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# **Do Voters Learn? Evidence that Voters Respond Accurately to Changes in Political Parties' Policy Positions**

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**Abstract.** A premise of the mass-elite linkage at the heart of representative democracy is that voters notice changes in political parties' policy positions and update their party perceptions accordingly. However, recent studies question the ability of voters to accurately perceive changes in parties' positions. We advance this literature with a two-wave panel survey design which measured voters' perception of party positions before and after a major policy shift by parties in the government coalition in Denmark 2011-2013. We report two key findings that extend previous work: First, in our case voters do indeed pay attention to parties when they visibly change policy position. Second, voters update their perceptions of the party positions much more accurately than would have been expected if they merely relied on a 'coalition heuristic' as a rule-of-thumb. Our findings imply that voters under some conditions are better able to make meaningful political choices than previous work suggests.

**Keywords:** mass-elite linkage, political parties, voter perceptions, policy positions, heuristics.

A basic premise of representative democracy is that citizens can form and express their preferences for which public policies they want government to pursue, vote for the candidates on offer that they think best advance their preferences, and that elected representatives, in turn, respond to these public preferences (Dahl 1989; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Thus, voters hand representatives the authority to make binding decisions for society. For these decisions to be meaningful, voters are expected to make informed choices that give the elected a mandate to make policy.

However, scholars have fundamentally questioned the ability of voters to fulfill these requirements, raising doubts about the competence of citizens to participate in representative democracy. In particular, empirical research has found that citizens only to a limited extent respond to changes in the policy positions of political parties. In a careful review of existing studies, Adams (2012: 412) concludes: “There is only weak and inconsistent empirical evidence that citizens in multiparty systems systematically react to parties’ policy shift”. This is surprising given the extensive evidence that political parties in multiparty systems consistently adjust their policy promises in response to shifts in citizens’ policy preferences (Adams 2012: 412). Such changes, thus, suggest that parties adjust their policy positions in the belief that voters do care. Moreover, a number of studies find that the content of campaign platforms contributes to explaining electoral support (Adams *et al.* 2006; Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009). Apparently, voters adjust party support but not their perceptions of parties’ policy positions. In this light, the evidence that voters do not update their perceptions of parties’ policy images represents in the words of Adams (2012: 412) “an important puzzle in the study of mass-elite policy linkages”.

More recently, studies have suggested that voters’ failure to respond to shifts in party positions is due to difficulties comprehending such shifts. Instead, what voters do is to use simple decision-rules, called heuristics, to deduce changes in parties’ positions. From this

point of view, voters are capable only of processing easily accessible and digestible information about coalition formation and then use basic rules-of-thumb to deduce party positions, such as inferring that the policy positions of junior parties in a government coalition must move toward the position of the prime minister party (Adams *et al.* 2015; Fortunato and Adams 2015; Fortunato and Stevenson 2013).

In this study, we build on and extend these findings. We make two key contributions: First, we demonstrate in contrast to Adams *et al.* (2011) that voters do pay attention to parties when they visibly change position, at least in the case under investigation here. Second, we demonstrate in contrast to the emerging emphasis on heuristics that in our case voters adjust their perceptions accurately, i.e. voters do not employ the coalition heuristic to update their perceptions of the parties' policy positions. Accordingly, our study offers an important extension of the current literature as we illuminate conditions under which voters neither ignore party policy shifts nor simply rely on the coalition heuristic to form perceptions of party positions.

We suggest that existing results may, in part, be a product of the analytical strategy. Rather than looking at actual instances of visible changes by the parties, existing work has mainly looked at patterns of voter perception adjustment to changes in party manifestos across time and countries. A major part of our contribution lies in our choice of a different analytical strategy. Thus, we study voters' reaction exactly to such a real-world instance of a highly visible change by the parties. Whereas voters may not read and stay tuned to party manifestos, it would be bad news for representative democracy if they did not respond to actual instances of major changes by the parties.

We report results from a unique two-wave panel survey with measures of voters' perception of the parties' positions before and after a major change by the parties. Panel data

is a considerable improvement to the cross-sectional data used in previous scholarship because it allows measuring accurately whether voters actually respond to parties by studying the same respondents over time. As a further advantage of our study, we focus on a classic multiparty system, Denmark, with eight parties represented in parliament at the time of our study. Unlike in studies of two-party systems, this allows us to examine the extent to which voters can keep parties apart. Specifically, since the Prime Minister (PM) party was among those changing its position, we are able to investigate the coalition heuristic hypothesis which would expect voter perceptions for all government parties to coalesce around that of the PM party. In contrast to the prediction from previous work, we demonstrate that voters exactly update perceptions of the parties that moved – including the PM party – but not of a third, small party in government that stayed put. Hence, our study provides reasons to be optimistic about representative democracy. In the case we study, voters turn out to be much more aware of parties' shift in policy positions and much better at updating their perceptions than previous studies have found.

### **What We Know About How Voter Perceptions Respond to Shifting Party Positions**

Representative democracy rests on the premise that voters make meaningful vote choices, i.e. that they know both their own and each party's policy preferences across issues and are able to bring this together and vote for the party that best represents their interests (cf., e.g., Downs 1957; Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989). However, despite the importance of citizens knowing the policy positions of the political parties for their ability to reach meaningful voting decisions (cf. also the discussion in Stokes 1963), we have only limited empirical knowledge about actual effects of shifts in party positions on voters' updating of their perceptions of parties' policy positions.

The recent study by Adams *et al.* (2011) constitutes the main cross-national study of this question. The authors report, somewhat depressingly, that voters do not listen to parties. When parties alter the content of their manifestos, voters do not systematically notice and update their perceptions of the parties accordingly. In addition to a few single-country studies (Adams, De Vries, and Leiter 2012; Adams, Green, and Milazzo 2012; Green 2007), this comprises the main systematic evidence on the extent to which voters update their perception of parties' policy positions in response to party shifts. With its alarming message, the study by Adams *et al.* (2011) sparked a surge in scholarly attention to voters' perceptions of parties. Indeed, subsequent studies have yielded a number of important insights. Yet, as we will emphasize, this line of work still leaves a lot to be examined.

Thus, several strands of literature suggest that voters pay at least some attention to at least some party behaviors. First, in a follow up study focused more narrowly on the policy issue of European integration, Adams *et al.* (2014) find more optimistically that voters do not read manifestos, but nevertheless adjust their perception of parties' policy positions in light of the wider information environment. When experts change perceptions of parties, citizens move in the same direction. Furthermore, Fernandez-Vazquez (2014) has re-analyzed the connection between election manifestos and voters' perceptions of parties left-right position from Adams *et al.* (2011), and shown that by controlling for voters' existing perceptions, updating becomes more visible (also see Busch 2016).

Second, studies from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Adams, De Vries, and Leiter 2012; Adams, Green, and Milazzo 2012) show that voters in these countries have dramatically changed their perceptions of the policy positions of the major right- and left-wing parties over the course of the 1980s and '90s. The changed perceptions are described as the outcome of the parties' depolarization during the period analyzed although the causal effects remain unclear due to reliance on different cross-sectional studies covering large spans

of time (Fiorina *et al.* 2016). These studies are related to the debate about the extent of party and voter polarization in the United States where studies have shown similar tendencies for voters to change their perceptions of parties' positions over longer time periods (Layman and Carsey 2002; Carsey and Layman 2006). Although the various studies disagree about the extent to which all parts of the electorate perceive parties as changing (to the same extent), the message from this line of work is that voters may actually be paying attention to the parties' action at least over the long run.

As noted, Fortunato and Stevenson (2013) have a third take on the weak or potentially absent responsiveness identified by Adams *et al.* (2011). The authors hold that too high demands are put on citizens' interest in and ability to sophisticatedly observe and update parties' policy positions. Instead, they show that citizens use easily accessible information and apply simple heuristics. Controlling for the effect of the location of a party as expressed through its party manifesto, the authors show that across Western European parliamentary systems with multiple parties, citizens notice when a governing coalition is formed after an election, and automatically perceive the participating parties to be located more closely together. Fortunato and Adams (2015) suggest and provide empirical support for an alternative version of such a coalition heuristic by which voters reason that junior coalition partners have to accommodate the larger PM-party to enter a coalition, and voters hence use the location of the PM-party to map the position of the junior partner. Again, this applies even when controlling for parties' actual announcements in their election manifestos. Meyer and Strobl (2016) have elaborated on these findings by showing that other simple decision-rules may be at play as voters tend to place the coalition closer to their preferred party in the coalition. Although such heuristics may seem a cost-efficient way for voters to form perceptions of the parties, Adams *et al.* (2015) reveal that they often lead voters astray and make them draw inferences about parties' position changes from joining a government coalition that divert from both the content of the

parties' manifestos and expert judgments. Being that as it may, also this line of work suggests that voters may be paying attention to what parties say and do (although perhaps in an unhelpful way).

This possibility that voters do notice the policy behavior of parties is supported by evidence from research on perceptions of other types of party policy positions. Thus, a series of studies on voter responsiveness document that voters adjust their policy preferences in response to parties' policy changes to the status quo. This responsiveness works thermostatically; when voters express a preference for more spending on an issue and the incumbent party honors this request, voters subsequently ask for less (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Wlezien 1995). Hence, this body of research suggests that voters do observe and respond to party action. Similarly, in the literature on issue ownership, a growing number of studies demonstrate that parties' reputation for issue-handling competence in the eyes of the electorate changes in light of how much priority the parties put on an issue. When parties talk more about an issue, voters see a stronger connection between the party and that issue (Egan 2013; Stubager and Slothuus 2013). Again, voters do seem to listen and respond to parties, at least when it comes to issue ownership.

In sum, both the varying results from studies of the relationship between, on the one hand, what parties say and do and, on the other hand, voters' perceptions of their policy positions as well as the results from research on other types of party perceptions give reasons to further examine if voters update their perceptions of parties' policy position in light of parties' positional changes. Thus, if we hone in on the studies focusing directly on voters' perceptions of parties' policy positions, we see a number of unanswered questions. First, it appears that, as suggested by Adams (2012, 413), voters may not be paying attention to what parties *say*, e.g., in their manifestos, but rather to what they *do* in the form of changing their actual policies and/or joining government coalitions. This conjecture is supported by the



observation that most of the studies reviewed above show that changes in voter perceptions of parties are based on some form of party behavior – not merely declarations, e.g., in manifestos.

However, even if one were to accept this conjecture (which we cannot test here, although see the concluding discussion), the evidence for voter updating of perceptions of party policy positions and the process underlying such updating suffers from serious methodological problems. Although the studies are, in many cases, based on impressive amounts of data spanning several years and countries, all of this data is cross-sectional in nature. This constitutes an obvious problem for causal inference. First, it does not permit an evaluation of how given individuals may or may not change their perceptions of the parties over time. Second, because the studies rely on election study data the individual data sets are separated by several years. This reduces the possibilities for credibly linking changes in voter perceptions to party behavior since the large time spans mean that many other factors (such as, e.g., changes in objective social conditions or the content of media reporting) may also be causing voters to change their perceptions of the parties' positions.

In addition to these problems, testing the coalition heuristic hypothesis – arguing that voters will infer the positions of junior coalition partners from that of the PM party – presents challenges of its own. To convincingly demonstrate that voters use this heuristic, thus, requires a setting where the PM party, but not the junior partner, credibly and visibly changes its position. For the hypothesis to be supported we should, in such a situation, observe that voters perceive the junior partner, but not the PM party, as changing position – i.e., the opposite of what actually took place. Such settings, and indeed the closely spaced panel data required to overcome the causal inference problems discussed, are rare. This may be the reason why previous studies have not employed such a design. Recent developments in Danish party politics do, however, afford exactly the setting required and, as explained below,

this is what we have taken advantage of in our analytical design. We are thus able to extend existing results by exploring a case where voters might in fact respond to a shift in parties' policy positions and where they cannot just be relying on the coalition heuristic.

## **Research Design**

To investigate the extent to which voters notice major shifts in parties' policy positions and update their perceptions of the parties accordingly, we rely on a research design with two main features. First, we use a two-wave panel survey collected before and after a major, very visible policy shift to gauge the extent to which voters noticed the parties' policy shifts and updated their perceptions of party positions accordingly. Second, as we will describe, the shift in policy position was made by the PM party but not by all parties in the government coalition, hence allowing us to test if voters just responded by relying on the coalition heuristic.

### The Case: Shifting Party Positions in Denmark 2011-13

At the 2011-election, the Liberals and the Conservatives who had been in office for ten years supported by the Danish People's Party (DPP) and the Liberal Alliance (LA) lost power and the Social Democrats (SD), the Socialist People's Party (SPP), and the Social Liberals (SL) formed a new coalition government supported by the Red-Green Alliance (R-G). In the coalition, the SD was by far the largest party with 24.8 percent of the votes, whereas the junior partners, the SL and SPP, received 9.5 and 9.2 per cent of the votes, respectively. On the general left-right continuum as well as on the question of redistribution, the SD is placed between the two junior partners. This is reflected in the voters' placements, in our 2011

survey, of the parties on the left-right scale where the SPP is placed at 0.26, the SD at 0.38, and the SL at 0.53 on a 0-1 scale where 1 is the rightmost position (see Table 1 below). The SL has traditionally, and also after the 2011-election, played the role as the pivotal party deciding whether the left or right should govern.

The period around the 2011-election is relevant for our purpose because the SD and SPP changed position on the highly salient issue of redistribution in connection with two high-profile reforms implemented in the wake of the financial crisis. The first of these was the so-called 'Recovery Package' (*'Genopretningspakken'*) passed in May 2010 by the Liberal-Conservative government together with the DPP, LA – and the SL – to restore the Danish economy and public finances (The Danish Government, 2010). Most importantly, the reform, worth €3.2 billion, involved a reduction in the entitlement to unemployment benefits from four to two years, an increase in the period of work required to qualify for unemployment benefits from 6 to 12 months, and a planned reduction in the tax rate for high incomes in 2014.

The second reform was the so-called 'Retirement Reform' (*'Tilbagetrækningsreformen'*) which was agreed between the Liberal-Conservative government, the DPP, LA – and the SL – in May 2011 (The Danish Government, 2011a). The agreement was reached six months before the election (that had to come no later than November 2011) which meant that it would have to be passed into law after the election. The agreement basically moved forward by five years retrenchment measures already passed into law in the 2006 welfare reform. Hence, the early retirement program and the universal pension scheme would be severely retrenched already starting from 2014 and 2019 respectively.

Before the 2011-election, the SD and SPP were firmly against both of these reforms (Thorning-Schmidt 2010). The SPP put it clearly in their election manifesto: “The SPP will fight with all the muscle provided us by the Danes to prevent the bourgeois agreement to degrade the early retirement scheme”. Likewise, the SD announced in their 2011-manifesto that they would “fight to protect the early retirement scheme”. Moreover, the united position of the SD and SPP was made very clear to the electorate as the parties launched a shared election program – ‘Fair Solution 2020’ – which was presented as a direct alternative to the policies of the Liberal-Conservative government. In this program, the two parties proposed to introduce a ‘millionaire tax’ on the highest incomes, to increase the work week by one hour through a collective agreement on the Danish labor market, and to invest €1.33 billion in construction and maintenance of public schools, hospitals etc. to increase demand for labor. In stark contrast to the SD and SPP, the SL presented a 2020-plan for the economy in its 2011-manifesto which included support for the two reforms of labor market retirement and unemployment entitlements launched by the Liberal-Conservative government as well as pledges to cut the income tax. Despite these differences, the three parties all intended to support the chairman of the SD as Prime Minister after the election.

The policy change by the SD and SPP became visible immediately following the election in September 2011. Thus, in accordance with their declarations before the election the two parties entered into protracted coalition negotiations with the SL. During the negotiations, the SL, by threatening to stay out of the government thereby being free to strike deals with the right-of-center parties, forced the two other parties to accept its economic policies. The agreement was codified in a common declaration about the policies of their new government which summed up the negotiation result in the statement that “The point of departure for the government is the Liberal-Conservative government’s economic policy in

the widest sense including the Recovery Package and the agreements from the Spring including the Retirement Reform.” (The Danish Government, 2011b: 9).

The very foundation of the economic policies of the incoming government, in other words, would be exactly the two reforms so strongly opposed by the SD and SPP prior to the election. In accordance with the agreement, the newly formed government did not cancel the cutback in unemployment insurance and together with the Liberals and the Conservatives it passed a tax reform in June 2012 to implement the cut planned by the previous government in the tax rate for the highest incomes estimated to reduce the marginal tax by 14 percentage points for 275,000 high earners. As for the Retirement Reform, the government put the agreement into law in December 2011. On both counts, the SD and SPP did exactly the opposite of what they had promised prior to the election. All of these major events, naturally, received intense media coverage and both the SD and SPP suffered substantial losses in the opinion polls tracking voting intention (Bille 2011, 2012, 2013).

Later in 2012 and 2013, the government adopted three remedy-measures<sup>i</sup> to help the group of unemployed that were most severely affected by the reforms, namely those that had been outside the labor market for two years and hence would fall out of the benefit system due to the new rules. The government took these steps as it emerged that the initial reform rested on false assumptions by which the size of this group of particularly vulnerable unemployed had been seriously underestimated. Importantly though, none of the measures changed the entitlements, and even though they alleviated the very urgent problem, they did not come any close to rolling back the reforms that were agreed before the 2011-election. The end result, thus, was clearly less redistributive than the SD and SPP had promised.

Hence, this case seems ideal to test if voters respond to parties' policy changes as well as the extent to which they use the coalition heuristic to place the parties on issues. It is ideal

for two reasons. First, the policy changes by the SD and SPP were very clear and visible; they should, in other words, be noticed by the voters. Second, we can generate very specific expectations about how voters should react to the changes: Two coalition parties definitely moved on the specific issue, while the third coalition partner kept its position. If voters accurately respond to parties' policy shifts, we should see that the SPP and SD are perceived to have changed position on redistribution while voters should perceive that the SL got what they wanted on redistribution in the coalition negotiations as well as afterwards and therefore did not change policy position. At the same time, the case allows us to test voters' use of the coalition heuristic to position the parties. Based on the heuristic, thus, we should expect voters to change their perceptions of the position of the SL and SPP towards that of the PM party, i.e. the SD which is, furthermore, placed between the two junior partners, thereby constituting the natural point of coalescence. In this way, the case allows us to test both whether voters pay attention to parties' policy changes and how.

### Measuring Voter Perception of Shifts in Party Positions

To reap the analytical benefits of case, however, we need closely spaced individual level panel data collected before and after the policy change of the parties. Panel data, thus, has the advantage of ruling out any influence of using different subjects that may potentially affect comparisons of cross-sectional data. Fortunately, we have been able to collect such data as a supplement to the 2011 Danish National Election Study (DNES). This survey contains 2,078 respondents and was collected by a combination of face-to-face and online interviews conducted in the period September-December 2011. This high-quality survey had a response rate of 59.2 and is generally representative of the Danish electorate (Stubager *et al.* 2012). With the election study serving as the first panel wave, we took advantage of the fact that

1,604 respondents had agreed to provide their email address. These respondents were contacted in September 2013 and over the course of this and the following month 533 of them completed the second panel wave.

The timing of the two waves of our study was such that the full effects of the policy changes of the SD and SPP had time to manifest themselves among voters. This was driven by a continued high level of public attention to the two reforms, in particular to the effects of the shortening of the unemployment benefits coverage period from four to two years. Through 2013, thus, the media were full of reports about unemployed persons who were about to lose their benefits. This situation put the government under continued pressure and prompted it to implement the various remedy-measures discussed; none of which solved the fundamental problem, however. Yet, the panel waves are not so far apart that other policy issues had the chance to take over the agenda thereby possibly influencing voter perceptions of the parties' positions. The discussion of the different aspects of the issue of redistribution was the dominant theme of public debate during the two years covered by our study. If we observe any changes in voter perceptions, therefore, we are confident in attributing them to the parties' policy changes.

Whereas the respondents in the national election survey were representative of the electorate, the subgroup that constitutes the panel is much more selective. To assess the extent to which the representativeness of the panel mirrors that of the DNES, we compare the distributions on key variables in Table 1. The table reveals that there are no or only minor differences on gender and age just as there are no systematic political differences between respondents in the full DNES compared to the panel. However, the respondents in the panel are better educated and earn a bit more than respondents in the full DNES just as they have a higher level of political awareness (0.71 vs. 0.46 on a 0-1 scale).<sup>ii</sup> Given that the panel was voluntarily recruited among the respondents of the DNES, it is not entirely surprising that the

politically engaged are more inclined sign up. However, it implies that we have to take political awareness into account in our analysis. To do so, we conducted separate analyses for respondents with high and low levels of political awareness (split at the mean of the DNES sample, i.e. 0.46).

[Table 1]

In each panel wave, respondents have been asked the exact same questions about where they would locate all of the parties in parliament on taxes, (in-)equality, representation of the lowest income groups as well as on the general left-right scale. We use these first three items as issue-specific indicators of the parties' positions on redistribution in addition to the general left-right scale. For comparison, all variables have been rescaled to 0-1 with 1 being the rightmost position. The question wordings were as follows:

Taxes: "The parties discuss what to do with taxes on high incomes. Some parties want to raise taxes on high income, while others want to reduce them. On this scale, 1 stands for lowering taxes on high incomes while 5 stands for increasing taxes on high incomes, Where about would you place [party]?"

(In-)equality: "Some parties support a high degree of equality while others believe that inequality is necessary to create a dynamic society. On this scale, 1 stands for those who are most in favor of extensive equality and 5 stands for those who are most in favor of accepting that inequality is necessary to create dynamics. Where about would you place [party]?"

Representation of the lowest income groups: "Now I would like to ask which party you think best represents specific groups. Which party best represents the lowest income groups.<sup>iii</sup>



Overall ideological position: “In politics one often talks about left and right. Where would you place [party] on this scale? 0-10 scale with 0 labeled ‘Left’ and 10 labeled ‘Right’.

For each of these questions, we compare the average perceived positions of each party in 2011 and 2013. Our focus is on the degree to which any changes in these perceptions match the expectations set out above. We first look at all respondents in the panel before splitting on political awareness.

## **Empirical Results**

How did voters respond to the shift by SD and SPP on the issue of redistribution? Did voters perceive the changed party positions? Table 2 reports perceived party positions on all of our three specific indicators as well as on the general left-right position before and after the parties’ policy shifts. The results show that voters clearly noticed the changing party positions. This is evident in almost exactly the same way for voters’ perceptions of the parties on taxes, (in-)equality, and representation of the lowest income groups. The perceived change is strongest on taxes, where the SD, as reported in Table 2, increases by 0.13 point on the 0-1 scale, i.e. is seen to move in the rightist direction of reducing taxes. The SPP is seen as moving 0.06 points in the same direction. In contrast, perceptions of the position of the SL are virtually unchanged.

A similarly statistically significant change in the perceptions of the positions of the SD and SPP took place for representation of the lowest income groups.<sup>iv</sup> Thus, the proportion perceiving the SD at the best representative of the lowest income groups drops from 26% to only 15% and for the SPP the drop is from 20% to 12%. And again the SL is not seen as moving. Turning to (in-)equality, the SD and SPP are, paralleling results on the two other

issues, viewed as promoting a more pro-inequality position and this change is also statistically significant. In contrast to what we find on the other indicators, here the SL are also perceived by our respondents to have moved, and the change is in the same rightward direction and as marked as that of the SD and SPP. However, this is the only instance in which the SL are seen to have moved.

Furthermore, the changes in the perceptions of the positions of the SPP and SD towards a more right-wing stance on the three specific indicators appear to be reflected in a similar change on the general left-right dimension.<sup>v</sup> This change is also statistically significant. With insufficient time-points, we are, however, unable to examine whether the changes on the specific indicators drive the change in the general ideological position, or if it is the other way around. It is worth noticing, finally, that these distinct changes perceived for the SD and SPP are not part of a broader displacement across the range of parties. Apart from the DPP on two indicators and the Liberals and the Red-Green Alliance on one each, none of the other parties are seen by the respondents as changing their positions on our indicators of the redistribution issue, that is.<sup>vi</sup>

[Table 2]

In relation to the theoretical discussion and the expectations arising therefrom, we should note two points. First, not only do voters seem to notice the policy shifts by the SD and SPP, we even see a rather fine-grained response by voters. Second, the changes perceived do not fit the predictions based on the coalition heuristic according to which voters' project the PM party's position onto the junior partner(s) (Fortunato and Adams 2015). If that were the case, the SPP and SL should be seen as changing towards the position of the SD while the latter should not be seen as changing. In agreement with the actual policy shifts of the parties, we find the almost opposite pattern where the PM party is perceived to move towards the

position of one of the junior partners, the SL. Since the SD was (and continue to be) placed between the two smaller partners in the policy space, the observations are also at odds with the alternative version of the coalition heuristic according to which voter's should perceive the policy positions of the coalition partners to have coalesced due to the compromises inherent to coalition governance. Our results suggest an asymmetrical response which is in accurate accordance with the actual changes of the parties. In sum, voters respond to parties' policy shifts – and that in a much more sophisticated way than should have been expected based on the existing literature.

#### Changes in Perceived Party Positions by Political Awareness

How generalizable are our findings? The comparison of the respondents in our panel to the entire DNES on key background variables revealed that political awareness is markedly higher in the panel than in the election study (0.71 against 0.46 on the 0-1 scale). This raises the possibility that our results are driven by the preponderance of highly aware respondents in our panel data since such respondents may be expected to pay more attention to party behavior. It might be, thus, that only the most politically aware voters update their perceptions of the parties' positions (Zaller 1992).<sup>vii</sup> If this is the case, our findings would reveal that *some* voters are indeed capable of accurately learning new party positions but this behavior would be confined to only a segment of the electorate.

To shed light on this possibility, we rerun our analysis for subsets of high and low political awareness respondents. As noted, we have split the respondents at the mean level of awareness in the entire DNES sample, i.e. 0.46. This means that 21.6 per cent of the panel (or 115 respondents) fall in the group of less politically aware which has an average political awareness score of 0.27 (S.D. = 0.15) compared to an average of 0.83 (S.D. = 0.16) among

the more politically aware 78.4 per cent of our panel respondents.<sup>viii</sup> The results of this analysis are reported in Table 3 which shows not only the changes in the party perceptions from 2011-2013 on each indicator for the two groups with low and high political awareness but also the absolute differences in the changes for each group.

[Table 3]

The results clearly show that the shifts in parties' policy positions are noticed across levels of political awareness. Thus, it is not only the most politically aware that respond to the policy changes of the SD and SPP by updating their perceptions of the positions of these parties – and not those of the other parties, including the third coalition party, the SL. Rather, in many instances, the perceived position changes of the SD and SPP are just as large or even larger among the less politically aware than among the more politically aware. Moreover, the lack of statistical significance among the less politically aware of some perceived changes of the SD and SPP is at least partly due to the small number of respondents in this group which increases the standard errors.

The similarity of responses among the less and the more politically aware is further corroborated by the results in the “Absolute difference: low vs. high” rows comparing the magnitude of changes among the less and the more politically aware. Only in rare cases are responses significantly different between the two groups, with the most notable exception being the perception of who is representing the lowest income groups where the largest changes in perceptions occurred among the less politically aware.

That we find evidence of widespread political learning of the changing party positions across the electorate should not be surprising. Indeed, taking the intensive political debate and media coverage of these policy shifts following the 2011 election into account, it makes sense

that even the less politically aware noticed what was going on and adjusted their perception of the parties' positions accordingly (cf. Zaller 1992).

## **Discussion and Implications**

This paper contributes important new evidence to the proliferating body of research on voter perceptions of changes in the policy positions of political parties. Whereas extant research has suggested that voters are struggling to comprehend and process information about party behavior, if they pay attention at all, and use instead simple heuristics to update their perceptions of parties' policy positions, we provide evidence indicating the contrary. After the Danish 2011-election where the SD and SPP departed from central election promises to form a coalition with the pivotal SL, voters were perfectly able to accurately update their perceptions of the two former parties' changed policy positions. In the eyes of the voters, thus, the SD and SPP moved substantially towards the SL on the important issue of redistribution.

Crucially, these updated perceptions did not conform to expectations based on the coalition heuristic in the sense that the large PM party, the SD, was seen as moving away from its position. Not only did voters not use the PM party's position as a heuristic to place the two junior partners, they also did not merely see the positions of the three coalition partners as converging around their natural average which would have been the position of the SD (placed as it is between the two junior partners). The updating was, finally, not confined to the politically most aware subset of the electorate. Both high and low awareness voters changed their perceptions of the parties' positions, that is. In other words, our study suggests that voters are fully capable of observing parties' behavior and adjusting their perceptions of them accordingly.

To reach this conclusion, we rely on a two-wave panel survey with the waves timed to allow effects of the position changes to manifest themselves while simultaneously preventing other events or actions from confounding the relationship. Whereas previous work has mainly relied on cross-sectional data combined with coding of election manifestos, our research design permits more solid causal inferences since the panel design controls away large amounts of confounding individual-level variation just as the timing of the panel waves minimizes the influence of confounding events.

While our study gives cause for somewhat more optimism on behalf of representative democracy, it is also clear that a case study like the one reported here leaves open some questions. One of these pertains to the kind of information voters react to when updating their perceptions of parties' positions. As noted above, most of the studies (e.g., Adams, De Vries, and Leiter 2012; Adams, Green, and Milazzo 2012) that have shown voter perception updating in one form or the other have linked the updating to party behavior while the studies not finding updating have focused on the impact of what parties say, e.g., in their manifestos (e.g., Adams *et al.* 2011). This seems to suggest that while citizens may not be listening, they are watching. In part contrast, our study shows that voters may react at least to a combination of parties' words and deeds. Thus, it was the strong contrast between what the SD and SPP said before the election and what they did afterwards that made their policy change so visible. Voters may, it seems, be listening somewhat more to parties than previous studies suggest. A firmer conclusion will, however, have to await further research.

For two reasons we cannot rule out that our case constitutes a most likely case for the results we find. First, Fortunato *et al.* (2015) find that, in a comparative context, Danish voters are disproportionately good at locating parties which makes it less likely that they use heuristics. As these authors argue, however, this does not mean that voters in other political contexts are not using heuristics in similar situations. Second, the position changes by the SD

and SPP may have been so visible and publicized that information about them was sufficiently cheap and easily accessible to make heuristics unnecessary for rational voters (cf. Fortunato and Stevenson 2015). We may in Adams' (2012: 413) words have encountered one of the "unusual circumstances [in which] politicians' policy statements actually receive widespread publicity and thus will register with large segments of the electorate".

Whether our case is unusual in these (or other) ways will be up to future studies to uncover. Thus, we need more studies that attempt to identify under what conditions voters do pay attention to shifts in parties' policy positions and respond by updating their party perceptions more accurately than would have been expected if they merely relied on the coalition heuristic. As we have argued and demonstrated, such studies would do well by relying on methods with greater potential for causal inference than the combination of cross-sectional survey data and coded manifestos that has dominated extant research. As we await the outcome of such future work, our results demonstrate that at least under some conditions citizens are fully capable of keeping track of parties' policy positions. Representative democracy is not, therefore, built (solely) on sand.

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Table 1. Comparison of the DNES 2011 and our panel study

	Election Study (mean)	Panel study (mean)	Diff.
Gender (pct. females)	50.6	46.7	3.86
Age	46.3	49.9	3.66***
Education (pct. with only elementary school)	52.6	42.7	9.92***
Income (1-15 scale)	5.11	6.10	0.99***
Political awareness (0-1 scale)	0.46	0.71	0.25***
Left-right position (0-1 scale)	0.48	0.47	0.00
Voted right bloc (=1)	0.46	0.43	0.03
N	2,078	533	

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$  (two-sided test).

Table 2. Policy images on redistribution, 2011-2013. Scale means.

	Red- Green Alliance	Socialis t People' s Party	Social Democrat s	Social Liberal s	Liberal s	Conser- vatives	Liberal Allianc e	Danish People' s Party
<b>Policy position on taxes</b>								
2011	0.03	0.10	0.22	0.52	0.74	0.87	0.89	0.57
2013	0.06	0.17	0.35	0.50	0.79	0.86	0.88	0.58
Change	0.03	0.06***	0.13***	-0.02	0.06***	-0.01	-0.01	0.02
N	173	166	174	164	175	172	168	165
<b>Representation of the lowest income groups</b>								
2011	0.41	0.20	0.26	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.05
2013	0.56	0.12	0.15	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.08
Change	0.14***	-0.08***	-0.11***	0.01	-0.01	0.00	0.00	0.03
N	442	442	442	442	442	442	442	442
<b>Policy position on equality</b>								
2011	0.04	0.13	0.25	0.42	0.73	0.76	0.80	0.58
2013	0.08	0.18	0.33	0.48	0.76	0.76	0.81	0.54
Change	0.04	0.05***	0.08***	0.06***	0.02	0.00	0.01	-0.04*
N	212	212	213	205	211	210	190	192
<b>General left-right position</b>								
2011	0.11	0.26	0.38	0.53	0.76	0.76	0.78	0.82
2013	0.12	0.28	0.42	0.51	0.75	0.76	0.79	0.76
Change	0.01	0.02*	0.04***	-0.02	-0.01	0.00	0.02	-0.06***
N	417	420	424	422	422	421	403	408

Note: \*\*\* p < 0.001 \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05 (two-sided test of within change). A higher score on each of the position scales represents a more rightist position: Policy position on taxes runs from 0 (raise taxes) to 1 (reduce taxes); policy position on equality runs from 0 (equality) to 1 (inequality); the general left-right position runs from 0 (left) to 1 (right). Representation of the lowest income groups is coded 0 (does not represent) or 1 (does represent).

Table 3. Change in policy image on redistribution at high and low levels of political awareness, 2011-2013. Scale means.

	Red- Green Alliance	Socialist People's Party	Social Democrats	Social Liberals	Liberals	Conser- vatives	Liberal Alliance	Danish People's Party
<b>Policy position on taxes</b>								
Change 2011-2013 (low awareness)	0.03	0.10	0.15*	0.08	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.03
Change 2011-2013 (high awareness)	0.03	0.06***	0.12***	-0.04*	0.06***	-0.02	-0.02	0.02
Absolute difference: low vs. high	0.01	0.04	0.03	0.12*	0.04	0.06	0.08	0.02
N (low awareness)	24	17	25	19	25	22	22	22
N (high awareness)	149	149	149	145	150	150	146	143
<b>Representation of the lowest income groups</b>								
Change 2011-2013 (low awareness)	0.34***	-0.13**	-0.23***	0.03	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.00
Change 2011-2013 (high awareness)	0.10***	-0.07**	-0.08***	0.00	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.04*
Absolute difference: low vs. high	0.24***	0.06	0.15*	0.02	0.01	-0.01	0.04	-0.04
N (low awareness)	79	79	79	79	79	79	79	79
N (high awareness)	363	363	363	363	363	363	363	363
<b>Policy position on equality</b>								
Change 2011-2013 (low awareness)	0.06	0.03	0.08	0.06	0.07	-0.01	0.12	-0.06
Change 2011-2013 (high awareness)	0.03	0.05**	0.08***	0.06***	0.02	0.00	-0.03	-0.04
Absolute difference: low vs. high	0.03	0.02	-0.01	0.00	0.05	-0.01	0.15*	-0.02
N (low awareness)	30	29	29	27	28	27	23	25
N (high awareness)	182	183	184	178	183	183	167	167
<b>General left-right position</b>								
Change 2011-2013 (low awareness)	0.02	0.03	0.06	-0.01	-0.05	-0.04	0.01	-0.08*
Change 2011-2013 (high awareness)	0.01	0.02	0.03***	-0.02	-0.00	0.01	0.02	-0.05***
Absolute difference: low vs. high	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.05	0.05	0.00	0.02
N (low awareness)	69	68	72	71	73	71	66	71
N (high awareness)	348	352	352	351	349	350	337	337

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$  (two-sided test of within change). A higher score on the position scales represents a more rightist position; on the representation measure, scores indicate the percentage seeing the party as representing the groups. See the text and Table 2 for further information. Entries in the “Absolute difference: low vs. high” rows are the absolute differences in the changes to the policy images in the two groups of voters from 2011-2013.



## ONLINE APPENDIX

### “Do Voters Learn? Evidence that Voters Respond Accurately to Changes in Political Parties’ Policy Positions”

*Under review with West European Politics*

Table A1. Policy images on redistribution, before and after the new government was announced on October 3, 2011. Scale means.

	Red-Green Alliance	Socialist People’s Party	Social Democrats	Social Liberals	Liberals	Conser-vatives	Liberal Alliance	Danish People’s Party
<b>Policy position on taxes</b>								
Sept.	0.02	0.09	0.17	0.48	0.72	0.87	0.88	0.57
Oct.-Dec.	0.07	0.15	0.28	0.54	0.75	0.84	0.84	0.57
Change	0.05**	0.07***	0.11***	0.07*	0.02	-0.03	-0.05	0.00
N	231	232	233	223	234	231	221	219
<b>Representation of the lowest income groups</b>								
Sept.	0.38	0.20	0.27	0.00	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.05
Oct.-Dec.	0.44	0.18	0.26	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.06
Change	0.06	-0.03	-0.02	0.00	-0.02	0.00	-0.01	0.02
N	508	508	508	508	508	508	508	508
<b>Policy position on equality</b>								
Sept.	0.04	0.12	0.22	0.40	0.79	0.81	0.83	0.61
Oct.-Dec.	0.06	0.16	0.27	0.43	0.67	0.71	0.73	0.57
Change	0.02	0.04	0.05*	0.02	-0.12***	-0.11***	-0.10***	-0.04
N	260	262	264	258	261	258	235	251
<b>General left-right position</b>								
Sept.	0.11	0.27	0.38	0.53	0.76	0.76	0.78	0.81
Oct.-Dec.	0.12	0.27	0.40	0.53	0.75	0.74	0.74	0.81
Change	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.00	-0.02	-0.03	-0.04*	-0.01
N	510	516	519	519	518	515	505	509

Note: \*\*\* p < 0.001 \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05 (two-sided test of within change). A higher score on the three position scales represents a more rightist position: The tax scale runs from 0 (raise taxes) to 1 (reduce taxes); the equality-scale runs from 0 (equality) to 1 (inequality); the left-right scale runs from 0 (left) to 1 (right). Representation of the lowest income groups is coded 0 (does not represent) or 1 (does represent).

Table A2. Policy images on refugees, the public sector, environment, and law and order, 2011-2013. Scale means.

	Red- Green Alliance	Socialist People's Party	Social Democrats	Social Liberals	Liberals	Conser- vatives	Liberal Alliance	Danish People's Party
<b>Policy position on refugees</b>								
2011	0.09	0.22	0.38	0.29	0.64	0.65	0.63	0.97
2013	0.09	0.24	0.44	0.36	0.69	0.70	0.71	0.98
Change	0.00	0.03**	0.06***	0.06***	0.05***	0.05***	0.09***	0.00
N	369	367	374	369	387	370	303	406
<b>Policy position on the size of the public sector</b>								
2011	0.28	0.35	0.42	0.58	0.77	0.80	0.87	0.68
2013	0.10	0.24	0.42	0.53	0.75	0.75	0.87	0.57
Change	-0.18***	-0.11***	0.00	-0.05***	-0.02*	-0.06***	0.00	-0.11***
N	377	384	393	379	390	378	361	377
<b>Policy position on the environment</b>								
2011	0.06	0.16	0.36	0.32	0.63	0.63	0.67	0.70
2013	0.07	0.20	0.40	0.37	0.67	0.64	0.73	0.68
Change	0.01	0.03**	0.04***	0.05***	0.03***	0.02	0.06***	-0.02
N	369	372	375	372	372	359	310	343
<b>Policy position on law and order</b>								
2011	0.19	0.25	0.34	0.33	0.58	0.62	0.66	0.75
2013	0.33	0.39	0.48	0.46	0.69	0.71	0.74	0.78
Change	0.14***	0.14***	0.15***	0.14***	0.11***	0.09***	0.08***	0.03***
N	533	533	533	533	533	533	533	533

Note: \*\*\* p < 0.001 \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05 (two-sided test of within change). A higher score on each 0-1 scale represents a more rightist position: The refugee scale runs from 0 (take more) to 1 (take less); The size of the public sector scale runs from 0 (expand) to 1 (cut back); the environment scale runs from 0 (very green) to 1 (non-green); the law and order scale runs from 0 (prevention) to 1 (punishment).

Table A3. Policy image on redistribution by partisan group, 2011-2013. Scale means.

	Red- Green Alliance	Socialist People's Party	Social Democrats	Social Liberals	Liberals	Conser- vatives	Liberal Alliance	Danish People's Party
<b>Policy position on taxes</b>								
Change 2011-2013 (supporters)	0.07	0.03	0.15**	-0.04	0.02	-0.02	-0.01	-0.08
Change 2011-2013 (defectors)	0.08	0.02	-0.02	-0.04	0.02	-0.04	0.00	0.02
Change 2011-2013 (non-supporters)	0.00	0.06***	0.12***	-0.03	0.06**	-0.02	-0.00	0.04
N (supporters)	29	29	29	25	28	29	28	26
N (defectors)	15	13	14	12	15	13	13	14
N (non-supporters)	108	104	109	107	109	109	105	107
<b>Representation of the lowest income groups</b>								
Change 2011-2013 (supporters)	-0.11	0.06	0.05	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00
Change 2011-2013 (defectors)	-0.15	0.10	0.10	0.00	-0.03	0.00	-0.03	0.00
Change 2011-2013 (non-supporters)	-0.17***	0.08***	0.15***	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.00	-0.05*
N (supporters)	81	81	81	81	81	81	81	81
N (defectors)	39	39	39	39	39	39	39	39
N (non-supporters)	248	248	248	248	248	248	248	248
<b>Policy position on equality</b>								
Change 2011-2013 (supporters)	0.02	0.04	0.09	0.13**	0.02	-0.03	0.02	-0.04
Change 2011-2013 (defectors)	0.04	-0.01	0.04	0.00	0.07	0.04	0.06	-0.19*
Change 2011-2013 (non-supporters)	0.03	0.04	0.08	0.02	0.03	0.00	0.00	-0.03
N (supporters)	48	48	48	46	48	47	35	46
N (defectors)	20	19	20	17	18	19	17	17
N (non-supporters)	114	115	114	113	116	115	109	104
<b>General left-right position</b>								
Change 2011-2013 (supporters)	-0.04	-0.04	-0.02	0.01	0.04	0.06**	0.04*	-0.04
Change 2011-2013 (defectors)	-0.01	0.02	0.04	0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.08*	0.02
Change 2011-2013 (non-supporters)	0.02	0.03*	0.05***	-0.03**	-0.02	-0.01	0.00	-0.06***
N (supporters)	81	82	82	82	79	80	75	78
N (defectors)	39	39	38	38	38	38	36	37
N (non-supporters)	237	240	244	241	244	243	235	235

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$  (two-sided test of within change). ‘Supporters’ are the voters that voted for the Social Democratic Party or the Socialist People’s Party in the 2011 election and still support them in 2013; ‘Defectors’ are the voters that voted for the Social Democratic Party or the Socialist People’s Party in the 2011 election but intends to vote for another party in 2013; ‘Non-supporters’ are the voters that voted for another party in 2011 and still intend to vote for another party. A higher score on the three position scales represents a more rightist position; on the representation measure, scores indicate percentage seeing the party as representing the group. See the text for further information.

Table A4. Policy images on redistribution by partisan group, 2011-2013. Scale means.

	Red-Green Alliance	Socialist People's Party	Social Democrats	Social Liberals	Liberals	Conservatives	Liberal Alliance	Danish People's Party
<b>Policy position on taxes</b>								
Supporters vs. non-supporters	0.06	-0.03	0.02	-0.01	-0.04	0.01	-0.00	-0.11*
Supporters vs. defectors	-0.01	0.01	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.02	-0.01	-0.09
N (supporters)	29	29	29	25	28	29	28	26
N (defectors)	15	13	14	12	15	13	13	14
N (non-supporters)	108	104	109	107	109	109	105	107
<b>Representation of the lowest income groups</b>								
Supporters vs. non-supporters	0.06	-0.02	-0.09	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.05
Supporters vs. defectors	0.04	-0.04	-0.05	0.00	0.04	0.00	0.03	0.00
N (supporters)	81	81	81	81	81	81	81	81
N (defectors)	39	39	39	39	39	39	39	39
N (non-supporters)	248	248	248	248	248	248	248	248
<b>Policy position on equality</b>								
Supporters vs. non-supporters	-0.01	0.00	0.00	0.10*	-0.01	-0.03	0.02	-0.01
Supporters vs. defectors	-0.02	0.05	0.05	0.13	-0.05	-0.07	-0.04	0.15
N (supporters)	48	48	48	46	48	47	35	46
N (defectors)	20	19	20	17	18	19	17	17
N (non-supporters)	116	115	114	113	116	115	109	104
<b>General left-right position</b>								
Supporters vs. non-supporters	-0.07**	-0.07*	-0.07**	0.05	0.06*	0.07*	0.03	0.02
Supporters vs. defectors	-0.03	-0.05	-0.05	0.01	0.03	0.06	-0.04	-0.06
N (supporters)	81	82	82	82	79	80	75	78
N (defectors)	39	39	38	38	38	38	36	37
N (non-supporters)	237	240	244	241	244	243	235	235

Note: \*\*\* p < 0.001 \*\* p < 0.01. \* p < 0.05 (two-sided test of within change). 'Supporters' are the voters that voted for the Social Democratic Party or the Socialist People's Party in the 2011 election and still support them in 2013; 'Defectors' are the voters that voted for the Social Democratic Party or the Socialist People's Party in the 2011 election but intends to vote for another party in 2013; 'Non-supporters' are the voters that voted for another party in 2011 and still intend to vote for another party. 'Supporters vs. non-supporters' reports how much larger the change for supporters is compared to the non-supporters. 'Supporters vs.

defectors' reports how much smaller or larger the change for supporters is compared to the defectors (a negative value indicates that the change is smaller for supporters). A higher score on each 0-1 scale represents a more rightist position. The cell entries are the differences in the changes in the policy images within the two groups of voters from 2011-2013. See the text for further information.

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<sup>i</sup> First, in August 2012 in what was named ‘The Urgent Reform’ (*‘Akutpakken’*), the government allocated €44.7 mill to the local job centers responsible for getting the unemployed back on the labor market to intensify the support to the group of vulnerable unemployed (The Danish Government, 2012). Second, in June 2013 the government set up an exceptional and temporary unemployment benefit scheme ensuring 60 per cent of the regular unemployment benefits to those whose benefits would terminate in the six months before January 2014. Basically, this would alleviate some of the negative effects of the reform for the long-term unemployed. After the collection of the second wave of the survey was completed, the government extended in November 2013 the temporary benefit program for another 2.5 years. Hence, this additional step taken by the government did not influence the respondents in the panel.

<sup>ii</sup> Political awareness is measured by an index made up of five factual questions about the composition of the government before 2011, the number of seats in parliament and the party affiliation of three prominent (but not top-) politicians. The index score indicates the average number of correct answers for each respondent recoded to a 0-1 scale.

<sup>iii</sup> In the tables, we show the proportion pointing to each party as the best representative of the lowest income groups. Hence, and in contrast to the other measures, high numbers indicate a left wing position.

<sup>iv</sup> Please bear in mind the scoring of this variable (cf. note iii).

<sup>v</sup> It is worth noting that the precise magnitude of changes in perceptions from 2011 to 2013 should be interpreted with some caution. Because some of the interviews in the first wave of the panel were conducted after the new government was announced on October 3, 2011, already the

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2011 responses might reflect the policy shifts made by the SD and SPP. In this case, the changes in perceptions of the parties' policy positions that we have found would in fact be even larger than we show, hence bolstering the support for our conclusion that voters did notice and respond to the changing party positions. As can be seen in Table A1 in the Online Appendix, respondents interviewed after the new government was announced do perceive the Social Democrats to be more rightist on equality than respondents interviewed before, and on taxes all left-of-center parties are perceived to be more rightist. Given the small samples sizes and variation in the composition of the 2011 samples interviewed before and after the government was announced, these numbers should be interpreted with a high degree of caution. Yet these results show that, if anything, our comparison of 2011 and 2013 responses tend to underestimate the actual changes in perceptions.

<sup>vi</sup> Obviously, changes in voters' perception of the parties' general left-right position might be driven by simultaneous changes in perceived party positions on other issues than redistribution. Consequently, we should be cautious about attributing changes in general left-right positions to the marked changes on the redistribution issue alone. The DNES data includes measures of perceived party positions on refugees, size of the public sector, environment, and law and order. On these issues we do see changes in perceived party positions over the 2011-2013 period (see Table A2 in the Online Appendix). However, these changes are notable, first, by including quite similar changes in perceptions of government and opposition parties alike, and, second, by sometimes moving positions in a more leftist direction (on the public sector), sometimes in a more rightist direction (on refugees, the environment, and law and order). It is beyond our analysis to interpret each of these changes, as our focus is on how the marked changes in party positions of redistribution affected voter perceptions. We acknowledge this limitation with the



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current design that we cannot say if changes in perceived left-right position of the parties are driven by the redistribution issue (alone), although we can say that the changes on redistribution, confined to the SD and SPP, fit with the parties' behavior, and that this issue was highly salient during this period, making it likely that general left-right position is, at least in part, affected by the redistribution issue.

<sup>vii</sup> We focus on the potential moderating role of political awareness here given the differences in composition on this variable between the DNES and our panel. However, other variables might affect the generalizability and interpretation of our results, perhaps most notably partisanship. It has long been recognized that party identification “raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (Campbell et al. 1960: 133). For example, voters tend to be more supportive of a policy if it is proposed by their own party (Slothuus and de Vreese 2010) and this tendency to interpret policies and arguments through a partisan lens favoring one's own party seems to be more pronounced when the parties conflict or polarize (Druckman *et al.* 2013). Thus, in response to the highly salient policy changes made by the SD and SPP, one expectation could be that supporters of these parties would tend to ignore the changing positions of their parties or at least interpret them as minor. Alternatively, voters defecting from the SD and SPP after they entered government could be expected to interpret these policy changes as major to justify that they left their party or to express anger over broken electoral pledges. Tables A3 and A4 in the Online Appendix offer some empirical analysis of these possibilities. Even though the small number of respondents in each partisan group allows only tentative conclusions, we generally find quite small partisan differences. Thus, there are no statistically significant differences in perceived changes among supporters of the SD and SPP as compared to non-supporters (i.e., voters from other parties) on the parties' positions on taxes,

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equality, and in their representation of the lowest income groups. In fact, SD and SPP supporters seem to share the view that their parties take more rightist positions on redistribution. Only on the general left-right position are supporters statistically different from non-supporters as the SD and SPP supporters see their parties moving slightly to the left. However, this result is difficult to interpret as these partisans did see their party moving to the right on the issue-specific measures. In sum, therefore, our data indicates that even the supporters of SD and SPP recognized the parties' changing policy positions, suggesting that the perception of the policy shift was general across the electorate.

<sup>viii</sup> Splitting instead on the average political awareness in the panel (0.71 on the 0-1 scale) does not substantively change the results.