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## Why so negative? Negative party positioning in spatial models of voting

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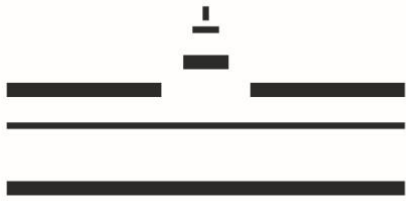
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**Why so negative? Negative party positioning  
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*Felix Hoch / Kim Leonie Kellermann*

**Abstract**

Why should political parties say what they do *not* want instead of saying what they want? In this paper, we introduce the concept of *negative positioning* into spatial models of voting and discuss its relevance as a campaigning tool in European multiparty systems. By negative positioning, we refer to the rejection, denial or criticism of opposing positions on a political issue scale without providing information on what a party's own position is instead. We argue that negative positioning is an attractive tool in reaction to high issue salience among voters as it allows to acknowledge the respective issue without costly commitment to or design of own policy proposals. We provide a first empirical test of our concept for elections held in 26 European countries between 2002 and 2018, examining immigration as an issue with a highly volatile salience. We use data on voter issue salience from the Eurobarometer and on party positions from the Manifesto Project Database. Indeed we find that if an issue is highly salient among voters, parties increase the share of negative positioning on that issue in their manifestos. Interestingly, negative positioning is more prevalent among smaller, opposition and extreme parties.

**JEL-Codes:** C33, D71, D72, D78

**Keywords:** issue salience, party positioning, negative positioning, negative campaigning

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# 1 Introduction

In 2004, the *United Kingdom Independence Party* (UKIP) won 16 percent in the European elections campaigning with the slogan „Say no to European Union!“.<sup>1</sup> While it may not be surprising to hear this statement from UKIP, the formulation deserves a more careful look. It clearly states what UKIP does not want, namely the EU as it stands. Yet, it leaves open what it wants instead. A hard Brexit? A soft Brexit? Close relations with the EU? No international cooperation at all? Or still an EU membership but only upon substantial reforms?

A great amount of social science research has been dealing with the question why political parties occupy specific positions on political issues, why they propose certain policies and what role general voter sentiment plays in this process (Adams et al. 2004; Ezrow et al. 2010; Gerber & Lewis 2004; Hakhverdian 2012; Klüver & Spoon 2016; Meguid 2005; Spoon & Klüver 2014, 2015; Wagner & Meyer 2014; Williams & Spoon 2015). However, it has implicitly been assumed that parties actively adopt a certain political position by affirming and advertising it and by making concrete policy suggestions. Throughout this paper, we refer to this strategy as *positive positioning*. However, little research has been concerned with the reverse strategy: reaching a political position by rejecting the opposite. We call this strategy *negative positioning*. Under this term, we summarize all types of campaign and manifesto content that express a negative, rejecting and critical attitude towards a certain position on a political issue. However, no information is given on what the political agents' actual stance is instead. In the above-mentioned example, UKIP clearly positions against the current form of European integration. However, it remains unclear to the voter, how the party wishes to alternatively shape European and international cooperation or what specific policies it proposes to do so.

In this paper, we introduce and discuss the concept of *negative positioning* in more detail. We shed light on the incentives of parties to prefer this campaigning strategy over positive positioning. Specifically, we argue why negative positioning is an attractive tool when a party wants to react to high issue salience among voters. Here, negative positioning allows a party to make a statement on a pressing issue without having to develop an elaborate political strategy how to solve a problem or make a costly, inflexible

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<sup>1</sup> See a *Guardian* report about the campaign at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2004/apr/16/elections2003.uk>. See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/vote2004/euro\\_uk/html/front.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/vote2004/euro_uk/html/front.stm) for a BBC report on the election results.

commitment to a specific position. This is particularly useful in multiparty systems where parties intend to uphold multiple coalition options and where certain issues are dominated by issue-owning parties which are hard to contend.

We complement our conceptual framework by a first empirical analysis of the use of negative positioning on a highly polarizing position issue, namely *immigration*. Generally, a salient issue is understood as the *most important issue* to be addressed in political decision-making (Bélanger & Meguid 2008; Dellis 2009; Dennison 2019; Glazer & Lohmann 1999; Johns 2010; van der Brug 2004; Walgrave et al. 2012; Wlezien 2004). Issue salience builds upon the more general concept of *issue voting*, which describes the idea that the individual voting decision depends on the voters' evaluation of single, crucial issues<sup>2</sup>, rather than an entire party program (Bélanger & Meguid 2008; Carmines & Stimson 1980).

We exploit data on voter issue salience from the Eurobarometer (European Commission 2002, 2018) as well as on party positions in manifestos from the Manifesto Project Database (Volkens et al. 2019a,b). Our sample comprises parties from 26 European countries, which participated in elections held between 2002 and 2018. By means of a multi-level regression model, we test various hypotheses, foremost, whether the amount of negative positioning in parties' manifestos increases if immigration becomes more salient among voters. We here make use of the specific data processing methodology in the Manifesto Project Database which distinguishes between positive and negative mentions of a political issue. Thereby, the data allow us to investigate in which way parties pick up the respective issue. Our results provide some first, tentative evidence of a positive relationship between greater voter issue salience and negative positioning. Most importantly, we find that parties do not only use negative positioning when issue salience is high but also use relatively more negative than positive positioning. We also find that smaller, non-governing and more extreme parties on the overall left-right scale rely more heavily on negative positioning.

The most prominent and most comprehensive body of previous literature dealing with party strategies based on rejecting the opponent consists of studies of *negative campaigning*. Negative campaigning includes all forms of attacks on the opponent, not only

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<sup>2</sup> By *issues*, we refer to politically relevant topics or problems such as *unemployment, sustainability, immigration, social equality* or *discrimination*. Issues are generally more narrow than ideologies (*liberalism, authoritarianism, socialism* etc.) but broader than specific policies, for instance, the introduction of affirmative action measures to reduce gender discrimination or a legal ban on environment-impairing materials (Carmines & Stimson 1980; Dolezal et al. 2014).

with respect to political positions and past performance but also to character traits or private misconduct (Hansen & Pedersen 2008; Lau & Pomper 2002; Sanders & Norris 2005). Negative campaigning has become more and more relevant in recent history, which leads to a growing academic interest (Nai 2018; Ross & Caldwell 2020; Walter 2014; Walter et al. 2013). Yet, it only covers political communication and campaigning strategies talking negatively about opposing candidates as *persons* (or opposing parties as groups). However, to the best of our knowledge, no concept whatsoever has been developed, which refers to negative talk and rejection of *political positions* or policies. Therefore, we aim at closing this gap with the introduction of negative positioning.

Beyond this introduction of the novel concept of negative positioning, we further aim at making three more contributions to the existing literature. First, both issue salience and the relation between party and voter preferences have extensively been discussed in the political science literature. However, the clear focus lies on studying *if* parties respond to changes in issue salience among voters. We extend this research by investigating *how* parties respond in terms of adopting negative positioning as a specific strategy. In particular, from an economic perspective, we highlight the incentives of political agents to choose between the different strategies of either positive or negative positioning.<sup>3</sup> Second, because the question of *how* positional shifts are realized has been neglected so far, the negative positioning approach has played virtually no role in spatial models of voting. Yet, on a two-end scale, parties can either shift to one end by approaching it or by distancing from the other end. The connection between negative positioning and spatial models of voting thus seems natural. Therefore, we enhance spatial models of voting by highlighting the significance of negative positioning as an alternative way of party positioning. Third, some of our considerations can be transferred to the concept of negative campaigning and we point out opportunities for further research on this topic.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, we present our conceptual framework and elaborate on the key terms of *negative positioning* and *positive positioning*. Importantly, we highlight a party's incentives to employ these strategies. In section 3, we outline our empirical approach and present the used data. Empirical results are reported in section 4. Finally, concluding remarks are provided in section 5.

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<sup>3</sup> Only a very small number of papers has dealt with negative elements in campaigns from an economic point of view, see Brueckner & Lee (2015) and Skaperdas & Grofman (1995).

## 2 Conceptual framework

If voter issue salience is subject to a positive shock, parties are challenged to react to the new circumstances. Let us consider the issue scale of immigration as an example and assume that there are only three possible positions. At the left end of the scale, there is multiculturalism, thus a very immigration-friendly position. At the right end, there is nationalism, which represents an anti-immigration position. As a third option, a party could be neutral by occupying a position in the middle. Now, salience of immigration among voters increases due to a shock in mass immigration from another country. The set of possible party responses basically comprises two options. First, the party can ignore the increase in importance. This behavior presupposes that the amount of voter attention paid to the issue is insufficient to establish a relevant political discussion or to affect a pivotal share of the electorate (Meguid 2005; Spoon et al. 2013). Second, a party can react to the voters' demands by picking up the salient issue and likewise increase party issue salience (Adams et al. 2004; Hakhverdian 2012; Meguid 2005).

The second expectation finds wide support in the related empirical literature (Ezrow et al. 2010; Hakhverdian 2012; Klüver & Spoon 2016; Spoon & Klüver 2014, 2015; Wagner & Meyer 2014). Yet, most of these studies, foremost Klüver & Spoon (2016) and Spoon & Klüver (2014, 2015), measure party issue salience by examining how much manifesto space a certain issue covers. That is, salient issues are those that parties talk most about without looking at the content of such statements or at a party's position on the respective issue scale. Considering the example of immigration, a party could increase issue salience by just talking more about both nationalism and multiculturalism without taking a position at one of these ends. Yet, the more salient an issue is, the more are parties under pressure to take a specific stance on the issue scale (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2015). Moderate or neutral party positioning is often associated with indecisiveness or unwillingness to clear commitments (van der Brug 2004), which undermines the purpose of increasing party issue salience in the first place. An extreme position, however, signals credibility and issue expertise which is necessary to make such a commitment (Rovny 2012).

Moreover, if the issue is highly controversial among voters, extreme party positioning bears a chance to win and retain voters with firm positions, who are more strongly emotionally involved (Han 2018; Hobolt & de Vries 2015; Weaver 1991). Finally, a positional shift towards one end of the issue scale can particularly be helpful if a party



wants to distinguish itself from competitors with an opposite or neutral position in a multi-party system (Wagner 2012). In that sense, increasing voter issue salience bears substantial incentives for parties to shift their position towards the ends of the issue scale to electorally benefit from increasing voter interest (Dennison 2019; Givens & Luedtke 2005).

**Hypothesis 1.** *Parties react to high voter issue salience by shifting their platforms towards one end of the issue scale.*

The main purpose of this study is to explain how parties realize this positional shift. We can consider the example of a party which wants to shift towards multiculturalism as a reaction to the increased issue salience of immigration. This positional shift can now be realized using two distinct strategies.

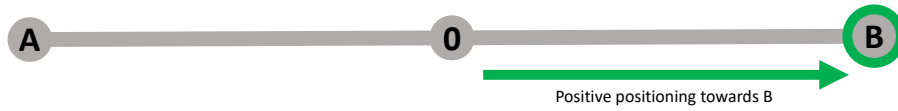
On the one hand, the party can explicitly commit to multiculturalism by proposing and promoting policies such as financial aid for immigrants or cultural exchange platforms (Mader & Schoen 2018). Since this strategy involves a positive emphasis of one position on the issue scale, we refer to it as *positive positioning*. It implies that a party approaches one end of the scale by affirming and advertising it or by proposing policies it intends to implement in order to achieve the associated political goal (Franzmann & Kaiser 2006; Gabel & Huber 2000).

On the other hand, however, the shift can also be realized by rejecting the opposite position without necessarily advertising an alternative. Again referring to our example, the same party could achieve to be perceived as immigration-friendly by rejecting nationalism. In this case, this can be done by criticizing specific policies such as immigration bans or cuts in social expenditure for integration (Lesińska 2014; Mader & Schoen 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). In contrast to positive positioning, we label this strategy *negative positioning*, since it involves referring to the opposing position in a negative way. Hence, the party does not promote its own position or policies but makes clear what it does not want.<sup>4</sup>

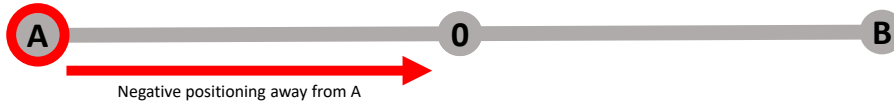
More technically speaking, on a given issue scale that spans between the two ends A and B, a party can achieve a shift towards B by either positive positioning, where it actively picks up and emphasizes B (see figure 1a) or by negative positioning where it

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, the other way around, a party can occupy a nationalist stance towards immigration either by actively committing to nationalist ideas or by rejecting multicultural ideas.



(a) Shift in party positioning towards B by positive or negative positioning



(b) Shift in party positioning towards A by positive or negative positioning

denounces and literally distances itself from A (see figure 1b). Analogously, a party can choose between advertising A and rejecting B to realize a shift towards A.

**Hypothesis 1a.** *As a reaction to high voter issue salience, parties differentiate from their competitors by emphasizing their own position (positive positioning).*

**Hypothesis 1b.** *As a reaction to high voter issue salience, parties differentiate from their competitors by rejecting the opposing position (negative positioning).*

If hypothesis 1 holds true, either hypothesis 1a or hypothesis 1b (or both) must also hold true since these are the only ways how a positional shift can be realized. Importantly, hypotheses 1a and 1b are not mutually exclusive. A party can, in reaction to higher salience of, e.g., the immigration issue, advertise its pro-immigration stance and, at the same time, criticize exclusionary, nationalist ideas. However, the two positioning strategies do not just go hand in hand. In particular, it is unclear if parties commit to A just because they reject B. We will further elaborate on this aspect below.

What may need some additional explanation is the relation of negative positioning to the term *negative campaigning* also used in the political science literature. Negative campaigning describes attacks on the political opponent by means of negative statements about the opponent's personality, past political performance or current program (Lau & Pomper 2002; Sanders & Norris 2005; Walter 2014; Walter et al. 2013). Some scholars even limit negative campaigning to false statements or statements which are unrelated to politics as such (Lau & Pomper 2002; Nai 2018; Sanders & Norris 2005; Walter 2014). The phenomenon is most prevalent and has extensively been studied for the

U.S. as it is usually more narrowly targeted at a specific person (Hansen & Pedersen 2008; Walter et al. 2013). The candidate-focused campaigns in the U.S. thus provide a suitable environment for negative campaigning. What is more, both the importance and dimension of pre-election campaigns are traditionally greater than in most party-centered European political systems.

In contrast, negative positioning as we understand it is restricted to the programmatic dimension of politics. It refers to the position parties take on certain issues and whether they do so by adopting one stance or rejecting the opposing stance. The tonality or truthfulness of respective communication is irrelevant. While negative positioning also implies a criticism of the opposing stance, this criticism may be formulated in a factual fashion and underpinned with valuable arguments. Furthermore, the potentially expressed criticism only refers to non-physical constructs such as the competitor's policy plans or value system and is hence independent of specific political figures.

According to the above-outlined argumentation, both positive and negative positioning are suitable tools to commit to one side of the issue scale. Thus, from a point of view of economic calculus, if both result in a positional shift at identical costs, parties should be indifferent between the two types of positioning. We argue, however, that this is not the case. Hence, we highlight in the following why negative positioning can generally be considered to be the less costly option and why we expect it to be more frequently used in reaction to increasing issue salience.

First, the programmatic development that constitutes the positional shift involves costs (Doherty et al. 2016; Graitson 1982). Although this holds true for every shift, we argue that the costs of a shift via positive positioning are almost certainly higher. Positive positioning, according to our definition, entails the pressure to develop lines of argument or specific policy proposals. For instance, if our exemplary pro-immigration party has clearly committed to the ideal of a multicultural society, voters would likely start to ask questions about how integration should be facilitated, how the respective measures should be financed, how housing or job shortages should be overcome etc. Negative positioning, on the other hand, requires no more than an opposing position that can be criticized. In that sense, it would suffice if our pro-immigration party disapproved of a competitor's claim to close the borders. While the policy suggestions inherent in positive positioning make it more precise and informative for voters, they also make it costlier.

On a similar note, the reaction time to an increase in issue salience is expected to be higher for positive positioning (Däubler 2012). While the development of a new program is time-consuming, a rejection of opposing positions is right at hand. This flexibility of negative positioning is particularly valuable in a situation where parties are forced to immediately react to changing voter preferences, for instance in case of a sudden political crisis, a natural disaster, a stock-market crash and the like. What is more, party members have to agree on a new program or set of policies in an internal process. No democratic party can promote a new platform without approval of the party base. Such an internal decision process has to account for different subgroups and wings within the party, which further complicates the search for positions with majority appeal. While party membership as such can be regarded as the smallest common denominator that a group of politically active citizens finds, intra-party conflict regarding political goals is common. We thus expect it to be easier for a majority of party members to unanimously disagree on an opponent's position than to develop a detailed policy strategy that all members can agree on.

Second, negative positioning implies a unique possibility for parties to choose a side of the issue scale but blur their specific position at the same time. *Position blurring* describes a strategy where parties intentionally take a vague position without actual policy proposals or even without specific arguments (Han 2018). Indeed, when negative positioning is used, it can be the case that voters and parties only agree on what they disagree on.<sup>5</sup>

Considering our setting, the constituency of a nationalist party may be very heterogeneous with respect to the immigration issue (Rooduijn 2018). Some supporters may harbor genuine xenophobic attitudes (van der Brug et al. 2000), so that they find themselves at the right end of the immigration scale. Others may be concerned about their own job security (Scheve & Slaughter 2001) but not reject immigrants as such (Rydgren 2008), which rather corresponds to a neutral, moderate position. Hence, the only binding element between these two groups is the rejection of the left end of the scale.

Thus, a campaign advertising specific discriminatory measures against immigrants may be too harsh from the perspective of moderate voters. Negative positioning with respect to the left end of the scale, however, appears to be the ideal tool to retain both groups of

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<sup>5</sup> This strategy of achieving intra-group cohesion by dissociation from a common enemy is well-established in psychological research (Simon & Klandermans 2001). In the realm of political economy, the mechanisms behind this idea trace back to the theory of collective identity of Olson (1965).

voters. While negative positioning with respect to A implies a clear shift away from the left end of the scale in figure 1b, it does not necessarily imply that a party now occupies B. Shifting away from A can likewise mean that a party ends up at the neutral position. Parties can thus distance themselves from one position without having to clearly commit to another. This strategy allows parties to acknowledge the issue without alienating moderate voters (Glazer & Lohmann 1999). This may constitute an important strategic asset as, in classic spatial models of voting with normally distributed policy preferences, a majority of votes can be won at the center of the issue scale (Rovny 2012, 2013).

Yet, these centripetal incentives for a blurred position seem to conflict with the centrifugal incentives for extreme positioning on salient issues presented above (Kurella et al. 2018). In the prevalent framework of positive positioning, position blurring automatically results in moderate positions since every attempt to actively embrace a non-neutral position at the end of the scale would require to move away from the median. The only way to realize position blurring through positive positioning is by presenting conflicting arguments for both ends of the issue scale (Lo et al. 2014), which results in a moderate position. In consequence, position blurring and positive positioning are contradictory. Negative positioning, however, solves this tension as it only requires to distance from an opposing position. Thus, it enables parties to choose a side without actually committing to one specific position.

In general, negative positioning and position blurring seem to be natural complements as both of them explicitly avoid constructive arguments or specific policy proposals. They therefore ideally fit the needs of political populism as a *thin ideology* (Mudde 2004), regardless of its actual left-wing or right-wing alignment. It is no coincidence that Donald Trump's "amazingly vague" (Cillizza 2015) 2016 presidential election campaign, a recent and very prominent example of position blurring (Han 2018; Parvaresh 2018), also serves as a perfect example for both negative campaigning (Gross & Johnson 2016; Ross & Caldwell 2020) and negative positioning. In the case of Trump, his attacks aimed at 'Crooked Hillary' Clinton went hand in hand with a high degree of negative positioning exemplified by his rejection of liberal, cosmopolitan values (Norris & Inglehart 2019).

Third, a crucial advantage of negative positioning is that parties can acknowledge an issue without challenging existing issue ownership. Especially when a niche issue becomes highly salient and parties are forced to pick it up, they face the dilemma of how to deal with the competition of an established issue owner. No matter whether the shifting party decides to side with or position against the issue owner, it always encounters the

problem that the position of the issue owner is usually better developed and already established (Dennison 2019; Tresch et al. 2013). Empirical evidence suggests that *issue stealing*, i.e. the attempt to overtake an already existing issue ownership, very rarely succeeds (Tresch et al. 2013). Competing with an established issue owner through positive positioning thus implies the costly development of a program at a high risk of failing to win voters. Negative positioning, however, implies the option to choose a side without engaging in competition for issue ownership, keeping the associated costs low.

To sum up, there are three main reasons why parties may prefer negative positioning to implement their shift in party positioning when they face high voter issue salience. First, negative positioning is cheaper and more flexible than positive positioning since it does not require the costly internal process of platform development. Second, parties can use negative positioning to choose sides and blur their specific position at the same time. Third, through negative positioning parties can respond to higher issue salience without challenging an issue owner. We thus expect negative positioning to be used more by parties upon observation of high voter issue salience.

**Hypothesis 2.** *When voter issue salience is high, the use of negative positioning is relatively more frequent than the use of positive positioning on the respective issue.*

## 3 Empirical approach

### 3.1 Database

We obtain data on voter issue salience from the Eurobarometer survey (European Commission 2002, 2018) and data on party positioning from the Manifesto Project Database (Volkens et al. 2019a). Although these are both well-established data sources, some of our variables need some further deliberation. In particular the way to measure issue salience and the differentiation between positive and negative positioning, which makes our analysis unique, requires a more detailed explanation.

We measure salience of a specific issue among voters at the country level as the share of respondents in the Eurobarometer<sup>6</sup> who state that the issue in question is one of

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<sup>6</sup> For convenience, we only include bibliographic information on the first (European Commission 2002) and the last (European Commission 2018) Eurobarometer survey included in this study.

the two most important issues facing their country at the moment. We argue that this measurement of issue salience is more suitable for our analysis than the alternative of rating single issues according to perceived salience, as applied by Bélanger & Meguid (2008), for instance. First, the underlying idea is to find issues that are decisive for one's vote choice. The most important issue is probably the most salient one in the sense that it influences the voting decision. On the contrary, one of many issues which ranks low on the salience scale is less likely to be pivotal. Second, the share of voters classifying a particular issue as the most important one is a suitable explanatory variable in our model where we want to capture the reaction of vote-seeking parties. It is far more plausible for parties to pick up an issue which a larger share of voters deems important than to incorporate several issues according to a ranking. Finally, the most important issue question simply provides a better database since it is asked on a yearly basis in the Eurobarometer, with virtually no alterations to the wording.

To distinguish between positive and negative party positioning we exploit the coding of the Manifesto Project Database.<sup>7</sup> It measures party issue salience and party positions by capturing positive and negative mentions of 'left' and 'right' positions on different issue scales in the party manifesto. In doing so, the share of the manifesto dedicated to each of these issues is measured, which represents the salience of this issue (Volkens et al. 2019b). Hence, party issue salience ranges between 0, when an issue is not at all addressed, and 100, when a party dedicates its whole manifesto to one issue exclusively. The actual party positioning is calculated by adding up the positive mentions of right positions and the negative mentions of left positions but subtracting positive mentions of left positions and negative mentions of right positions. Thus, the overall position is left of the median when it is lower than 0 and right of the median when it is larger than 0 (Volkens et al. 2019b).<sup>8</sup>

Applied to the immigration issue, in our analysis, we translate this coding as follows. Multiculturalism and nationalism represent the left and right ends of the issue scale, respectively. Positive mentions of multiculturalism and negative mentions of nationalism shift the party position towards the left, while positive mentions of nationalism and negative mentions of multiculturalism shift it towards the right. Positive mentions of

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the coding scheme, see Budge et al. (2001).

<sup>8</sup> The Manifesto Codebook technically refers to each of these items, such as *Multiculturalism: Positive/Multiculturalism: Negative* and *Nationalism: Positive/Nationalism: Negative*, as issues. However, as defined in the theory section, we regard *Multiculturalism* and *Nationalism* as the two opposing ends of the same issue scale. Thus the *programmatic dimensions* of the Manifesto Codebook correspond to our concept of issues (Volkens et al. 2019b).

either multiculturalism or nationalism qualify as positive positioning, negative mentions of either end represent negative positioning.

Based on this, we define the following dependent variables. *Party issue salience* equals the sum of all mentions of multiculturalism or nationalism, regardless of being positive or negative. *Party extremism* is the absolute value of the party position or, in spatial terms, the distance between the party position and the neutral point, regardless of the direction. *Positive positioning* equals the sum of positive mentions, while *negative positioning* equals the sum of negative mentions. Finally, *negative positioning* divided by *party issue salience* is the *share of negative positioning*.

We also include several control variables at the party and country level. The vector of party-level control variables contains the share of seats in the the national parliament and party family affiliation provided by the Manifesto Project Database. Furthermore, we obtain information on government participation and party affiliation of the head of government from the Database on Who Governs in Europe and Beyond (Casal Bértoa 2020). Thereby, we are able to determine whether a party participates in government, as either the junior partner in a coalition or as head of government. At the country level, we collect information on the political and institutional environment from the European Election Database (Norwegian Center for Research Data 2020) and the World Factbook (Central Intelligence Agency 2020). This includes the existence of an electoral threshold, voter turnout rates, electoral system, system of government, and the existence of a compulsory voting rule. Additionally, we use GDP per capita and unemployment rates from the World Bank (World Bank Group 2020) as indicators for the economic situation. More detailed information on all of the mentioned variables including definitions, calculations, and sources can be found in appendix B.

Overall, we collect data for 26 European countries comprising all members of the European Union, apart from Cyprus. Covering 113 elections held between 2002<sup>9</sup> and 2018, we obtain 835 party observations. Descriptive statistics can be found in appendix table A.1.

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<sup>9</sup> We start in 2002 since this is the first year from which on the most important issue question is available on a yearly base.



## 3.2 Regression model

In order to empirically test our hypotheses, we perform mixed multilevel linear regressions with random country-level intercepts. Since our hypotheses relate to the effect of voter issue salience on various types of party positioning, we use a different dependent variable for each hypothesis. More specifically, the dependent variables are *extremeness of party positioning* to test hypothesis 1, *positive positioning* to test hypothesis 1a, *negative positioning* to test hypothesis 1b, and *share of negative positioning* to test hypothesis 2. The main explanatory variable *voter issue salience* remains the same in all specifications. Likewise, the party-level control variables as well as the country-level control variables are included in all models. We thus estimate the following regression equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \textit{Party positioning}_{p,c,t} = & \beta_{0c} + \beta_1 \textit{Voter issue salience}_{c,t-2} \\ & + \beta_2 \textit{Party-specific control variables}_{p,c,t} \\ & + \beta_3 \textit{Country-specific control variables}_{c,t} + \delta_t + \epsilon_{p,c,t} \end{aligned}$$

where *Party positioning*<sub>*p,c,t*</sub> represents one of the four dependent variables and *p*, *c*, and *t* denote party, country, and year, respectively.  $\delta_t$  denotes a vector of year-fixed effects and  $\epsilon_{p,c,t}$  denotes the error term.

In the baseline regression model, we include a lagged value of *voter issue salience* two years before the election year *t*. This time structure, which is common in similar models examining the relationship between voter and party behavior (Spoon & Klüver 2014; Williams & Spoon 2015), is applied for two reasons. First, the lagged independent variable, at least partly, addresses the potential problem of endogeneity due to reverse causality. It is conceivable that parties do not react to a change in *voter issue salience* but cause that change by acting as agenda setters (Boudreau & MacKenzie 2014; Leszczensky & Wolbring 2019; McCombs & Shaw 1972). Furthermore, the lagged value of *voter issue salience* accounts for the inertia of parties when it comes to changing their position. As described earlier, the formal change of positions in the party manifesto, especially when using positive positioning, can be a time-consuming process (Däubler 2012). Two years seem to be a reasonable time frame for this process as it roughly equals half a term in most European democracies so that the public opinion is still relevant enough to

shape the election campaign while the party has sufficient time to incorporate its new position.

Note that, although we have multiple observations per country over time, we conduct a pooled analysis, which is for mainly two reasons. First, during our observation period several parties enter the political system in their countries. If they only participated in one single election, they would be eliminated by a fixed-effects estimator, which is especially unfortunate with regard to smaller and new parties. Second, several parties merge or split during the sample period, in particular in Italy, which makes it difficult to create unambiguous panels.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Main results

The results of the multilevel regressions for each dependent variable are displayed in tables 1 to 4. We perform step-by-step regressions: In model (1) of each specification, we only include *voter issue salience* as the main explanatory variable, in model (2), we add party-specific control variables, and in model (3) we also include country-specific control variables as well as year-fixed effects. For convenience, we only display the coefficient estimates for *voter issue salience* as the main explanatory variable and for selected party-specific covariates which provide additional insights into the use of negative positioning.

Table 1: Multilevel regression results for party extremism

Dependent variable: Party extremism	Model (1)		Model (2)		Model (3)	
Voter issue salience	5.091	** (2.503)	4.259	** (2.131)	6.222	* (3.224)
Party-specific covariates			Y		Y	
Country-specific covariates					Y	
Year FE					Y	

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ ; standard errors in parentheses

Table 1 provides evidence in favor of hypothesis 1 as higher *voter issue salience* is associated with a more extreme party position. Actually, this is identical to higher

party issue salience since *party extremism* increases in more mentions of an issue and thus reflects a higher salience on the party’s side. The most elaborate model (3) suggests that if voter issue salience increases by 1 percentage point, the distance between the absolute party position and the neutral point of 0 increases by about 6 units.

Table 2: Multilevel regression results for positive positioning

Dependent variable: Positive positioning	Model (1)		Model (2)		Model (3)	
Voter issue salience	3.779	(2.381)	3.097	(2.152)	5.798	* (3.221)
Party-specific covariates			Y			Y
Country-specific covariates						Y
Year FE						Y

\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1; standard errors in parentheses

Table 3: Multilevel regression results for negative positioning

Dependent variable: Negative positioning	Model (1)		Model (2)		Model (3)	
Voter issue salience	4.461	*** (0.964)	4.124	*** (0.895)	4.140	*** (1.310)
Share of seats			0.147	(0.561)	0.220	(0.556)
<b>Government participation</b>						
Junior partner			-0.442	** (0.197)	-0.514	*** (0.197)
Head of government			-0.022	(0.233)	-0.042	(0.231)
<b>Party family</b>						
Nationalist			2.508	*** (0.219)	2.533	*** (0.217)
Left			-0.271	(0.222)	-0.274	(0.220)
Country-specific covariates						Y
Year FE						Y

\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1; standard errors in parentheses

Given that parties indeed occupy more extreme positions when facing higher *voter issue salience*, the question is whether they reach this position through positive positioning, negative positioning, or both. Table 2 shows the results for *positive positioning* and provides only small support for hypothesis 1a. Although the coefficients are positive in all three models, the relationship is only weakly significant in model (3). In contrast, the relationship between *voter issue salience* and *negative positioning*, as displayed in table 3, is positive and significant at the 1 percent level in all three models, which supports hypothesis 1b.

Since the observed increase in *negative positioning* is stronger than the observed increase in *positive positioning*, the combined results of tables 2 and 3 already point to support

Table 4: Multilevel regression results for share of negative positioning

Dependent variable: Share of negative positioning	Model (1)			Model (2)			Model (3)		
Voter issue salience	0.498	***	(0.121)	0.480	***	(0.120)	0.637	***	(0.173)
Share of seats				-0.124		(0.078)	-0.121		(0.075)
<b>Government participation</b>									
Junior partner				-0.029		(0.026)	-0.044	*	(0.026)
Head of government				0.027		(0.031)	0.023		(0.031)
<b>Party family</b>									
Nationalist				0.046		(0.0299)	0.049	*	(0.028)
Left				0.068	**	(0.032)	0.061	**	(0.031)
Country-specific covariates								Y	
Year FE								Y	

\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1; standard errors in parentheses

for hypothesis 2 which supposes that the share of negative positioning increases. The results displayed in table 4 further underpin this notion as *voter issue salience* and *share of negative positioning* exhibit a positive and highly significant relationship in all three models.

Beyond that, the results in tables 3 and 4 offer some insights into the relationship between party-specific characteristics and negative positioning. Parties from nationalist or left party families, which are the most extreme categories in the Manifesto Project Database, rely more strongly on negative positioning than moderate party families. Junior partners in governments use less negative positioning than opposition parties, whereas this, interestingly, does not hold true for parties providing the head of government. Party size measured by the share of seats in parliament also has a negative, albeit insignificant, effect on negative positioning. These results indicate that negative positioning is more prevalent among extreme or niche parties and among opposition parties compared to moderate, mainstream or incumbent parties.

## 4.2 Robustness tests

In order to assess the sensitivity of our results, we conduct some robustness tests where we vary the estimation methods and modify the sample.

First, we perform a simple OLS regression with standard errors clustered at the country level instead of using the more advanced multilevel regression. Significance, unsur-

prisingly, increases, however the qualitative results, as reported in appendix table C.1, remain the same.

Second, we alter the time structure by using different time lags of the explanatory variable *voter issue salience*. Although we consider two years to be a suitable lag, opinions about what constitutes an adequate reaction time for parties differ. While some studies on party responsiveness rely on a large lag of one election term (e.g. Ezrow et al. 2010), other studies regarding government responsiveness developed the convention of a one-year time lag (e.g. Hobolt & Klemmensen 2008). Thus, we repeat our regressions with an extended time lag of three years and with a shorter one of one year. The coefficient estimates, as reported in appendix tables C.2 and C.3, point into the same direction as our main results and remain significant in both cases.

Third, we manipulate the database in order to rule out that our results are driven by specific observations. We conduct an outlier analysis where the most extreme parties are excluded. Furthermore, we systematically exclude each country and each party family one by one. We also perform the analysis without early elections. Our main results are robust, both regarding the signs and the significance levels of the estimates, to all of these manipulations.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, we conduct a two-stage least squares instrumental variable regression for the dependent variable *share of negative positioning* to account for the potential problem of endogeneity due to reverse causality. In doing so, we follow previous proposals of demographic variables as instruments for voter preferences (Carrubba 2001) and use the share of females in the electorate as an instrument for voter issue salience. As such, gender has to fulfill the two assumptions of relevance and exogeneity. We argue that gender is a relevant determinant of voter attitudes towards immigration since female voters have been observed to be more other-focused and care-oriented than men (Berg 2010), resulting in more supportive, pro-immigration preferences (Givens 2004). This relationship also holds in our sample, where the share of females in the electorate constitutes a highly significant predictor of the voter issue salience of immigration (see the first-stage results in appendix table C.4).

While we cannot empirically prove the exogeneity of our instrument, we argue that we can consider the share of females to be exogenous. First, party positioning in manifestos is unlikely to influence the short-run share of females. The other way around, we cannot

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<sup>10</sup> The results of these tests are not reported to save space but can be provided on request.

exclude that parties directly react to the demographic composition of the electorate. However, we rely on economic theories of voting, which argue that demographic variables affect party programs exclusively through voter preferences (Gerber & Lewis 2004), which is in line with the instrument requirements. Since we only aim at providing some tentative evidence of our conceptual framework here, we deem the share of females a suitable instrument for our purpose.

The results of the additional IV regressions in table C.4 confirm our baseline findings. Specifically, the estimates suggest an even stronger effect on a party's share of negative positioning of 2 to 2.5 percentage points given a 1 percentage point increase in voter issue salience compared to the baseline results in table 4.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we introduce the concept of negative positioning, incorporate it into spatial models of voting, and deliver first empirical evidence that negative positioning is particularly attractive when parties face high issue salience. Although negative positioning is related to the established concept of negative campaigning, they are explicitly distinct as negative campaigning refers to all types of attacks on the opponent as a person or party, while negative positioning exclusively refers to the rejection of opposing stances regarding a given issue. In that sense, negative positioning is the opposite of positive positioning, the previous standard concept in spatial models of voting, according to which a party realizes a positional shift by affirming a specific political stance or by proposing related policies.

Building upon economic reasoning, we argue that the two strategies have different cost structures. Specifically, negative positioning is – on average – less costly for parties as it reduces the pressure to design concrete policy proposals and does not require the cumbersome process of adopting a new program. Following our line of argument, negative positioning is especially relevant in the light of volatile voter issue salience where parties have to use their scarce resources to quickly develop or change their position. We test our hypotheses for immigration which is an issue with ever-changing salience among voters in the last decades. Our results indeed reveal a greater relative use of negative positioning given high voter issue salience. Furthermore, negative positioning turns out

to play a more important role for smaller, extreme or niche parties as well as for opposition parties. As our analysis shows, major mainstream parties and incumbents rely less on negative positioning, which is not surprising since government participation inherently requires specific policy proposals. Furthermore, frequent and significant program changes may be interpreted as unreliable by voters.

For spatial models of voting, the proposed distinction between positive and negative positioning constitutes the first attempt not only to analyze *which* position parties occupy but also to analyze *how* they reach this position. In previous studies, parties reach a position exclusively by emphasizing it (Franzmann & Kaiser 2006; Gabel & Huber 2000), which leads to conceptual problems when issue voting and issue salience in a multidimensional space are included. In particular, a model featuring only positive positioning leads to ambiguous predictions of party behavior on a salient issue space since centrifugal and centripetal incentives exist at the same time (Kurella et al. 2018; Rabinowitz & Macdonald 1989). In contrast, negative positioning allows parties to acknowledge an issue and to simultaneously blur their position by rejecting one end of the issue scale without emphasizing a specific position on the other side of the median. It is common knowledge in both political science and communication science that it matters how parties communicate a position (see e.g. Gibson & Römmele 2001; Janssen & Teteryatnikova 2017), yet the aspect has been neglected in spatial models of voting. Here, negative positioning offers a convenient way to integrate the *how*. In that sense, negative positioning fills another conceptual gap in spatial models of voting by acknowledging that the relocation of party platforms is costly (Doherty et al. 2016; Graitson 1982) and by allowing parties to choose between a cheap short-term strategy and the more expensive long-term strategy of elaborating a specific standpoint via positive positioning.

By looking at party positioning from an economic perspective, the introduction of negative positioning also contributes to the sister-concept of negative campaigning. While the research on negative campaigning deals with its advantages and disadvantages concerning electoral success (see e.g. Lau et al. 2007; Malloy & Pearson-Merkowitz 2016) and other outcomes like media attention (Haselmayer et al. 2019), the cost advantages over positive campaigning have largely been ignored. Similar to the case of negative positioning, the lower costs of negative campaigning may constitute an additional explanation for the finding that negative campaigning is mostly used by small and extreme parties (Hansen & Pedersen 2008; Nai 2018; Walter 2014). Likewise, our main observation that higher issue salience promotes the use of negative positioning may also hold

true for negative campaigning. Hence, future research on negative campaigning may benefit from implementing the rationale behind our concept. What is more, examining the differences, similarities and interdependencies between the two negative-tone approaches promises further insights into campaigning strategies.

Apart from that, negative positioning opens up several other avenues for future research. First, the concept requires additional empirical investigation with respect to other issue spaces or within other institutional contexts outside of Europe. At this point, new and more comprehensive data sources are needed since the distinction between negative and positive positioning is not extensively covered by common databases on party positioning. However, alternative sources and new ways of data collection like the qualitative analysis of speeches, interviews, or social media posts of politicians may deliver promising data. This also leads to follow-up questions regarding the moderating or mediating role of the medium of communication and the media as agenda-setters. Second, while we demonstrate that parties indeed use negative positioning in specific contexts, we do not explore the actual benefits of negative positioning in terms of election outcomes. Thus, the question of whether and when parties increase their electoral success by means of negative positioning constitutes an intriguing path for further research.



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# A Descriptive Statistics

Table A.1: Summary statistics

	Observations	Mean	SE	Min	Max
Federal state	835	0.116	0.321	0	1
Compulsory voting	835	0.149	0.356	0	1
Government type: Parliamentary	835	0.844	0.363	0	1
Government type: Semi-presidential	835	0.132	0.338	0	1
Government type: Presidential	835	0.024	0.153	0	1
Electoral system: Proportional	835	0.613	0.487	0	1
Electoral system: Majoritarian	835	0.313	0.464	0	1
Electoral system: Mixed	835	0.074	0.262	0	1
Turnout	835	0.684	0.133	0.380	0.917
Voter issue salience	825	0.104	0.089	0.002	0.388
GDP per capita	835	31152	18353	3495	113625
Unemployment	835	9.478	5.167	2.554	24.897
Positive positioning: Nationalism	826	2.398	4.529	0	46.154
Negative positioning: Nationalism	826	0.200	0.770	0	15.179
Positive positioning: Multiculturalism	826	0.884	1.953	0	26.493
Negative positioning: Multiculturalism	826	0.712	1.907	0	16.185
Party issue salience	826	4.195	5.820	0	50
Party positioning	826	2.025	5.827	-26.12	46.154
Party extremism	826	3.249	5.243	0	46.154
Positive positioning	826	3.282	4.980	0	50
Negative positioning	826	0.913	2.055	0	16.185
Share of negative positioning	738	0.202	0.271	0	1
Share of seats	818	0.136	0.136	0	0.681
Party family: Left	835	0.123	0.329	0	1
Party family: Nationalist	835	0.109	0.312	0	1
Party family: Reference group	835	0.768	0.423	0	1
Government participation: Opposition	835	0.725	0.447	0	1
Government participation: Junior partner	835	0.156	0.363	0	1
Government participation: Head of government	835	0.120	0.325	0	1
Share of females	835	0.544	0.039	0.455	0.646

## B Codebook

Variable	Type	Definition	Source
Voter issue salience	Explanatory	Voter issue salience of immigration measured as the share of the electorate that names "Immigration" as one of the two most important issues their country faces at the moment.	Eurobarometer
Negative positioning: Nationalism	Auxiliary	<p>Share of negative mentions of nationalism in a manifesto defined as:</p> <p>"Unfavourable mentions of the manifesto country's nation and history.</p> <p>May include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Opposition to patriotism;</li> <li>○ Opposition to nationalism;</li> <li>○ Opposition to the existing national state, national pride and national ideas"</li> </ul> <p>(Volkens et al. <a href="#">2019b</a>, p. 19)</p> <p>(ranging from 0 for no mentions and 100 for negative mentions of nationalism exclusively)</p>	Manifesto Project Database
Positive positioning: Nationalism	Auxiliary	<p>Share of positive mentions of nationalism in a manifesto defined as:</p> <p>"Favourable mentions of the manifesto country's nation and history.</p> <p>May include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Support for established national ideas;</li> <li>○ General appeals to pride of citizenship;</li> </ul>	Manifesto Project Database

- Appeals to patriotism
- Appeals to nationalism
- Suspension of some freedoms in order to protect the state against subversion."

(Volkens et al. [2019b](#), p. 18)

(ranging from 0 for no mentions and 100 for positive mentions of nationalism exclusively)

Positive positioning: Multiculturalism	Auxiliary	Share of positive mentions of multiculturalism in a manifesto defined as: "Favourable mentions of cultural diversity and cultural plurality within domestic societies. May include the preservation of autonomy of religious, linguistic heritages within the country including special educational provisions." (Volkens et al. <a href="#">2019b</a> , p. 20)	Manifesto Project Database
		(ranging from 0 for no mentions and 100 for positive mentions of nationalism exclusively)	
Negative positioning: Multiculturalism	Auxiliary	Share of negative mentions of multiculturalism in a manifesto defined as: "The enforcement or encouragement of cultural integration. Appeals for cultural homogeneity in society." (Volkens et al. <a href="#">2019b</a> , p. 20)	Manifesto Project Database
		(ranging from 0 for no mentions and 100 for positive mentions of nationalism exclusively)	

Party issue salience:	Auxiliary	Share of party manifesto dedicated to nationalism and multiculturalism, calculated as: Positive Positioning: Nationalism + Negative Positioning: Nationalism + Positive Positioning: Multiculturalism + Negative Positioning: Multiculturalism  (ranging from 0 for no mentions and 100 for mentions of nationalism and multiculturalism exclusively)	Authors' calculations based on Manifesto Project Database
Positive positioning	Dependent	Sum of shares of positive mentions of both nationalism and multiculturalism, calculated as: Positive positioning: Nationalism + Positive positioning: Multiculturalism	Authors' calculations based on Manifesto Project Database
Negative positioning	Dependent	Sum of shares of negative mentions of both nationalism and multiculturalism, calculated as: Negative positioning: Nationalism + Negative positioning: Multiculturalism	Authors' calculations based on Manifesto Project Database
Share of negative positioning	Dependent	Share of negative positioning relative to positive positioning, calculated as: Negative positioning / Party issue salience	Authors' calculations based on Manifesto Project Database
Party positioning:	Auxiliary	Party position on the issue space of immigration, calculated as: Positive Positioning: Nationalism - Negative Positioning: Nationalism	Authors' calculations based on Manifesto Project Database

			- Positive Positioning: Multiculturalism + Negative Positioning: Multiculturalism	
			(ranging from -100 for a party positioning at the multiculturalism end to +100 for party positioning at the nationalism end)	
Party extremism:	Dependent	Extremism of the party position on the issue space of immigration calculated as the absolute value of Party Positioning representing the distance between the neutral point and the party position.	Authors' calculations based on Manifesto Project Database	
			(ranging from 0 for a neutral position to 100 for the most extreme position)	
Party family	Control	Categorical variable: ○ Left ○ Nationalist ○ Reference group	Manifesto Project Database	
Federal state	Control	Dummy variable; 1 for federal states, 0 otherwise.	CIA World Factbook	
Compulsory voting	Control	Dummy variable; 1 for countries employing mandatory voting by law regardless of the degree of enforcement and sanctions, 0 otherwise.	European Election Database	
Electoral system	Control	Categorical variable: ○ Proportional ○ Majoritarian ○ Mixed	European Election Database	

System of government	Control	Categorical variable: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Parliamentary</li> <li>○ Presidential</li> <li>○ Semi-presidential</li> </ul>	CIA World Factbook
Share of seats	Control	Share of seats in the national parliament held by the party	Manifesto Project Database
Turnout	Control	Voter turnout in a national election	European Election Database
GDP p.c.	Control	Gross domestic product per capita in current US-\$	World Bank
GDP p.c growth	Control	Annual growth rate of GDP p.c.	World Bank
Share of females	Instrument	Share of females in the electorate	Eurobarometer

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## C Results from robustness tests

Table C.1: OLS regression

Dependent variable: Share of negative positioning	Model (1)			Model (2)			Model (3)		
Voter issue salience	0.870	***	(0.177)	0.885	***	(0.178)	0.787	***	(0.170)
Party-specific covariates				Y			Y		
Country-specific covariates							Y		
Year-fixed effects							Y		
Clustered standard errors	Y			Y			Y		

\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1; standard errors clustered at the country-level in parentheses

Table C.2: One-year lag of voter issue salience

Dependent variable: Share of negative positioning	Model (1)			Model (2)			Model (3)		
Voter issue salience	0.293	***	(0.105)	0.257	**	(0.104)	0.509	***	(0.164)
Party-specific covariates				Y			Y		
Country-specific covariates							Y		
Year-fixed effects							Y		

\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1; standard errors in parentheses

Table C.3: Three-year lag of voter issue salience

Dependent variable: Share of negative positioning	Model (1)			Model (2)			Model (3)		
Voter issue salience	0.767	***	(0.158)	0.708	***	(0.158)	0.681	***	(0.188)
Party-specific covariates				Y			Y		
Country-specific covariates							Y		
Year-fixed effects							Y		

\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1; standard errors in parentheses

Table C.4: 2SLS IV regression

**First-stage results**

Dependent variable: Voter issue salience	Model (1)			Model (2)			Model (3)		
Share of females	-0.861	***	(0.079)	-0.909	***	(0.124)	-0.447	***	(0.125)
Party-specific covariates					Y			Y	
Country-specific covariates								Y	
Year-fixed effects								Y	
First-stage F statistic			119.1			22.65			28.55

**Second-stage results**

Dependent variable: Share of negative positioning	Model (1)			Model (2)			Model (3)		
Voter issue salience	2.38	***	(0.328)	2.153	***	(0.311)	2.447	***	(0.785)
Party-specific covariates					Y			Y	
Country-specific covariates								Y	
Year-fixed effects								Y	
Observations			575			575			575

\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1; standard errors in parentheses






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