

The Space Between: How Ideological Similarity Limits the Effectiveness of Ambiguity

Victor Shin*

Laron K. Williams†

Abstract

Recent research has shown that political actors strategically conceal their ideological position and gain electoral benefits by presenting themselves as if they were closer to the voter. Ideological ambiguity may seem like a rewarding strategy, but there are clear limits. In this project, we explore the limits of ambiguity and argue that voters make a value judgment on the party's signal based on its ideological distinctiveness. Our theory is based on the desire of parties to offer ideological positions that are clearly distinguishable from neighboring parties. With the use of Comparative Study of Election Systems (CSES) data, we provide clear evidence that voters' perceived distance to parties and their willingness to vote for the party are conditioned by both ambiguity and ideological distinctiveness. Indeed, too much ideological overlap in the voters' perceptions of parties' positions dampens the potential rewards from strategic ambiguity. We also provide the first evidence that voters reject parties whose ideologies cannot be distinguished from those of rival parties. Our research offers answers to recent dilemmas related to responsible party government, party messaging, and the diffusion of campaign strategies.

Keywords: Party strategy, party brands, ambiguity, party placements, vote choice

*Ph.D. Candidate, Truman School of Government and Public Affairs, University of Missouri; vt-sxwh@umsystem.edu.

†Professor, Truman School of Government and Public Affairs, University of Missouri; williamslaro@missouri.edu. We thank the participants of the Conference on Voters' Perceptions of Political Parties at Texas A&M University, October 26-27, 2023. We are particularly indebted to the feedback from Min Kyu Chang, Bruna Dalmas, Zeynep Somer-Topcu, Jae Jae Spoon, Randy Stevenson, Guy D. Whitten and Rylie Wieseler.

Introduction

Ambiguity refers to the ability of political actors to deliberately obscure their intentions and thus reap electoral benefits (Downs, 1957; Shepsle, 1972). Scholars have debated the consequences of ambiguity without reaching a definitive conclusion. Early empirical works found that ambiguity may actually harm political actors, as voters tended to be risk-averse (Bartels, 1986; Alvarez, 1998). Recently, the debate has gained renewed interest, and some research provides new evidence demonstrating the benefits of ambiguity (Rovny, 2012; Tomz and Van Houweling, 2009; Somer-Topcu, 2015), while others argue the opposite (Rogowski and Tucker, 2018; Martin, 2019). Ambiguity is a strategy that can be achieved through various means, such as blurring or avoiding clear positioning on certain issues, providing vague statements, or inconsistent positioning across multiple issue dimensions. Most scholars debate whether the ambiguity of candidates and parties is beneficial or not, often overlooking the fact that political actors are embedded in a specific context (Callander and Wilson, 2008), and different contexts may affect voters' risk preferences. While the debate is far from over, research suggests that political actors adopting extreme positions tend to be more ambiguous than those adopting centrist positions (Bräuninger and Giger, 2018), indicating that ambiguity's ability to garner electoral benefits is context-dependent.

In this project we identify clear limits to the benefits of strategic ambiguity. We theorize that ambiguity can be a winning strategy as long as it does not interfere with one of the most important functions in developing the ideological identity of parties: the capacity of voters to distinguish between different platforms. Political parties develop brands to provide low-cost information about their platforms, enabling voters to easily identify and vote for the party positioned closer to their own position. However, parties also define themselves relative to one another, and one of their goals is to provide a way for voters to distinguish between programs. While political actors may employ ambiguity to conceal their positions, voters will also make a value judgment on the credibility of its signal. When ambiguity makes them similar to another party, voters will distrust their signal, and ambiguity becomes unattractive. On the other hand, parties may successfully

employ ambiguity as long as there is space between the parties.

We find evidence supporting this theory in two patterns. First, when voters perceive parties as ideologically similar, they tend to perceive parties positioned further away as ambiguity increases. On the other hand, when voters are capable of distinguishing the parties' ideological positions ambiguity tends to diminish respondents' perceived distance from the party. Second, we provide evidence that this relationship between ambiguity and ideological distinguishability shapes vote choice.¹ These findings allow us to reconsider several other important patterns of party competition, including how mainstream parties can ward off challenges from emerging parties, the role of ideological heuristics in responsible party government, and whether the usefulness of strategic ambiguity is limited to those on the ideological extremes.

In the next section we summarize two perspectives that offer contrasting expectations on the effects of ideological uncertainty on electoral support. Then, we introduce our theory that reconciles these two perspectives and identifies clear limits on the viability of strategic ambiguity conditional on the degree of ideological distinctiveness of parties. Following that, we present our empirical tests of our expectations for perceived distance and vote choice. Finally, we conclude by offering some implications for parties' strategies in crafting electorally viable party brands.

Two Perspectives on Ideological Uncertainty

Voters develop images of what a political party stands for by receiving and accepting the party's messages (Zaller, 1992). Over time, the voter learns and captures signals that help identify the party's platform, associating a set of values and policies with the party. When the voter sees the party label next to a candidate, it enables the voter to make a series of inferences about the candidate's behavior and the policies they will pursue, even if the voter knows nothing more about the candidate. In other words, the party label evokes a stereotypical image in the voter's mind about how a typical candidate from that

¹Analysis at the party-level (shown in the *Appendix*) supports our theory and demonstrates that parties can only increase support through ambiguity when they are perceived as ideologically distinct from other parties.

party would behave. This evoked image constitutes the party brand and it represents the informational value associated with the party's name. Similar to the relationship between firm brands and consumers, where consumers associate a brand with the quality of its products, once the voter becomes familiar with the party brand, it generates expectations about the policies and candidates associated with that party. The literature identifies two distinct perspectives regarding the electoral benefits of clear ideological messages.

The Party Brand

In the first perspective, a party brand is the product of what parties and candidates do, and what voters observe and experience. Voters accumulate information about the party based on its record of economic output (Fiorina, 1981), its actions (Cox and McCubbins, 1993), campaign messages (Alvarez, 1998; Fortunato, Silva and Williams, forthcoming), issues emphasized (Petrocik, 1996), ideological cues (Conover and Feldman, 1989), the ideological cohesion of its members (Snyder and Ting, 2002), membership of governing party coalition (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013), all of which might enlighten voters' understanding of the party's ideology. The informative value of the party label is developed across time, and it is historically connected to policy outcomes and issue positions (Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Fiorina, 1981; Petrocik, 1996). It is useful as long as voters can clearly predict its behavior and the policies its members will pursue, and it ceases to be useful when voters can no longer make this prediction (Alvarez, 1998). Thus, the party brand becomes a common denominator that affects all candidates that carry its label; it simplifies and provides a low-cost information source so voters can make a reasoned decision when casting a ballot.

In this perspective, ambiguity can be disadvantageous for political actors, either because voters are attracted to more informative brands, or because it diminishes attachment to a party. The literature on party brands argues that voters are drawn to informative brands. A party can develop and enhance the informational value of its brand by sorting like-minded candidates and by aggregating homogeneous and ideologically pronounced members, thereby positioning itself at a distinct ideological position. On the

other hand, if their label is sufficiently informative to the electorate, they can afford to move to a centrist location or include ideologically heterogeneous members in an effort to increase support (Snyder and Ting, 2002; Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2008). Similarly, the branding model of partisanship literature argues that attachment to a party results from cumulative information that voters gather, either confirming or contradicting their prior beliefs about the party. Uncertainty increases as signals either confirm or contradict their prior beliefs, thus diminishing attachment to the party (Achen, 1992; Gerber and Green, 1998; Lupu, 2013; Grynaviski, 2010).

Strategic Ambiguity

In the second perspective, parties employ ambiguity as a strategy to conceal their positions and appeal to a broader audience. Downs (1957) speculated that parties “becloud their policies in a fog of ambiguity” (p. 134) to make it appear they are positioned closer to the voter than they really are. Decades later, the concept of ambiguity was formalized as a probability distribution of the perceived positions of parties and candidates on an issue dimension, or in other words, as uncertainty about the party’s location (Shepsle, 1972). Ambiguity may arise from diverse sources. Political leaders may emphasize issues in which they are invested or issues their constituents deeply care about, while deliberately blurring their positions on issues that may appear detrimental to them (Page, 1976; Rovny, 2012). They may also avoid clearly stating where they stand on certain issues and provide vague statements (Tomz and Van Houweling, 2009). Parties may also position themselves differently across various issues without regard to the traditional ‘sides’ of the ideological spectrum (Sommer-Topcu, 2015). Since Downs (1957), scholars have offered various motivations for political actors to embrace ambiguity. Parties and candidates employ ambiguity because of their unwillingness to compromise on policies (Aragones and Neeman, 2000), uncertainty about voters’ preferences (Meirowitz, 2005; Glazer, 1990), or because politicians plan to enact their preferred policies once they win office (Alesina and Cukierman, 1990; Aragones and Neeman, 2000).

Recently, a growing body of research has revealed the electoral benefits of ambiguity.

Tomz and Van Houweling (2009) demonstrate in an experimental setting that on average, ambiguity often attracts voters, especially when the voter feels uncertain about their own preferences. Somer-Topcu (2015) argued that parties use ambiguity as a means to increase support while simultaneously maintaining the support of their core constituents. Similarly, Bräuninger and Giger (2018) developed a model demonstrating that ambiguity is as strategically important as position-taking, and parties make an effort to balance the support of both core constituents and the necessity to increase support by choosing both the ideological position and the level of ambiguity to appeal broadly. Research has also suggested that ambiguity is a winning strategy if the electorate is composed of risk-takers (Shepsle, 1972), the party is not internally divided (Lehrer and Lin, 2020), and that voters incorporate the ambiguity differential between candidates (Cahill and Stone, 2018). The electoral benefits of ambiguity are context-dependent in this perspective, but scholars have yet to consider how these ideological signals affect their credibility.

Limits of Strategic Ambiguity

If the goal of ambiguity is for political actors to present themselves as if they were ideologically closer to the voter, and assuming proximity voting dynamics, becoming ambiguous should always increase support beyond their traditional constituents. It would be logical for all political actors to engage in such behavior regardless of their position. It is easy to understand why parties at extreme positions have incentives to become ambiguous, as positions at the extremes tend to be less popular. However, parties in centrist positions could potentially employ ambiguity to attract voters from extreme parties and their ideological opponents. The fact that not all political actors employ this strategy may suggest that political actors face constraints that are context-dependent.

There is evidence that ambiguity diminishes the perceived distance between political actors and voters, but it is not always true that it translates into support (Somer-Topcu, 2015; Cahill and Stone, 2018; Martin, 2019). The key is understanding the conditions under which ambiguity can be a winning strategy. For example, while Somer-Topcu (2015)

finds a positive relationship between the broad-appeal strategy and support, she also emphasizes that “one possible risk of the broad-appeal strategy is that some voters may hear messages that were targeted to a different group of voters, and they may perceive the party to be even further away than it is” (p. 844). Nasr (2023) uses experiments to show that ambiguity influences vote choice and valence assessments to different degrees depending on the variety of ambiguity and the competitive environment facing the party. Vague or ambivalent messages are much more productive than either negative or flip-flopping messages, but the benefits also depend on the degree of correspondence between voters’ preferences and those of rival parties. Additionally, Tomz and Van Houweling (2009) argued that voters tend to project their own positions onto political actors when presented with ambiguity. However, later research found that voters tend to dislike inconsistency driven by uncertainty (Tomz and Van Houweling, 2010). Furthermore, Rogowski and Tucker (2018) argue that voters consider the issue position distribution of the candidate to make inferences about predictability. A wide distribution of issues makes the candidate unpredictable, and voters use this distribution to infer the candidate’s commitment to a given platform. In many ways, these works echo the theoretical argument of Alvarez (1998), who contends that voters shun uncertain parties because it decreases the likelihood of the party implementing the voter’s preferred policy.

While political actors try to increase support and convince voters that they represent their preferred policy views, voters also assess the credibility of these signals and the commitment to a particular position. To comprehend what renders an ideological signal more credible, we must consider the instrumental use of ideology. Ideology serves as a tool for both voters and parties to simplify and reduce the cost of obtaining political information. Parties enable rationally uninformed voters to overcome their informational limitations by developing a brand that voters can use as a heuristic aid (Downs, 1957). The informative value of this brand is constructed over time and is historically linked to policy outcomes and issue positions (Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Fiorina, 1981; Petrocik, 1996). Brands are also advantageous for parties because they define themselves relative to one another. The literature on the heuristic function of party cues provides compelling

evidence that the informativeness of source cues depends on the clarity of the platform. Voters care about the clarity of a party’s ideology and tend to follow cues from party leaders who are ideologically clear (Brader, Tucker and Duell, 2013). The clarity of ideological positions can be enhanced by parties distancing themselves from one another, which is one reason why polarization clarifies voters’ expectations of party platforms and generates more consistent opinions among their supporters (Levendusky, 2010; Lupu, 2013).

To summarize, voters value the ideological purity of political actors. Purity does not necessarily imply radicalizing their issue positions; it means that voters can perceive differences in their platform. Voters tend to support parties when they are ideologically distinct because distinctiveness provides credibility that the party is committed to the proposed platform. This suggests that to evaluate the benefits of strategic ambiguity we need to consider how that strategy influences the voters’ ability to distinguish between the ideological positions of competing parties.

[Figure 1 about here]

To illustrate how strategic ambiguity and ideological distinctiveness operate in theory, we provide eight sets of parties operating under different conditions in Figure 1. For now, just consider panels 1-6. Party A (in red) and Party B (in blue) are aligned on a single left-right unidimensional space and we assume – for illustration purposes – that the voters are uniformly distributed along this same dimension.² Histograms reflect voters’ perceptions of their positions. We vary three elements across the six panels: ideological position (medians of the distributions), ambiguity (standard deviations of the distributions), and ideological distinctiveness (the degree to which the distributions overlap). It is also helpful to think of these distributions as reflecting party brands: the ideological position with the highest frequency represents the party brand, and the strength of that brand is a function of voters’ perceptions around that position. For example, parties with stronger (weaker) party brands have steep distributions and the standard deviations of voters’ perceptions

²This assumption means that shifting the ideological positions does not have an effect independent of ambiguity and ideological distinctiveness.

are small (high). With that in mind, we can explore how simple changes in position and messaging are translated into changes in electoral support.

First consider the effects of ideological ambiguity in panel 1. Both parties are positioned in the middle of the scale (5), but they differ significantly in terms of their ambiguity: Party B's standard deviation of voters' preferences (1.54) is nearly three times larger than Party A's standard deviation (0.57). It is clear that Party B's ideological position includes a much higher degree of ambiguity than Party A. We expect that Party B's strategy will attract more voters by making it seem like they are a closer ideological fit to voters than Party A. Panels 3 and 4 allow us to control for the degree of ideological overlap – which is the same – between each party pair. Though both parties occupy more moderate positions in panel 4, we would expect that both parties would fare better in panel 3 because of the greater dispersion of voters' placements; in panel 3 voters observe the ambiguous messaging and communication efforts and view them as proximate to their own position.

Ambiguity Hypothesis: There is a positive relationship between ambiguity and party support.

The *Ambiguity Hypothesis* states that parties employ ambiguity to convince voters that they are positioned closer to them. However, the credibility of the signal depends on the ideological distinctiveness of political actors. Consider Party A (in red) in panel 1: occupying the same ideological position as Party B – especially with a strong party brand and low levels of ambiguity – risks making it difficult for voters to distinguish its ideological messages from those of Party B. Panel 4 illustrates that Party A shifting to a more leftist ideological position – while maintaining the same degree of ambiguity – decreases the ideological overlap and makes it easier for voters to distinguish positions. A similar dynamic is present as Party B (in blue) shifts to the right from panel 1 to panel 3. In both cases, parties can pursue a similar ambiguity strategy but increase their electoral support by offering more ideologically distinct positions.

Ideological Overlap Hypothesis: There is a negative relationship between ideological overlap and party support.

The key aspect that increases the credibility of parties' ideological signals is the capacity of supporters to differentiate parties' relative ideological positions. Parties can maintain their ideological location and increase their level of ambiguity to gain support as long as voters can still distinguish them. If parties' messages are ambiguous, voters become unclear about their positions and are unable to tell them apart. This phenomenon is a function of both the relative distance and the relative ambiguity.

The competing pressures of increasing ambiguity while still remaining ideologically distinct are clear in the comparison of panels 2 and 4. In both panels, Party A occupies a moderate-left position (around 4) and Party B occupies a moderate-right position (around 6). Perceptions of the parties' positions in panel 2 are clearly ambiguous, whereas ambiguity is low enough in panel 4 for the parties to be more distinguishable. This also shows that pursuing a strategy of ambiguity – for example, shifting from panel 4 to panel 2 – decreases parties' ideological distinctiveness. This demonstrates that these ideological pressures cannot be evaluated in a vacuum but must be considered in tandem.

Both parties in panel 2 face a difficult choice because of these competing pressures. While an ambiguous ideological position might appeal to voters who value ideological proximity, it might repel voters who cannot tell the difference between ideological positions. One solution that allows parties to be ambiguous while still maintaining ideological distinctiveness – shown in the comparison of panel 2 and 3 – is to move to the ideological extremes. In this situation, employing the strategy of ambiguity may not incur the cost of alienating supporters, or the cost might be lower than if they were closer. While Lupu (2013) has argued that weakening the brand may diminish the attachment of core constituents, the perceived position also counter-balances the effect. There is evidence that parties who occupy extreme positions are able to send clear party cues (Levendusky, 2010) and increase voter attachment (Ezrow, Homola and Tavits, 2014). This reasoning is also consistent with a recent finding that parties positioned at the extreme of the ideological dimension are more ambiguous than parties positioned at a centrist position (Bräuninger and Giger, 2018).

An implication of this is that parties who want to maintain ideological distinctiveness

may be incentivized to move toward the ideological extremes. However, this may not be a viable strategy. Parties are constrained by their ideological image and want to maintain their carefully-curated brands, so the extent of their movement is limited within certain bounds. This makes party positions remarkably stable, which prevents parties from leapfrogging others (Budge, 1994). Strategically, parties' options may be limited to minor changes that maintain their ideological brands yet increase the space between them and their competitors.

Our examples so far use two parties to simplify the dynamics of ambiguity and ideological distinctiveness. Of course, the limitations of the strategic ambiguity are imposed by the parties themselves relative to one another, so these concepts also apply to multi-party systems.³ We include Party C (green) in panels 7 and 8 to generalize the results to more varied party systems.

In panel 7, Party A, B and C are respectively positioned at 3, 5, and 7, and they present varying levels of ambiguity, which induces different levels of ideological distinctiveness. In this illustration, Party A (red) has the larger distribution with a standard deviation around 3, followed by Party C (green) with a standard deviation of 1, and Party B (blue) has the lowest level of ambiguity with a standard deviation around 0.5. In this context, the effectiveness of the ambiguity strategy is determined by the relative positions of all parties. Party A's larger ambiguity means that more of its ideological space overlaps the ideological space of Party B and C. Thus, using strategic ambiguity may be harmful as Party A may lose its ideological distinctiveness. Conversely, Party B presents the lower level of ambiguity, and despite being in the middle of two highly ambiguous parties, it is the most ideologically distinct party, as the ideological overlap is lower relative to the other two. To summarize, parties positioned further from one another can afford to become ambiguous and voters will still be able to distinguish them from their opponents.

³On average, we would expect lower ideological distinctiveness as more parties compete in the election, since the ideological space is bounded and more parties may crowd the space. But higher number of parties does not necessarily result in higher ideological overlap, as illustrated in panel 8 in which parties present a lower level of ambiguity. As a concrete example, we can compare the case of United States before polarization and Sweden. There is a much higher level of agreement of party placement across time of Swedish parties than there is for American parties (Granberg and Holmberg, 1988), so despite the American system having fewer parties, the multiparty system in Sweden has higher levels of ideological distinctiveness.

Ambiguity Limits Hypothesis: Ideological overlap shrinks the positive effect of ambiguity on party support.

Through what mechanism does the clarity of ideology shape the effect of ambiguity on vote choice? Our last hypothesis posits that the electoral connection is a result of the conditioning effect of ideological overlap and ambiguity on voters' perceived proximity to the parties. We utilize the concept of the party brand to elucidate the limitations of strategically employing ambiguity to increase support. Ambiguity is known to heighten voters' uncertainty, which subsequently influences their perception of the party's position. Parties may employ ambiguity as a strategic tool to obscure their ideological location, making them appear to be positioned closer to the voter. However, it is crucial to recognize that the ideologies of parties are defined in relation to one another. While a party may signal directly to a specific group of constituents or avoid a clear stance on an issue, voters also assess the party in relation to other parties.

Voters place value on the distinguishability of parties' ideologies, and they may be drawn to an ambiguous party as long as they can perceive clear ideological distinctions between parties. Conversely, when uncertainty is high, and parties are positioned relatively close to each other, their probability distributions of feasible points will overlap. Within these distributions, each point carries a probability that the party is located at that position. Consequently, it becomes increasingly likely that the voter perceives both parties as occupying the same ideological position due to the overlap. With a high level of overlap, it becomes challenging for the voter to distinguish between them ideologically. Conversely, when uncertainty is relatively low, voters can confidently determine the ideological position of parties because the distributions of feasible points are narrower. Therefore, whether ambiguity is appealing or off-putting to the voter hinges on the distinguishability of the parties' ideologies. Ultimately, the objective of employing ambiguity is to alter the voters' perceived distance to the party. If ambiguity is appealing to voters, they will perceive the party to be positioned closer. In contrast, if ambiguity is not desired, voters will perceive the party to be positioned farther away.

Perceived Distance Hypothesis: Ideological overlap shrinks the negative effect of

ambiguity on perceived distance.

To test these hypotheses we regress *perceived distance* (Model 1) or *party vote* (Model 2) on *ambiguity* (X_1), *ideological overlap* (X_2), their interaction (X_3), and a series of control variables. We present our empirical expectations in Table 1:

[Table 1 about here]

Research Design

Our empirical strategy explores the consequences of ambiguity. The data for 20 advanced democracies comes from the five modules of the Comparative Study of Electoral System (CSES) surveys (shown in Table 2). The CSES dataset provides the respondents' perceived party position of the main parties competing in the election for the period of 1996 to 2019, which will be the basis for the measures of ambiguity and overlap between parties.

[Table 2 about here]

To test these hypotheses, we created a voter choice-party dataset in which each respondent is matched to all parties competing in that election. We then generated two dependent variables: *perceived distance*, which is the absolute difference between the voter's self-placement and their placement of the party on the left-right scale, and *party vote*, which identifies whether the respondent voted for that party in that election. Table 3 provides summary statistics for these variables.

[Table 3 about here]

To test the *Ambiguity Hypothesis*, we rely on the party placement question from the CSES.⁴ We account for party-level ambiguity with two variables. The first variable – *brand dispersion* – measures the standard deviation of the difference between voters' perceived party position and the “true” position based on experts' judgments (CSES).

⁴“In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place [Party] on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right”?

Higher values on this measure of *ambiguity* reflect greater brand dispersion and mean that the party’s position is ambiguous.⁵ The second variable uses the agreement score, which is an algorithm that measures the distribution as an average of its ordered categories, weighted by the frequency that respondents place the party at that value (Van der Eijk, 2001). The agreement score varies from -1 to 1, and we invert the sign of the score so that a value of -1 means perfect agreement and 1 means perfect disagreement.⁶ We present empirical results using the first variable in this manuscript because it is more intuitive and describe the results from the *disagreement* model in the *Appendix*.⁷

We theorize that ideological overlap will have a negative effect on vote choice (*Ideological Overlap Hypothesis*) and that this conditions the value of strategic ambiguity (*Ambiguity Limits Hypothesis*). To measure ideological distinctiveness, we first generate a dyadic-respondent dataset where each party relates to every other party competing in an election per respondent. We then calculate the overlapping area of two probability density functions of respondents’ perceived positions. We call this variable *ideological overlap*, and it ranges from 0 to 1, where a 0 means that there is no overlap in the distribution of voters’ placements of that party and a 1 means perfect ideological overlap (Andeweg, 2012; Lupu and Warner, 2017).

$$\text{Ideological Overlap} = \sum_p \min\{f_1(p_1), f_2(p_2)\} \quad (1)$$

Equation 1 shows the calculation of *ideological overlap*, in which $f_1(p_1)$ and $f_2(p_2)$ are the probability density functions of the perceived positions of the focal party (p_1) and its closet neighbor (p_2).

We also control for two variables that are known to cause respondents to think the party is closer to (farther from) them than they actually are, also known as assimilation

⁵This measure is designed for measuring uncertainty at the voter level (Alvarez, 1998; Nasr, 2021), so we create a party-level measure by taking the standard deviation of those differences.

⁶This variable often appears in the literature and is called *perceptual disagreement* (Sommer-Topcu, 2015).

⁷The results from the two measurements of ambiguity are reasonably robust and the interactive relationships suggest that ideological distinctiveness moderates the impact of *ambiguity* on *perceived distance* and *party vote*. The results from the *disagreement* measure suggest that there is a smaller range of *ideological overlap* where pursuing an ideologically ambiguous strategy is electorally beneficial.

(contrast) effects. First, we control for the party identification of the respondent (*partisan*). This is coded 1 if the respondent feels closest to that party, and 0 otherwise. Partisans may project their position on the party they feel attached to (Aldrich and McKelvey, 1977; Merrill III, Grofman and Adams, 2001), and we expect this variable to negatively affect the perceived distance between the voter and party. Second, strong party affect – represented by a preference for the party that is driven by non-ideological reasons – has been shown to lead to closer perceived proximity than is deserved given the party’s and respondent’s actual positions (Nasr, 2021). We control for party affect by including the *likeability* score, which is based on an 11-point scale where the respondent places each party on a scale from “strongly dislike” (0) to “strongly like” (10). Finally, the actual proximity of the respondent to the party is likely to drive both their perceived proximity and their vote choice. In Model 1 we control for the absolute value of the actual distance of the respondent from the party (based on expert judgements from the CSES), or *actual distance*. When we predict vote choice (Model 2), we exchange the *actual distance* measure for the respondents’ perceptions of their own position relative to the parties’ position (*perceived distance*). We expect the actual distance from the party will be positively related to perceived distance (Model 1), perceived distance to positively influence the probability of voting for a party (Model 2), and that partisan identification and party affect will influence both outcomes in reasonable ways.

Results

We theorize that the credibility of parties’ ideological signals will be conditioned by the voters’ ability to clearly distinguish the ideologies of proximate parties. When *ideological overlap* is low we expect *ambiguity* to be negatively correlated to the perceived distance since voters will perceive parties as closer to them. This is not the case for parties that are difficult to distinguish ideologically, as *ambiguity* will increase the perceived distances of voters from parties. An implication is that the same relationship will result in *ambiguity* repelling voters.

[Table 4 about here]

In Table 4, we report two multilevel models with fixed effects at the survey level. In Model 1 we regress *perceived distance* on *ambiguity*, *ideological overlap*, and their interaction. In Model 2 we estimate a multilevel logit model on *party vote*, which is coded 1 if the respondent voted for that party, and 0 otherwise. If the *Perceived Distance Hypothesis* is correct, we expect to find that electoral ambiguity makes voters perceive the party to be closer to them if they are able to clearly distinguish between the parties. At high levels of *ideological overlap* a strategy of *ambiguity* is likely to increase the *perceived distance*. The results provide support for our conditional hypothesis as the interaction coefficient is positive (as expected) and statistically significant.⁸

[Figure 2 about here]

To analyze this relationship, we generate the marginal effect (Figure 2) of a standard deviation increase in *ambiguity* (0.41) on *perceived distance* across *ideological overlap* based on the results from Model 1. The solid line depicts the marginal effect of a one-standard deviation increase in *ambiguity*, the shaded region depicts the 95% confidence interval, and the rugplot shows the distribution of *ideological overlap*. Strategic ambiguity has a drastically different effect on perceived distance to the party depending on the ideological distributions of parties. At low levels of *ideological overlap*, *ambiguity* makes voters perceive parties as occupying positions closer to them; as *ideological overlap* increases beyond 0.59, the effect flips so that *ambiguity* increases the perceived distance between voters and parties. When a party employs ambiguity and the voter perceives the party as ideologically indistinguishable from its closest party, ambiguity repels the voter and they then perceive the party to be positioned farther. When the voter can clearly distinguish its ideology, ambiguity becomes attractive to the voter and they perceive the party to be positioned closer to them. Given that a value of 0.59 is in the 31st percentile, it is far more common for ambiguous messages to backfire on parties, causing voters to

⁸Given that some of the variables have small ranges (for example, *ideological overlap* ranges from 0.18 to 0.99), we depict the substantive effects based on standard deviation changes in the variables to provide more realistic effect sizes.

consider the parties as farther away. If we compare the size of the marginal effects at the minimum and maximum values of *ideological overlap* – an absolute effect size of about 0.2 – to the effects of other influential variables, we see that *ambiguity* has about half the effect that *actual distance* (0.39) and *partisan identification* (-0.38) have on *perceived distance*. When we consider that this is an aggregate-level measure that does not vary across respondents, we conclude that electoral ambiguity has a surprisingly large effect on *perceived distance*.

We next move on to the three remaining hypotheses, which provide our expectations for the effects of strategic ambiguity and ideological distinctiveness on vote choice (Model 2). To assess the conditional effects of strategic ambiguity and ideological distinctiveness on vote choice, we plot the marginal effect of a one-standard deviation increase in *ambiguity* (0.41) on the probability of voting for that party across *ideological overlap* in Figure 3.

[Figure 3 about here]

The results are consistent with the perceived distance results in Model 1 and suggest that electoral ambiguity has a high risk of backfiring if it is difficult for voters to distinguish between parties. Indeed, when voters can distinguish between parties – at low to moderate levels of *ideological overlap* – *ambiguity* has a positive effect on *party vote*. At moderately-high levels of *ideological overlap* – about 0.74, or the *ideological overlap* depicted in panel 1 of Figure 1 – this relationship changes so that *ambiguity* repels voters. This provides clear support for the *Ambiguity Limits Hypothesis*. At the minimum value of *ideological overlap*, an increase in *ambiguity* of one standard deviation increases the probability of voting for the party by 0.02, which is about a 12% increase over the average probability of *party vote*. The figures also show conditional support for the *Ambiguity Hypothesis* since the effect becomes negative if the ideological landscape is crowded (or beyond about the 61st percentile).

[Figure 4 about here]

In Figure 4 we show the marginal effect of a one-standard deviation increase in *ideological overlap* (0.16) on the probability of voting for that party across *ambiguity*. We find strong support for the *Ideological Overlap Hypothesis*, as *ideological overlap* reduces the probability of voting for party j at all levels of *ambiguity*.

When combined with the results from the *perceived distance* model, we conclude that whether ambiguity benefits parties largely depends on the particular context. It matters a great deal whether the parties have space between them to maneuver ideologically. In a crowded ideological landscape with high levels of *ideological overlap*, ambiguity will make voters perceive parties as farther from them ideologically which significantly lowers the probability of voting for that party. Moreover, the figures show that pursuing an ambiguous messaging strategy in a crowded ideological landscape is an especially costly electoral strategy.

While our theory is focused at the individual-level, an aggregate-level implication of the theory is that we should see similar constraining effects when looking at party vote share. In the *Appendix* we show that strategic ambiguity is generally rewarded at elections, with the exception of those instances when the ideologies of rival parties overlap. Indeed, roughly about 52% of the observations of *ideological overlap* fall above the 0.63 value, indicating that the strategy is not likely to be successful for a sizeable portion of the sample.

Conclusion

The electoral strategy of ideological ambiguity has limits that are imposed by the ideological landscape of the party system. Political parties devote ample time and resources to creating their brand. One of their main goals is to generate a brand that is easily associated with their world view, so parties can easily communicate to voters about their program and voters can easily compare parties. The parties define themselves relative to one another and these contrasts increase the credibility of the ideological message. Therefore, parties may strategically employ ambiguity to increase their vote share, but

only if they are able to operate within clear ideological neighborhoods (Budge, 1994).

We provide evidence at the individual and party levels that ambiguity is only a winning strategy when voters can clearly distinguish their ideological position. By offering ambiguous messages parties can manipulate the informative value of their brand, which creates uncertainty to the voter. When voters can distinguish the parties' ideological identity relative to one another, ambiguity becomes appealing and voters perceive the party to be positioned closer to them. On the other hand, too much similarity in ideological identity repels voters and the winning strategy shifts to providing voters a clear signal of where they stand. Thus, our results clearly demonstrate that ambiguity can only be a winning strategy if used correctly.

These findings cause us to revisit three prominent findings in the literature on party competition. First, the empirical conclusions of Somer-Topcu (2015) led to some striking implications of party behavior and representation overall. First, if parties are able to provide ambiguous messaging that causes voters to infer that the party is closer ideologically to them than they actually are, then what does this mean for the emergence of smaller parties? Parties typically emerge in response to ideological demands by voters that are not being met by the extant parties, but Somer-Topcu's (2015) conclusion suggests that mainstream parties might be able to prevent the emergence of those parties by making broad appeals. Yet the recent emergence of parties suggests that either this strategy is not the deterrent that we expect it to be, or there are other processes at work. Our study points to the latter possibility, as parties can only benefit from the broad-appeal strategy if they are clearly distinguishable from neighboring parties. This suggests that there is still ideological space for the new parties to exploit.

Second, this study provides a way to reconcile the opportunistic behaviors of parties with the requirements of the responsible party government (Adams 2001): if voters incorporate policy concerns or ideological positions in their vote choice, then strategic ambiguity threatens that balance because the input (vote choice) might not reflect the output (policy implementation). Alternatively, if parties are constrained by the desire to maintain ideological distance from other parties, then voters will still make the cor-

rect ideological decision even by voting for a party taking up an ambiguous position. Ideological distinctiveness appears to be the key to resolving these discrepancies.

Third, the need for ideological space between parties suggests that some types of parties are better suited for benefiting from the broad-appeal strategy. For example, (Bräuninger and Giger, 2018) find that ambiguous strategies are more prevalent at the ideological extremes than the ideological center. This also happens to correspond to ideological spaces that are less crowded. Our findings suggest that this is no accident; extreme parties have the freedom to provide more ambiguous messaging because the less crowded ideological space guarantees that it is easy to distinguish their positions from more moderate neighbors. Thus our theory provides an explanation for another empirical puzzle in the study of party competition.

Our findings of the clear limits to strategic ambiguity reveal several promising research avenues for scholars to explore. First, the literature on party competition argues that parties tend to respond to shifts of position of other parties (Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Williams and Whitten, 2015; Williams, Seki and Whitten, 2016). Increasing the level of ambiguity may affect other parties in their ideological neighborhood by making it difficult to distinguish between their positions. Maybe this is the reason parties move further from one another when, for example, the incumbent government has a poor performance in office (Williams and Whitten, 2015). Another possibility is that parties respond not only to shifts in the movement of competing parties, but also to the strategies used to convey ambiguous messages (Nasr, 2023). Second, these results may also have implications for the study of partisan responses to strategy, which argues that the level of attachment of partisans is a function of the uncertainty about its position and the level of ambiguity of political actors (Lupu, 2013; Nasr, 2021). Third, our illustrations reveal that in a situation where votes are based on proximity, ideological overlap suppresses party support, a pattern that is echoed in the empirical results. Of course, voters select parties based on an array of factors beyond proximity so voters who are unable to ideologically distinguish parties may still vote based on valence concerns (Bjarnoe, Adams and Boydston, 2023), party identification (Adams, 2001), economic performance (Williams and Whitten, 2015),

or any other combination. We hope that future scholars will explore the conditions under which ideological overlap ceases to be a net negative that should be avoided at all costs.

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Tables & Figures

Table 1: Empirical expectations

Hypothesis	Model	Variable	Expectation
Perceived Distance	1	<i>ambiguity</i> \times <i>ideological overlap</i>	$\beta_{X_3} > 0$
Ambiguity	2	<i>ambiguity</i>	$\beta_{X_1} + Z \times \beta_{X_3} > 0$
Ideological Overlap	2	<i>ideological overlap</i>	$\beta_{X_2} + Z \times \beta_{X_3} < 0$
Ambiguity Limits	2	<i>ambiguity</i> \times <i>ideological overlap</i>	$\beta_{X_3} < 0$

Table 2: List of countries and elections in the sample

	Country	Year
1	Australia	2004, 2007, 2013, 2019
2	Austria	2008, 2013, 2017
3	Belgium	1999, 2003
4	Canada	1997, 2004, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019
5	Denmark	1998, 2001, 2007
6	Finland	2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019
7	France	2002, 2007, 2012
8	Germany	1998, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017
9	Iceland	1999, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2013, 2016, 2017
10	Ireland	2002, 2007, 2011, 2016
11	Israel	1996, 2003, 2006, 2013
12	Netherlands	1998, 2002, 2006, 2010
13	New Zealand	1996, 2002, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
14	Norway	1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017
15	Portugal	2002, 2005, 2009, 2015, 2019
16	Spain	1996, 2000, 2004, 2008
17	Sweden	1998, 2002, 2006, 2014, 2018
18	Switzerland	1999, 2003, 2007, 2011
19	United Kingdom	2015, 2017
20	United States	2004, 2008, 2012, 2016

Table 3: Summary statistics

	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
Party Vote	0.16	0.37	0	1
Perceived Distance	2.78	2.39	0	10
Ideological Overlap	0.66	0.16	0.18	0.99
Ambiguity	2.01	0.41	1.20	3.89
Partisan	0.10	0.30	0	1
Likeability	4.72	2.88	0	10

Table 4: Multilevel analysis of the interactive effects of *ambiguity* and *ideological overlap* on *perceived distance* (Model 1) and *party vote* (Model 2)

	Model 1	Model 2
Ambiguity	-0.68*** (0.04)	1.81*** (0.12)
Ideological Overlap	-2.98*** (0.12)	3.04*** (0.29)
Ambiguity × Ideological Overlap	1.15*** (0.06)	-2.41*** (0.16)
Partisan	-0.39*** (0.01)	2.59*** (0.02)
Likeability	-0.44*** (0.00)	0.70*** (0.00)
Actual Distance	0.26*** (0.00)	
Perceived Distance		-0.34*** (0.01)
Intercept	6.43*** (0.09)	-8.61*** (0.23)
AIC	1727059.61	125728.79
BIC	1727157.97	125813.86
Log Likelihood	-863520.81	-62856.39
Num. obs.	411904	306659
Num. groups: ccses	125	102
Var: ccses (Intercept)	0.19	0.81
Var: Residual	3.87	

Note: dependent variable is absolute distance of self placement to the party's placement (Model 1) and vote for party j (Model 2).

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

Figure 1: Illustrations of ambiguity and ideological overlap across party landscapes

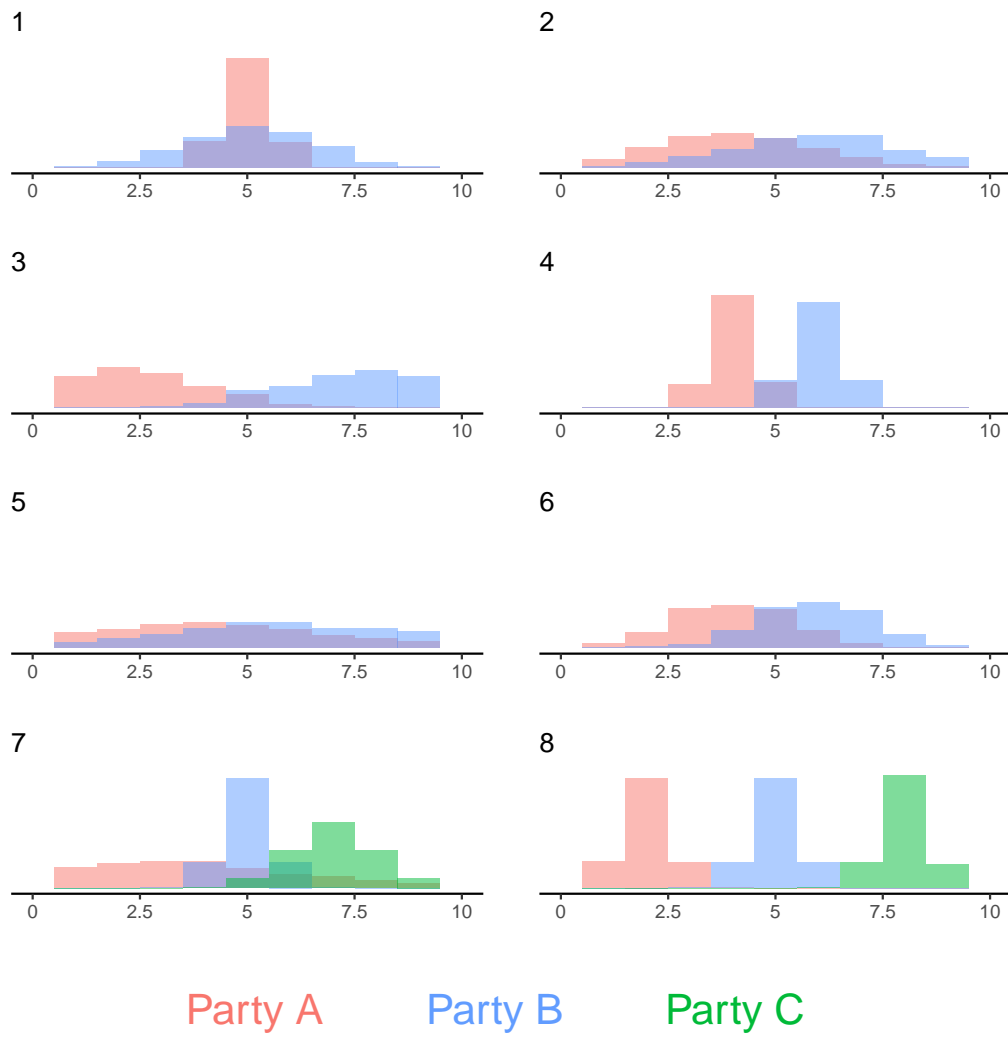


Figure 2: Marginal effect of *ambiguity* on *perceived distance* across *ideological overlap* (Model 1)

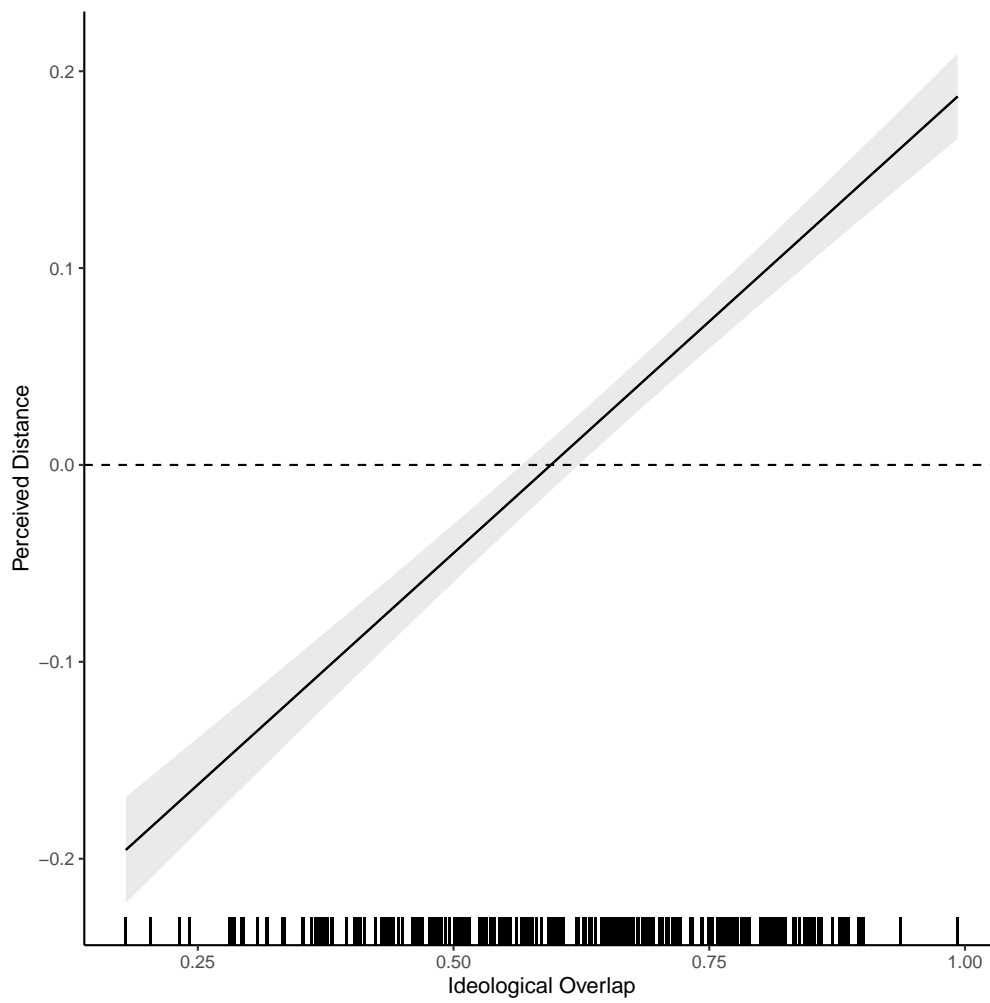


Figure 3: Marginal effect of *ambiguity* on *party vote* across *ideological overlap* (Model 2)

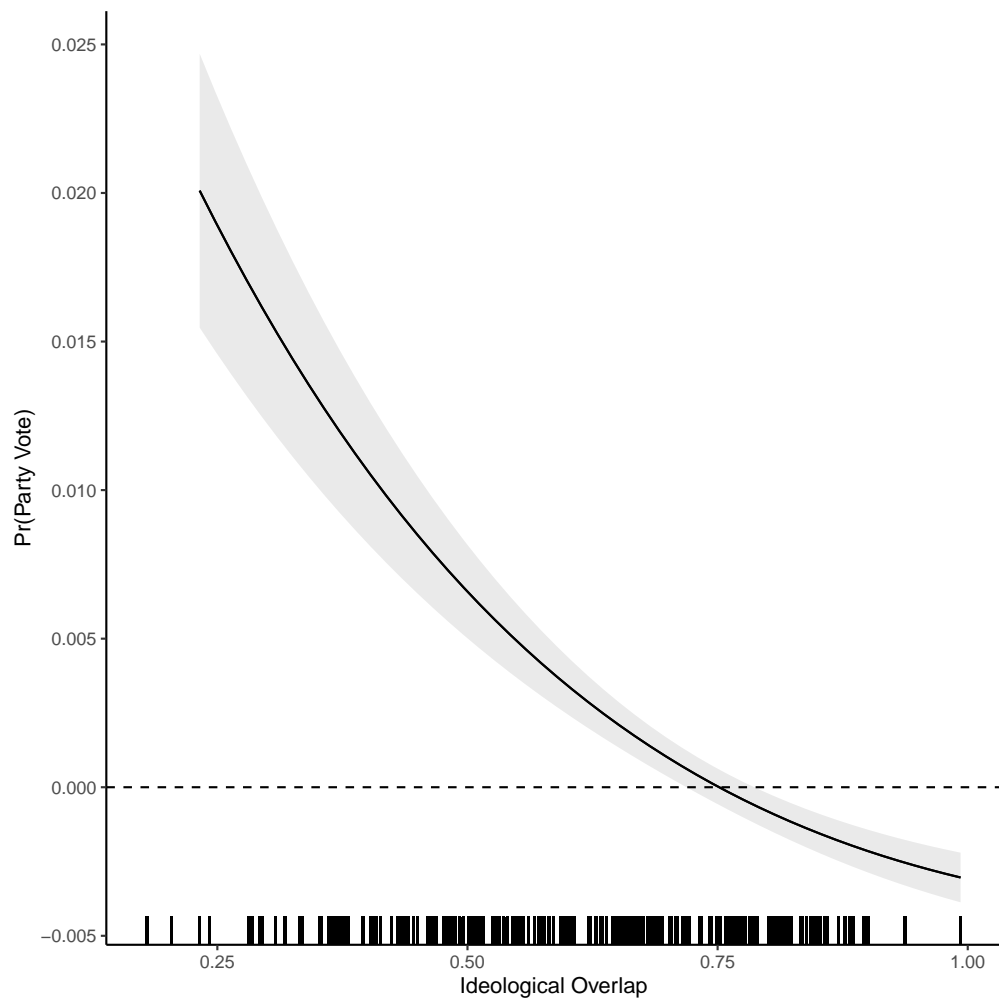


Figure 4: Marginal effect of *ideological overlap* on *party vote* across *ambiguity* (Model 2)

