as attributes that voters almost unanimously approved (Stokes 1963, 1992), including party's image with respect to competence, honesty, and leadership ability. Other valence attributes are non-positional characteristics of parties, such as their campaign effectiveness, recruitment of committed activists, or ability to raise contributions, which in turn can be used to burnish parties' valence images during electoral campaigns. Given

the non-conflictual nature of valence, all parties are motivated to present an image of holding more rather than less of these attributes.

Numerous studies have documented the relationship between valence and vote choice. Abney et al. (2011) find that late in the campaign period, changes in parties' image of valence are related to their electoral success. The works of Michael Clark (2009, 2013; Clark and Leiter 2014) find that European parties' vote-shares decrease as a function of increase in negative valence-related news reports. Green and Jennings demonstrate the importance of issue ownership and image of (in)competence for electoral success in the United Kingdom (2012), and in the US, UK, Australia, Germany and Canada (2017). In election to the House of Representatives in the United Sates, the vote-shares of incumbent candidates increase as their valence increases relative to the challengers' valence (Mondak 1995; Stone 2017; Stone and Simas 2010; Stone et al. 2004). Thus, I argue that centrist parties' lack of electoral success in EP elections is related to their systematical image as low valence parties (Zur 2017; 2019).

The valence disadvantage of centrist parties in national elections should also be translated into the European Parliament elections. If centrist parties are indeed perceived by voters as holding weaker qualities of competence, integrity, or unity, voters will not support them in elections for the European Parliament. This argument can be tested with the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Controlling for their policy positions, centrist parties' valence images are negative, relative to other parties in their country.

While all parties can be suffering from negative valence image, centrist parties are unique in their lack of strategical positional opportunities to compensate for their non-positional image. Parties, knowing that their valence image is negative, can shift their policy positions toward the crowded center, thus compensating voters in terms of policy-based utility (Adams and Merrill 2009). Moderation of policy positions have been shown to be a useful strategy for some political parties (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Ezrow 2005) and related to deterioration of their valence image (Clark 2014). Adams, Merrill, and Grofman (2005) find that all parties' vote-maximizing positions are near the center of the Left-Right distribution, but parties do not fully converge to the center. Yet, centrist parties, distinctly from parties on the wings, are already perceived as moderate. Therefore, the second disadvantage encountered by centrist parties is that they cannot find any Left-Right position that will significantly increase their vote-share (Zur 2019). From this argument the following hypothesis follows:

Hypothesis 2: Centrist parties cannot substantially increase their vote-share by changing their Left-Right position.

While hypothesis 2 pertains to the overarching Left-Right dimension, voters in EP elections tend to be motivated by issues beyond Left-Right politics. The issue of European integrations and EU powers are increasingly salient in EP elections (Bakker, Jolly, and Polk 2018; Hobolt et al. 2009; Hobolt and Spoon 2012; Hong 2015; Hobolt and de Vries 2016). Moreover, attitudes towards immigration influence EP voting decisions (Bakker, Jolly, and Polk 2018; Hobolt and Tilly 2016). The analyses below suggest that, on both these issues, centrist parties take (on average) less popular positions than the positions they take on the Left-Right spectrum. As I demonstrate,

these unpopular positions disadvantage centrist parties in two ways in EP elections. First, the salience of these issues makes voters less likely to vote for them. Second, given that centrist parties' valence image is negative, announcing more popular EU or immigration positions would increase their vote-share, but not enough to overcome their major rivals.

Hypothesis 3: Centrist parties can modestly increase their vote-share by shifting their positions to vote-maximizing positions in a three-dimensional space.

The third disadvantage encountered by centrist parties is that their only strategy toward a substantive vote-share growth is improving their valence image. Yet, centrist parties must close a very large gap with respect to valence image relative to major-Left and major-Right parties. Thus, even if their valence image is greatly improved, this strategy would be somewhat inefficient. Put differently, if a centrist party's valence image is improved by the same magnitude a major-Right party's valence is improved; the former will gain *less* additional votes than the latter. To fully grasp this argument, think of an extreme case where the valence characteristics of one party are exceptionally bad; a party that is perceived as the most corrupt, extremely incompetent, and a danger to national security. Such party, even if it can improve its valence image to some extent, will be still valence disadvantaged relative to the other parties, and therefore can only marginally improve its vote-share. From this logic the following testable hypothesis follows:

Hypothesis 4: Centrist parties can only modestly increase their vote-share by improving their valence image.

Data and Measurement

The data used in this article come from two sources. Data about parties' positions and ideology come from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Polk et al. 2017) and data about voters come from the European Election Studies (EES) (Schmitt et al. 2015). These data sources are useful because CHES and EES provide similar set of positional issue placements for both parties and voters. The coordination between CHES and EES in their 2014 surveys allows me to construct a multidimensional space of party competition. Following Bakker, Jolly, and Polk (2018), and based on the theoretical argument above, I construct a three-dimensional space where the first dimension is general Left-Right, the second is the level of immigration restriction, and the third is the level of European integration.

In the voting models analyzed below, the dependent variable is the respondent's reported vote choice in the 2014 European Parliament elections. The European Parliament elections are well-suited for testing the multidimensional disadvantages of centrist parties because they are often considered as second-order elections in which voters express their sincere preferences (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Hix and Marsh 2007). In the EP elections, vote choice is often driven by a different set of considerations than national elections, and these considerations are not usually mapped into the general (or economic) Left-Right dimension. Mostly, there is increasing evidence that issues related to the European Union are more prominent in EP elections (Bakker, Jolly, and Polk 2018; Hobolt et al. 2009; Hobolt and Spoon 2012; Hong 2015; Hobolt and de Vries 2016). In addition, the issue of immigration restriction has been shown to be a major consideration in voters' EP voting decision (Bakker, Jolly, and Polk 2018; Hobolt and Tilly 2016).

Using these data, I examine voting models in 11 West European countries[1] in which there is at least one centrist party. Centrist parties are defined as parties that are: (1) perceived by voters as taking a Left-Right position between the major-Left and the major-Right parties, and (2) belong to either the Liberal or the agrarian party families.[2] Major parties are defined as the historically largest party on each side of the Left-Right spectrum. Green parties are referred to as a specific category, while all other parties are defined by their position on the Left-Right scale and named "other Left" or "other Right". To understand these groups of parties, take the UK for example, where Labour is referred to as major-Left, the Conservatives as major-Right, the Liberal-Democrats as center, UKIP as "other Right", and SNP as "other Left". In the data used in this paper, 11 parties are defined as major-Left and 11 are major-right, 14 parties belong to the center category, 10 are green parties, 15 are minor Left parties and 18 are minor Right parties. Parties that received less than 1% of the votes or no seats are excluded from the analysis. The total number of reported vote choices is 6,116, and the total number of voter-party observations is 44,831.

The independent variables are measured as the linear absolute difference between the respondent's self-placement and the experts' mean placements of each party on each focal issue (general Left-Right, immigration, EU integration). Both voters and experts' positions are measured on a 0 to 10 scale, where 0 indicates extreme left, less restrictive immigration policy,

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[1] These countries are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Because the EES code Belgium's Flanders and French parties separately, the analysis below includes only the French specking parties of Belgium, the substantive results below hold for both Flanders and French parties.

[2] In robustness checks I have excluded the agrarian parties and included only liberal parties in the centrist party group. The substantive results hold.

and more European integration.[3] Figure 1 presents the positions of both parties and median voters on the three dimensions of interest. On average, centrist parties take very popular positions (in terms of proximity to the median voter) on both the Left-Right dimension and the immigration issue, but their position on European integration is unpopular. In all of the countries in this paper, the centrist party is either the closest or the second closest to the median voter's position. In the countries examined in this paper, the percentage of voters who placed a centrist party as the closest to their own Left-Right ideal point ranges between 16.2% (in Denmark) and 41.4% (in Luxembourg), with an average of 26.3%. This small distance between voters and parties' positions shapes the expectation and puzzle of this paper. Centrist parties should be electorally successful given their popular Left-Right positions and the high salience of the Left-Right continuum.

Parties that are centrist on Left-Right take less popular positions on the issue of immigration. Only 8.9% of the voters examined in this paper placed themselves as closest to the position of the centrist party as perceived by the experts, with a range of 4.8% (in Sweden) to 13.3% (in Germany). Lastly, the positions of centrist parties on EU integration are clearly unpopular.

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[3] These proximity variables are based on the following questions in EES and the corresponding question in CHES:
-    General left–right (QPP12): In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right". What is your position? Please use a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "left" and 10 means "right". Which number best describes your position?
-    Immigration (QPP17.6): (a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you are 'fully in favor of a restrictive policy on immigration', and 10 means 'you are fully opposed to a restrictive policy on immigration'. For convenient I have reordered the scale in the opposite direction.
-    European integration (QPP18): Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means unification 'has already gone too far' and 10 means it 'should be pushed further'. What number on this scale best describes your position?
To maximize variation in the categorical scales I have mulitiply voters' self-placements by a randomly assigned uniform distribution ranging from -0.5 to 0.5. For example, all voters that self-placed at 5 had equal probability to be treated as if they self-placed between 4.5 and 5.5 on the 0-10 scale.

Parties that are centrist on Left-Right take positions that are typically far away from those of the median voter in their country. All centrist parties (on Left-Right) are well to the left of the median voter on European integration. That is, centrist parties support the EU more extensively than the public opinion. Only 4.8% of voters reported a position that was closest to the centrist party's position in their country, ranging from 0.8% (in Austria) to 11.2% (Luxembourg). It should be clear from Figure 1 that on Left-Right, it will be challenging for centrist parties to take more popular positions than their current positions, while at the same time they will have to change their positions significantly to become popular on other issues. This visual distribution of parties suggests that centrist parties can grow their vote-shares by altering their immigration or EU integration, but not by altering their Left-Right position.

Figure 1: Parties' and Median Voters' Positions
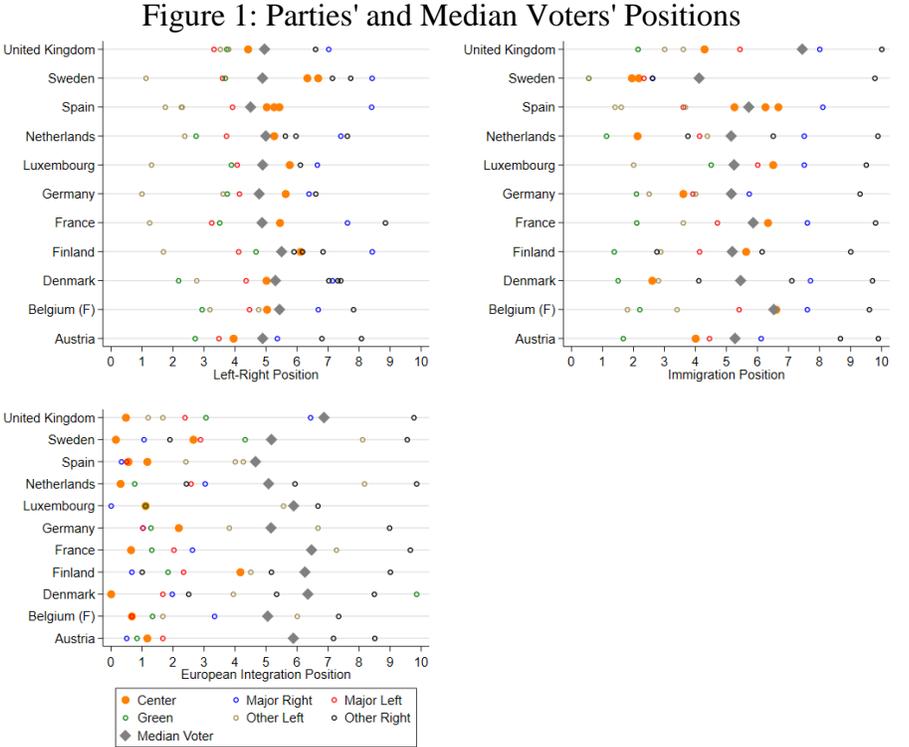
Note: This Figure shows parties' mean Left-Right perceived position (by voters), experts' placements of the parties on immigration restrictiveness (on the top-right panel) and the European integration on (the bottom panel), and the position of the median voter in each country.

Hypothesis 1 is tested using conditional logit models based on both the unidimensional (general Left-Right) and multidimensional vote choice rules. After testing hypothesis 1, I use mathematical simulations to test hypotheses 2-4 (see similar methodological approach in Adams and Merrill 1999; 2000; 2005; Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Alvarez and Nagler 1995; 1998; Zur 2017; 2019, among others). In these simulations, voters' decision rules are represented as probabilistic functions of their proximity to each party along each dimension and the valence attributes estimated in the models testing hypothesis 1. Then, the probability of each individual respondent voting for each party is calculated in order to compute each party's expected vote-share. In the next stage, I calculate the counterfactual change of parties' expected vote-shares as a result of either change in a party's policy position or its valence attribute. For example, given the unidimensional voting model presented below (Table 1), I estimate in the first stage that the German CDU/CSU are expected to receive 36.6 percent of the respondents' votes (relative to the actual result of 35.4 percent) when taking its observed Left-Right position (5.92 on a 0-10 scale). Then, I calculate how its expected vote-share changes when taking every possible position on the Left-Right dimension (with all other parties' positions fixed at their announced position) and find that its vote-maximizing position is at 4.89, where it can increase its vote-share to 39.71 percent.

This simulation method allows me to estimate how parties' vote-shares will change under a counterfactual scenario in which everything except the variable of interest is held constant. Based on the estimated salience of ideological proximity and parties' valence image, I simulate three counterfactual scenarios. First, I simulate parties' counterfactual vote-share increase due to

change in their Left-Right policy position (as perceived by experts).[4] In this scenario, each party unilaterally changes its policy position along the Left-Right scale, while all other parties' Left-Right positions and voters' decision rules are fixed. Then, a party's vote-maximizing position is defined as the Left-Right position which maximizes its expected vote-share. Similarly, the second scenario simulates by how much parties' vote-share increases if the party takes its vote-maximizing positions on all three dimensions. These two sets of simulations test hypotheses 2 and 3 respectively.

I emphasize that these simulations are a hard test for hypotheses 2 and 3. In these simulations, parties are free to alter their positions without any constrains or punishment to their valence attributes. This is a hard test for the theory because previous research has shown that parties rarely try to significantly change their policy positions (Dalton and McAllister 2015). Even when parties try to alter their positions, voters either ignore their new positions (Adams 2012; Adams et al. 2011) or discount new positions if they perceive parties' messages as vote-seeking (Fernandez-Vazques 2018). Moreover, voters may punish parties in terms of valence when they believe parties change their positions in order to increase their vote-share (Tomz and Van Houweling 2012).

The third scenario tests hypothesis 4. I simulate how realistic changes in parties' non-positional (valence) attributes are related to their counterfactual electoral growth. I compute the parties' counterfactual vote-share increase from improving their valence image by one unit. That is, I

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[4] In robustness checks I have repeated these simulations using voters' mean perceived position of the parties, and three-dimensional scaling of both parties' and voters' positions. The results of these simulations support the same substantive conclusions presented in this paper.

simulate the vote-share increase from the observed valence differential between two parties to a counterfactual where one party has a unit-larger valence advantage. For example, if two parties are equal in their valence image (i.e. voters' choice between them is based on proximity alone) in the observed model, I simulate how their vote-share changes if one of the parties will increase its valence advantage from 0 to 1 (in natural logarithm terms), making voters that are indifferent between the parties on positional issues about 70 percent more likely to vote for the valence advantaged party. The one unit increase of valence image is a realistic value as it is the observed centrist party's valence change between one national election to the next (Zur 2019).

Results

Table 1 and Table 2 present country specific models in which the dependent variable is the respondent's reported vote choice in the 2014 European Parliament election. In both tables the coefficients are calculated from a conditional logit model and presented in odd ratio form. These coefficients mean that on the proximity variables, smaller numbers represent higher saliency of the issue. That is, as the coefficient decreases, the electoral punishment for incongruence between voters and parties increases. The valence coefficients are interpreted as the change in probability of voting for a focal party relative to the baseline category (centrist party). For example, when the coefficient equals 2 a voter that is indifferent between the centrist party and the focal party on positional issues is twice as likely to vote for the latter over the former.

Table 1 presents models in which voters' decision rules are a function of the general Left-Right positional dimension and parties' valence image. The tables show odds ratio coefficients where numbers between zero and one are interpreted as negative effect, one means no effect and

numbers larger than one are interpreted as percental increase in probability. The probability of voting for a party decreases as the distance between a voter's self-placement on the Left-Right scale and the experts' placement of a focal party increases. In Table 2, voters' decision rules include two additional positional dimensions – proximity on the level of immigration and European integration. In these tables, the proximity coefficients are presented as odds. That is, the coefficients represent the change in the odds of voting for one party over another given a one unit increase in the proximity differential between the voter and the two parties. For example, a voter that is exactly in the middle between party A and party B (i.e. the proximity differential equals zero) is equally likely to vote for A as for B, regardless of the coefficient. But, if the voter is one unit closer to party A than to party B, and the coefficient on the proximity variable equals 0.7, the voter is 30 percent more likely to vote for A over B. Moreover, the closer the coefficient is to zero, the larger the effect of the distance on the focal dimension on vote choice. As one can see, the coefficients on the Left-Right proximity variables in Table 1 are very similar to the respective coefficients in Table 2. This implies that the additional dimensions have independent effects on vote choice in the European Parliament elections. Moreover, Left-Right proximity has significantly stronger effect on vote choice. Surprisingly, the issue of immigration has no significant effect on vote choice in Spain, and the issue of European integration has no significant effect in Spain and Luxemburg.

In addition to variables measuring issue proximity, both tables include party specific coefficients that estimate parties' perceived valence image relative to the baseline category, which is the largest centrist party in the system. Positive (negative) values on these coefficients imply that the focal party has a valence advantage (disadvantage) over the centrist party. With the exception of

the Netherlands, there is at least one party that has a valence advantage over the centrist party, in both the unidimensional (Table 1) and multidimensional (Table 2) models. To understand the information conveyed in these tables we can examine the case of France. The party of interest in this case is the Democratic Movement (MoDem), a small centrist party that received almost 10% of the votes and 7 out of the 74 French seats in the 2014 European Parliament election. In Table 1, the coefficient for the major-Right party, The Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), in France is 2.68, implying that a voter that is indifferent between MoDem and UMP on Left-Right is almost 3 times more likely to vote for the major-Right party over the centrist one. Similarly, the coefficient on the major-Left party (Socialist Party – SP) is 2.13, implying that a voter that is equally distant between MoDem and SP is more than twice as likely to vote SP over MoDem. These substantive results hold in the multidimensional model as well; a voter that is indifferent between the parties on all three dimensions is 2.34 more likely to vote for UMP over MoDem, and 2.06 times more likely to vote for SP over MoDem.

Looking at these models we can see that most centrist parties are largely valence disadvantaged relative to either the major party on the right or on the left (and relative to both in half of the cases). But centrist parties are also valence disadvantaged relative to other parties. Continuing with the example of France, MoDem was valence disadvantaged relative to the National Front as well. The centrist party in the Netherlands (D66) is a counter example; this party is not valence disadvantaged relative to any of the parties. In the Netherlands all of the party specific coefficients are between zero and one (and mostly significant), meaning that relative to the D66 party, valence has negative (or insignificant) effect on vote-choice for the focal party. For example, the coefficient on the major-Left is 0.63 (in the unidimensional model) and 0.43 (in the

multidimensional model), implying that a voter that is indifferent between D66 and the Labour

Party (PvdA) is roughly twice as likely to vote for the former party.

Table 1: Single Positional Dimension Voting model

	Belgium	Denmark	Germany	Spain	France	Netherlands	UK	Austria	Finland	Sweden	Lux
Proximity:											
Left-Right	0.70***	0.59***	0.61***	0.58***	0.59***	0.64***	0.76***	0.68***	0.50***	0.53***	0.77***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.04)
Valence:											
Major Right	1.47**	2.94***	17.75***	5.94***	2.68***	0.85	5.10***	2.36***	0.93	0.98	2.37***
	(0.24)	(0.51)	(4.56)	(1.45)	(0.55)	(0.13)	(1.18)	(0.38)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.41)
Major Left	1.13	4.14***	15.63***	3.22***	2.13***	0.63***	5.73***	2.40***	0.83	1.44***	0.63**
	(0.21)	(0.69)	(4.06)	(0.80)	(0.42)	(0.09)	(1.28)	(0.38)	(0.13)	(0.19)	(0.14)
Green	1.33	1.04	5.41***		0.95	0.66***	2.02***	1.58***	0.56***	1.38**	0.93
	(0.25)	(0.23)	(1.47)		(0.22)	(0.10)	(0.53)	(0.27)	(0.09)	(0.19)	(0.20)
Other Right	2.46***	1.39*	6.62***		2.81***	0.82	10.33***	3.21***	0.50***	0.42***	0.31***
	(0.38)	(0.27)	(1.91)		(0.67)	(0.11)	(2.43)	(0.55)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.10)
Other Right	0.24***	4.01***						0.17***	0.09***	0.47***	
	(0.09)	(0.67)						(0.07)	(0.03)	(0.08)	
Other Left	0.60**	1.73***	6.37***	1.92**	0.67	1.09	0.28***		0.69*	0.54***	0.42***
	(0.15)	(0.33)	(1.79)	(0.53)	(0.17)	(0.16)	(0.13)		(0.14)	(0.10)	(0.13)
Other Left		0.47***	0.86	0.92		0.41***	0.36**				
		(0.12)	(0.31)	(0.27)		(0.07)	(0.15)				
Other Center				1.03						0.40***	
				(0.31)						(0.07)	
Observations	3,164	6,200	6,090	3,056	2,160	5,216	3,087	3,312	4,408	6,608	1,530
Pseudo R-squared	0.181	0.205	0.308	0.231	0.240	0.138	0.247	0.179	0.248	0.232	0.172
Log-Likelihood	-720.5	-1282	-1171	-610.5	-490.5	-1168	-645.9	-812.2	-861.4	-1320	-378.3

Note: The dependent variable in these models is respondents' reported vote choice in the 2014 European Parliament Election. Left-Right proximity is a linear (absolute) term. Parties' valence is relative to the baseline (centrist) party. Coefficients (Odds Ratios) are calculated from Conditional Logit models. Standard Errors (eform) in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

The results of both the unidimensional and three-dimensional models are consistent with the first hypothesis. Centrist parties are, for the most part, valence disadvantaged. This valence disadvantage can, at least partially, explain the electoral failures of centrist parties in the EP elections. Given their valence disadvantage centrist parties have limited positional strategy they can employ to compensate for their valence disadvantage. Based on the results in Tables 1 and 2, I have computed the changes to parties' expected vote-shares as a function of unilateral changes in their policy positions, while holding everything else constant. This simulation method has been used to test how election results would change due to a variety of counterfactual scenarios of interest. Put simply, these simulations ask by how much a party's vote-share would increase if it could take the most electorally advantageous positions, while everything else stays the same.

Under these counterfactual scenarios, parties' vote-shares must increase, but the magnitude of the increase should vary among parties and party groups.

Table 2: Multidimensional Voting Model

	Belgium	Denmark	Germany	Spain	France	Netherlands	UK	Austria	Finland	Sweden	Lux
Proximity:											
Left-Right	0.71***	0.61***	0.60***	0.59***	0.61***	0.64***	0.78***	0.67***	0.50***	0.54***	0.78***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.04)
Immigration	0.88***	0.85***	0.89***	0.96	0.82***	0.87***	0.87***	0.91***	0.81***	0.75***	0.90*
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.05)
EU integration	0.87***	0.83***	0.85***	0.95	0.93**	0.82***	0.80***	0.89***	0.85***	0.89***	0.87
	(0.04)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.08)
Valence:											
Major Right	1.50**	2.06***	19.42***	6.15***	2.34***	0.54***	1.90**	2.50***	1.53**	0.85	2.84***
	(0.25)	(0.37)	(5.01)	(1.51)	(0.49)	(0.08)	(0.51)	(0.40)	(0.29)	(0.11)	(0.56)
Major Left	1.12	2.80***	17.54***	3.44***	2.06***	0.39***	3.85***	2.26***	1.09	1.12	0.62**
	(0.22)	(0.47)	(4.57)	(0.87)	(0.41)	(0.06)	(0.88)	(0.36)	(0.18)	(0.16)	(0.14)
Green	1.50**	0.59**	6.40***		1.16	0.62***	1.35	1.78***	0.90	1.24	0.89
	(0.30)	(0.15)	(1.75)		(0.28)	(0.10)	(0.37)	(0.31)	(0.17)	(0.19)	(0.19)
Other Right	1.88***	0.87	6.99***		2.16***	0.53***	2.79***	3.13***	0.54***	0.33***	0.22***
	(0.34)	(0.18)	(2.05)		(0.57)	(0.08)	(0.84)	(0.59)	(0.10)	(0.06)	(0.11)
Other Right	0.45***	1.96***				0.23***		0.15***	0.16***	0.25***	0.30***
	(0.13)	(0.40)				(0.04)		(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.13)
Other Left	0.22***	0.87	5.74***	1.98**	0.65	0.78	0.24***		0.70*	0.51***	
	(0.09)	(0.18)	(1.63)	(0.59)	(0.18)	(0.12)	(0.11)		(0.14)	(0.10)	
Other Left		0.21***	0.80	0.93			0.30***				
		(0.06)	(0.29)	(0.28)			(0.12)				
Other Center				1.07						0.33***	
				(0.32)						(0.06)	
Observations	3,164	6,200	6,090	3,056	2,160	5,216	3,087	3,312	4,408	6,608	1,530
Pseudo R-squared	0.195	0.253	0.330	0.233	0.267	0.183	0.325	0.202	0.284	0.275	0.179
Log-Likelihood	-708.2	-1203	-1135	-609.2	-473	-1108	-579.6	-789.4	-820.2	-1246	-375

Note: The dependent variable in these models is respondents' reported vote choice in the 2014 European Parliament Election. Left-Right, EU integration, and Immigration proximity variables are measured in linear (absolute) term. Parties' valence is relative to the baseline (centrist) party. Coefficients (Odds Ratios) are calculated from Conditional Logit models. Standard Errors (eform) in parentheses: *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$.

The scenario simulated in Figure 2 is the change of parties' expected vote-shares as a function of the focal party unilaterally shifting from its general Left-Right position (as perceived by experts) to the position that maximizes its prospective vote-share. Before comparing centrist parties to the other groups, note that when parties move from their perceived to their vote-maximizing position

on the Left-Right spectrum their electoral gains are not great. The average vote-share gain in this scenario is only 2.3% and the median is 1.2%. Moving to our group of interest, centrist parties gain on average less than 1%. The differences in gains between centrist and the right-wing parties (both major and minor) are statistically significant at the $p<0.05$ level. This finding can be explained by the observation that Right-wing parties tend to take policy positions that are relatively further away from their vote-maximizing positions. This result supports hypothesis 2; centrist parties have no Left-Right positional strategy that can increase their vote-share substantially.

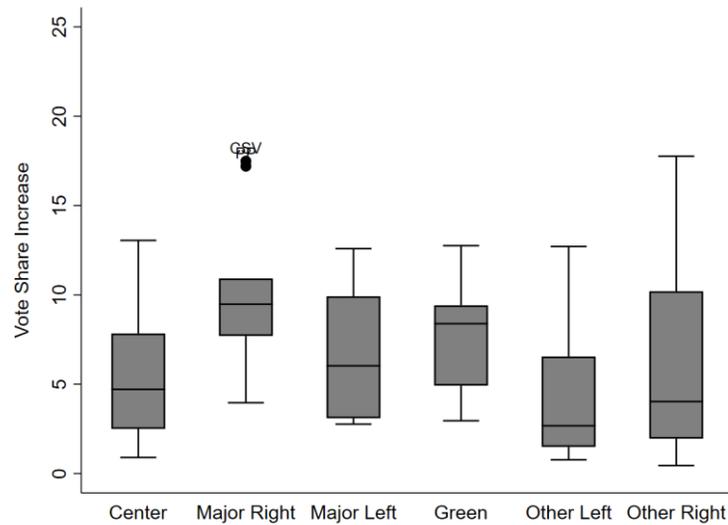**Figure 2: Vote-Share Growth due to Moving to Vote-Maximizing Position**
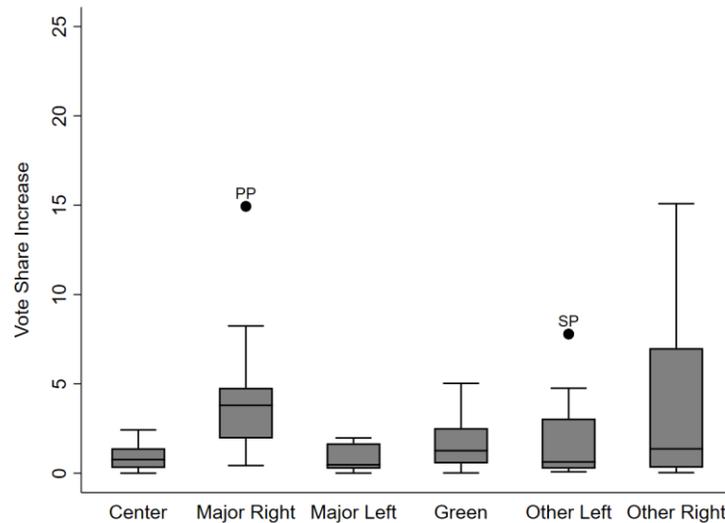
Note: Boxes show 25th to 75th percentiles of parties' vote-share increase from changing their Left-Right position (as coded by the CHES) to their computed vote-maximizing position. Each box represents at least 11 party-election simulations.

The simulations presented in Figure 3 are computed from the counterfactual scenario where each party unilaterally shifts its Left-Right position from its perceived to vote-maximizing position, then shifts its position on Immigration, and lastly moves to its vote-maximizing position on the European integration issue. Under this scenario, parties' average gains are much greater than

under the scenario where the parties can shift their position only on the Left-Right continuum. The average vote-share increase in this case for centrist parties is 5.4%, while the average for all other parties is 6.4%. Moreover, the gains of both major-Right and Green parties are significantly larger than those of centrist parties. This result supports the third hypothesis; centrist parties can modestly increase their vote-share using a multidimensional strategy. It is important to note, however, that these results are based on a counterfactual scenario were centrist parties have to sharply change their policy positions, especially on the issue of European integration. While there are examples of non-centrist parties changing their perceived positions (see Adams, Green, and Milazzo 2012; Adams, de Vries, and Leiter 2012; Seeberg et al. 2017), such change might involve further deterioration of their valence image (Fernandez-Vazques 2018; Tomz and Van Houweling 2012). Moreover, it is hard to believe that parties in general, and centrist parties more specifically, are able to communicate to voters such sharp changes in their policy position (Adams 2012; Spoon and Klüver 2017).

Figure 3: Growth due to Moving to Vote-Maximizing Positions in 3-Dimensional Space

Note: Boxes show 25th to 75th percentiles of parties' vote-share increase from changing their Left-Right, Immigration and European integration positions (as coded by the CHES) to their computed vote-maximizing position. Each box represents at least 11 party-election simulations.

The multidimensional disadvantages of centrist parties are shown by the comparison between Figure 2 and Figure 3. First, centrist parties cannot significantly increase their vote-shares by altering their position on the most salient dimension in the European Parliament Election (Left-Right). That is, they cannot take any Left-Right position that will compensate for their unfavorable image of valence. Second, moving to analysis of multiple dimensions, centrist parties' additional gains are smaller than those of moderate parties both on the Left and on the Right. Therefore, not only that a multidimensional vote-maximizing strategy would lead to a marginal increase of centrist parties' vote-shares, it is also insufficient to compensate for their low valence image. Put differently, even when parties are given a hypothetical chance to take the perfect set of policy positions, centrist parties cannot improve their electoral prospects to become the leading parties in the European Parliament. The same logic is evident in Table 3, where the

average distance between parties' positions (as perceived by experts) and their vote-maximizing positions is shown. Centrist parties are extremely close to their vote-maximizing position on Left-Right (second only to major-Left parties), thus altering their position yields only marginal increase despite being the most salient dimension. On the other hand, centrist parties have a long distance to travel between their perceived positions to their vote-maximizing positions on European integration. Yet, this is the least salient dimension. Thus, even if centrist parties could communicate such a sharp change in their positions toward more neutral or even anti-EU stands, changing positions would not result in a large increase of centrist parties' vote-share.

Table 3: Distance between Parties Positions and Vote-Maximizing Positions

	Left-Right	Immigration	European Integration	Cumulative
Center	1.05	1.51	4.79	7.35
Major Right	1.88	1.44	3.97	7.30
Major Left	0.82	1.18	4.13	6.14
Green	1.67	3.48	4.17	9.31
Other Right	2.48	2.65	2.42	7.55
Other Left	2.39	3.00	2.64	8.04

Given that centrist parties have no real positional strategy they can pursue in order to increase their vote-share to a meaningful extent, what should they do? The next set of analyses shows how parties' vote-shares would change as a function of changes in their valence image. Figure 4 displays parties' vote-share increase under the hypothetical scenario where parties' valence image is improved by one unit, while everything else remains constant. One-unit change in parties' valence image is a realistic change as it is roughly the median observed valence change between elections (Zur 2019). The one-unit increase in valence image is also a little over one standard deviation of the observed median valence value in the data used in this paper (i.e. Tables 1 and 2).

Figure 4: Vote-Share Growth due to 1-unit Increase in Valence
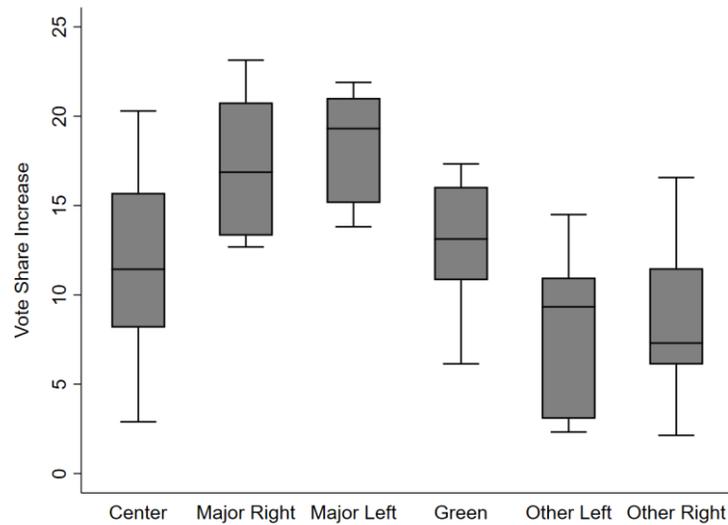
Note: Boxes show 25th to 75th percentiles of parties' vote-share increase from improving their valence image by 1 unit, while holding their policy position and voters' decision rule constant. Each box represents at least 11 party-election simulations.

These simulations show that under the scenario were parties increase their perceived valence image by one unit, all parties' vote-shares increase more dramatically than under the scenario where the move from their announced positions (as perceived by experts) to their vote-maximizing positions on all three dimensions. The average vote-share increase for all parties is 12.5% from improved valence image, while only 6.2% from altering policy positions. Similar results are true for centrist parties that could gain 5.4% from improving their three-dimensional policy positions, while gaining on average additional 11.7% percent by improving their valence image. Despite the substantive gains centrist parties can make by improving their valence image, they are still disadvantaged. This disadvantage is demonstrated by the significantly larger gains major-Left and -Right parties can make by improving their valence image in the same magnitude. On average, both major-Left and major-Right parties can increase their vote-shares by 18.7% and 17.7% (respectively) under the counterfactual scenario where their valence image

is improved by one unit. These results are consistent with hypothesis 4; while centrist parties' most meaningful path towards electoral growth is improving their valence image, this growth is smaller than the growth of major-Left and major-Right parties under the same conditions.

Conclusion

Centrist parties in Western democracies in recent years compete for votes under very fertile conditions; their Left-Right position is extremely popular, and they are not squeezed by other parties. The data used in this paper show that more than a quarter of voters place a centrist party closest to their ideological position, while over 17% of the voters place themselves closest to the position of a centrist party as perceived by experts. Yet, less than 10% of these voters voted for a centrist party in the 2014 European Parliament election. In this paper I explain this phenomenon by arguing that centrist parties encounter three related disadvantages. First, centrist parties are perceived by voters as low valence parties. That is, they are less competent, honest, or unified than their large mainstream counterparts. This valence disadvantage, in turn, motivates voters to vote for parties that might offer less policy-based, but more valence-based utility. These results are particularly striking because EP elections are understood as elections in which voters are making sincere voting decisions (i.e. they consider issues such as government formation to a lesser extent).

Second, I presented theoretical arguments and empirical analyses to demonstrate that centrist parties are near their vote-maximizing Left-Right position, hence they cannot use spatial strategies to compensate for their low valence, while non-centrist parties typically able to improve their vote-shares by altering their Left-Right position. Moreover, centrist parties' policy

positions with respect to immigration, and especially with respect to European integration, are less popular. These positions hurt centrist parties in two ways in the EP elections. First, the salience of these issues makes voters less likely to vote for them. Second, given their negative valence image, announcing more popular EU or immigration positions seems like a useful positional strategy, but it is insufficient to overcome their major rivals on the Left and Right. These findings about the positional disadvantage of centrist parties in EP election have important implications for national elections. Research has shown that issues that are salient in EP elections are less (or not at all) salient in national elections. The positional strategy (take more popular positions on immigration and EU integration) that centrist parties can use in EP elections might not be very useful in national elections as these issues are less likely to affect voters' decision rule.

Lastly, centrist parties are disadvantaged with respect to their ability to grow by improving their valence image. Despite being the only strategy toward a substantive vote-share growth, improving their valence image would generate gains that are smaller than those of the major mainstream parties under the same conditions. Here again, the implications for national elections are not in favor of centrist parties. If valence is more important in national elections than in the EP elections, centrist parties will have much greater valence gap to close in national elections.

The theoretical argument and the empirical analysis presented in this paper have important implications to the study of political representation and parties' campaign strategies. These results imply that when deciding how to spend their resources, centrist parties should focus on improving their valence image and not on emphasizing their Left-Right policy position, while

deemphasizing or moderating their unpopular immigration and EU integration policies. First and foremost, the results advance our knowledge about political representation as they suggest that voter-party relations are rational. Parties at the center of the Left-Right spectrum are not weak because voters are "fooled" or misrepresented by the major parties on both the Left and Right, but because voters rationally prefer voting for parties that maximize their valence-based utility over parties that are the most proximate to their positions.

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