

Opposition party policy shifts in response to no-confidence motions

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Abstract. No-confidence motions (NCMs) are attempts by opposition parties to publicise the government's failings in a salient policy arena, and previous research has shown that they often negatively affect citizens' evaluations of governing parties' competence and damage their electoral prospects. Yet currently there is a lack of understanding of how opposition parties respond ideologically to these NCMs. It is argued in this article that opposition parties should distance themselves from the government challenged by NCMs to show that they are different from the incompetent government and to compete for the votes that the government is likely to lose. Using a sample of 19 advanced democracies from 1970–2007, empirical evidence is presented that NCMs encourage political parties to move their positions away from the government's position, especially in the presence of reinforcing negative signals about government performance. These results have important implications for our understanding of opposition party policy change, for the economic voting literature, and for the spatial and valence models of party competition.

Keywords: government performance; no-confidence motions; opposition parties; policy change

Introduction

It is commonplace to see governing parties in parliamentary democracies lose votes in subsequent elections (Rose & Mackie 1983). A vast body of literature explores how economic performance (e.g., Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier 2000), circumstances beyond the control of governments (e.g., Achen & Bartels n.d.), as well as citizens' evaluations of the parties' attributes along valence dimensions, such as competence, integrity and charisma, affect governing party vote shares (e.g., Stokes 1963, 1992; Clark 2009). Parliamentary events have also been shown to influence parties' electoral fortunes. Empirical studies in the United States conclude that legislative voting records affect congressional incumbents' electoral performance (see, e.g., Ansolabehere et al. 2001; Canes-Wrone et al. 2002). Carmines and Stimson (1989) and Erikson et al. (2002) show that changes in the legislative behaviour of parties affect partisan loyalties and public preferences (see also Hetherington 2001), and Bartle et al. (2010) show similar patterns for British voters.

In addition to legislative voting records, there is both anecdotal and systematic evidence that no-confidence motions (NCMs) affect party vote shares in parliamentary democracies (Williams 2011).¹ For instance, during a three-day parliamentary debate in March 1989, embattled PASOK Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou faced a New Democracy NCM over a banking corruption scandal, which caused Greek citizens to become 'glued to the televised proceedings' (Delaunay 1989). While PASOK was able to use its absolute majority in parliament to defeat the motion, the lengthy debate was followed by a substantial drop in public support for the party (Dimitras 1989). A cabinet reshuffle and a series of

half-hearted commitments to reform were not enough to right the ship before the June election; PASOK experienced significant losses (-6.7 per cent). Using data from 20 advanced parliamentary democracies, Williams (2011) more generally shows that NCMs, regardless of whether they pass or fail, negatively affect government parties' vote shares in the upcoming elections.

In this article, we examine how opposition parties react to the information provided by an NCM about government performance. We argue that political parties are strategic actors, who, when given information, use it to adapt their positions to increase their electoral returns. Opposition parties should, then, strategically change their positions with respect to the government in order to successfully compete for the votes that the governing parties are losing as a result of the NCMs. Following Williams (2011), we argue that NCMs are highly publicised opportunities for opposition parties to depress citizens' evaluations of the governing parties' competence. In the presence of an NCM, opposition parties should then shift their positions away from the government's position in order not to be associated with an incompetent government.

Nevertheless, we also acknowledge that NCMs are biased criticisms by the opposition to publicise the government's failings in a salient policy arena. Therefore, we expect NCMs to negatively affect citizens' evaluations of governments and hence encourage opposition parties to shift their positions away from the government's position more when there are complementary signals about weak government performance. Using data on 19 democracies from 1970 to 2007, we show that NCMs have larger effects on opposition party shifts when they are coupled with weak economic performance. As a robustness test, we also show that these results are robust if we use another indicator of government performance: scandals.

This article contributes to several important literatures. First, while there are studies examining how parliamentary events affect election results, we are unaware of any work that examines how these parliamentary events, and specifically how NCMs, affect party policy positions. In addition, while there is work on how parties strategically respond to their electoral performance in past elections and change their policy positions (Budge 1994; Somer-Topcu 2009), there is no work to our knowledge that examines how other parties' electoral prospects influence parties' policy shifts. As a result, an important contribution of this article is that it bridges the literatures on elections, parliamentary events and party strategies.

Another important contribution is that we integrate two perspectives on party competition that have evolved largely independently of each other – namely the spatial model of elections, which emphasises parties' policy positions (Downs 1957), and the valence model, which emphasises attributes like competence and integrity (Stokes 1963, 1992). To note, there is empirical research demonstrating that voters are motivated by both policy- and valence-related considerations (e.g., Clarke et al. 2009) and an extensive spatial modeling literature examining how the competence evaluations of parties (i.e., their valence) affects party position-taking. However, these studies have been mostly theoretical in approach (see, e.g., Groseclose 2001; Schofield 2003; Adams et al. 2005; Adams & Merrill 2009; Serra 2010; but see Schofield & Sened 2005) and posit that parties/candidates have strategic incentives to change their positions with respect to the median voter position depending on their valence images relative to their opponents. By arguing that opposition parties should

change their spatial positions in response to NCMs that negatively affect the competence evaluation of governments, and by empirically testing this argument with cross-national and time-series data, we contribute to the literatures on valence and spatial models.

No-confidence motions, governments and elections

Political parties play a central role in the operation of modern liberal democracy by connecting the citizenry and their representatives. Given their important role, it is not surprising that an extensive literature on political parties and their policy strategies has developed over the last century, and particularly over the past two decades as data on party policies have become available (see, e.g., the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data, and the work using these data: e.g., Budge 1994; Ezrow 2008; Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009). One question that has not so far been addressed in this growing literature is how parliamentary events, such as legislative voting records, NCMs, parliamentary debates and speeches, affect party electoral strategies. This is surprising given that there is an important literature showing the impact of elite actions such as legislative voting and parliamentary speeches on public preferences (e.g., Zaller 1992; Erikson et al. 2002) and the translation of those preferences into vote choice (e.g., Duch et al. 2000).

In this article, we focus on the consequences of NCMs for opposition parties' policy strategies. Following Williams' (2011) finding that NCMs depress governments' electoral prospects by highlighting the weaknesses of governments in a salient policy area, and building on the valence literature that shows citizens' competence evaluations of parties have significant electoral consequences (Clark 2009; Clarke et al. 2009), we argue that opposition parties should use this information strategically and change their policy positions accordingly.

We can understand how NCMs depress citizens' competence evaluations of governments by examining the possible motivations for opposition parties challenging the government. First, opposition parties can use NCMs to highlight the government's responsibility for a specific salient policy. For example, Joe Clark's Conservative Canadian government narrowly defeated the Liberals' NCM in November 1979, which blamed the government for high energy prices (*Globe and Mail* 1979). Second, the opposition may also challenge the government to try to elevate a salient issue on the political agenda. This was the intention for the NCM against Finland's 'rainbow coalition' in March 1998. The centrist opposition used the opportunity to highlight the plight of Finnish farmers in the face of EU policy (*Agence France Presse* 1998). Finally, NCMs are often highly publicised opportunities for the opposition party to publicly question the government's ability or competence. Even NCMs with little chance of success receive front-page coverage. When the British Labour Party proposed an NCM on 27 March 1991 over the Conservative Party's decision not to abolish the poll tax, it triggered a 'bitter and rowdy debate that ended in uproar' (*Press Association* 1991). The circumstances of the debate and the positions taken by the parties were widely reported in British newspapers such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent*. Labour Chairman Neil Kinnock claimed that the poll tax was 'still alive and kicking the people of Britain', while Prime Minister John Major counterattacked that the Labour Party was incompetent (Bevins 1991). Even the Liberal Democrats were given a platform; they

called the poll tax ‘the biggest political blunder made in the latter half of the twentieth century’ (Knewstubb 1991). Since the Tories had a 90-seat majority in the House of Commons, there was little surprise when they defeated the motion 358 to 238 and remained in power. Nevertheless, this example illustrates that the media use NCMs as opportunities to focus on government performance in particular areas of interest, and to publicise parties’ positions on these issues. The greater the attention the media pays to the opposition’s claims and the government’s rebuttal, the more information is provided about government competence.

We also know from the literature that citizens’ competence evaluations of parties have significant effects on parties’ electoral prospects. Clark (2009), for instance, argues that events such as political scandals and party divisions cause parties to lose votes, and Clark and Leiter (forthcoming) show that the vote shares of governing parties respond to systematically measured changes in valence attributes in nine European countries over 27 years. In the British case, Clarke et al. (2009: 52) conclude that ‘electoral choice is grounded mainly in valence reasoning, with spatial considerations playing a secondary role’. To sum up, we have empirical evidence that NCMs negatively affect competence evaluations of governments, which in turn negatively affect the vote shares of governing parties and positively affect the electoral prospects of opposition parties (Williams 2011). Yet, we still do not know whether and how parties react to this information.

We focus on opposition parties’ competition and argue that they should distance themselves from a failing government.² We argue that because NCMs are expressions of the opposition parties’ disapproval of government policies, opposition parties should distance themselves from the government’s position to signal to the electorate that they are different. Governing parties’ losses in the presence of NCMs will be another party’s gain. The competition for these votes should affect opposition parties’ strategic position-taking. Opposition parties would look inconsistent, insincere and opportunistic if they criticised government policies – which is what they do when they introduce an NCM – while offering similar sets of policies themselves. Therefore, we expect that *opposition parties should shift their left–right positions away from the government’s position when facing a government challenged with NCMs*.³

Yet, should we expect *all* NCMs to push opposition parties away from the government? While NCMs increase the attention towards government policies and hence signal to voters and parties about the government’s weaknesses, we acknowledge that they are targeted attacks by opposition parties, and thus *noisy* signals. Even though these motions require a considerable amount of prior organisation and may backfire against the proposer, they are proposed for the purpose of criticising governments. As a result, we should expect both voters and political parties to be more attentive to NCMs when there are reinforcing negative signals about the government’s performance, such as weak economic performance.

As shown by Calvert (1985), decision makers pay attention to sources that provide bolstering information. Regardless of whether a decision maker is initially ignorant or has a predisposition in favour of the government or against it, the rational decision maker will prefer the biased information that bolsters already existing information. We argue that the same should be true for voters and political parties. After having observed a government criticised, attacked and challenged by one or more NCMs, voters’ perceptions of an already

weak government would be hurt more from these NCMs than an otherwise successful government. As a result, we expect opposition parties to react more strongly to NCMs when they are coupled with weak performance indicators.

We use economic performance, and more particularly GDP growth, as our performance indicator.⁴ This is consistent with the extant literature on economic voting (see Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier (2000) for a review). We follow this literature by arguing that economic performance is the most important indicator of government performance for upcoming elections. Therefore, we argue that *opposition parties should be more responsive to NCMs particularly when there are additional negative signals about government performance – that is, when the economy is weak.*

On the other hand, we argue that voters and political parties should be more sceptical about what is motivating parties to propose NCMs when the government is performing well otherwise. In this environment opposition parties might be concerned that a policy shift would be perceived as opportunistic by voters and damage them in the election. They also do not know how party activists, lobbyists and donors, who support and contribute to the party mainly because of its ideology, would react to any change. As a result, political parties would be less willing to shift their positions if opposition parties challenge an otherwise successful government. Therefore, we argue that *opposition parties should be less willing to shift their policy positions in response to NCMs in the presence of strong economic performance.*⁵

One may ask why opposition parties would then propose NCMs at all when the government is otherwise performing well. While our goal in this research is not to explain why NCMs are introduced but to examine their consequences, we acknowledge that this is a potential complication to our model. However, we also note from our data that opposition parties indeed challenge otherwise successful governments with NCMs. A government that is economically successful does not necessarily mean that it is not involved with scandals or does not have unpopular policies in other policy areas. It should also be noted that the outcomes of many NCMs are not certain at the time of the proposal. Opposition parties may have reason to believe that the situation is favourable enough to pass the motion and bring down the government regardless of the status of the economy. Even if they believe that a particular NCM is not going to succeed, opposition parties may still propose it with the goal of hurting a government's evaluations, or to gain some private benefits in the parliament, as Williams (2011) showed. In our dataset, about 44 per cent of all NCMs were proposed when the GDP growth rate was above the mean growth level of 2.3 per cent.⁶

Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we create a dataset of 19 countries from 1970–2007, which in total provides us with 651 opposition party positions in 198 elections.⁷ We use the party-election as the unit of analysis so that we can examine political parties' ideological change. We examine the last non-caretaker government in each election and focus on opposition party policy shifts using the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data.

The CMP data provide the most extensive cross-national and time-series data on party policy positions and change. Using the content of party election manifestos, scholars in this

Table 1. Coding rules for *Ideological Change*

The following cases are coded toward (+1):

$$p_t > p_{t-1} \ \& \ \text{govt}_{t-1} \geq p_t$$

$$p_t < p_{t-1} \ \& \ \text{govt}_{t-1} \leq p_t$$

$$p_t \geq \text{govt}_{t-1} > p_{t-1} \ \& \ |p_t - \text{govt}_{t-1}| < |p_{t-1} - \text{govt}_{t-1}|$$

$$p_t \leq \text{govt}_{t-1} < p_{t-1} \ \& \ |p_t - \text{govt}_{t-1}| < |p_{t-1} - \text{govt}_{t-1}|$$

The following cases are coded away (-1)

$$p_t > p_{t-1} \ \& \ \text{govt}_{t-1} \leq p_{t-1}$$

$$p_t < p_{t-1} \ \& \ \text{govt}_{t-1} \geq p_{t-1}$$

$$p_t \geq \text{govt}_{t-1} > p_{t-1} \ \& \ |p_t - \text{govt}_{t-1}| > |p_{t-1} - \text{govt}_{t-1}|$$

$$p_t \leq \text{govt}_{t-1} < p_{t-1} \ \& \ |p_t - \text{govt}_{t-1}| > |p_{t-1} - \text{govt}_{t-1}|$$

Note: p_t is the party's position at election t and p_{t-1} and govt_{t-1} are the party's and government's positions at time $t - 1$, respectively.

project have constructed a left–right political scale using 26 of the coded issues (see Budge et al. (2001) for more details on the project). This left–right scale ranges from -100 to $+100$ with positive and higher numbers representing a more right-wing emphasis.⁸ This index has been employed by scholars to examine changes in party policy positions and the reasons behind these changes (e.g., Budge 1994; Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow 2008). Scholars also agree that the left–right scale is a reasonable summary of citizens' views on national political context, and the left–right dimension continues to be the most salient dimension in advanced democracies (Blais et al. 1993; Dalton et al. 2011).⁹

Our hypotheses state that opposition parties should shift their policy positions away from the government's position when the government is challenged by NCMs. Our dependent variable, therefore, measures opposition parties' left–right position shifts between elections $t-1$ and t relative to the government's position. To create this *ideological change* variable we first calculate the absolute ideological change of the party's current position (at election t) relative to its previous position (at election $t-1$) on the left–right scale, and then multiply this value by $+1$ if the party has moved toward the government's position at election t , or by -1 if the party has moved away from the government's position. To measure the government's position at time $t-1$ we use the CMP left–right positions of political parties in government, weight these positions by their respective seat shares, and calculate the weighted average of left–right positions at time $t-1$.¹⁰ We code opposition parties as those that do not have cabinet portfolios in the last non-caretaker government using the updated Woldendorp et al. (2000) data (Seki and Williams forthcoming).

Determining whether an opposition party has moved toward or away from the government position requires additional coding rules. For instance, while it is an obvious instance of *moving toward the government* if the government has a centre-right position and an opposition party moves its position from a far-left position towards the centre, coding becomes complicated if the same party leapfrogs a centre-right government by moving from left to extreme right. To identify these cases as *toward* or *away*, we use the set of coding rules listed in Table 1. Hence, if a party leapfrogs a government but the original distance between the government at time $t-1$ and the party at time $t-1$ was larger than the new position between the government at time $t-1$ and the party at time t , then we consider this

Table 2. Summary statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Ideological change	-0.70	16.35	-63.31	61.30
No-confidence motions	0.19	0.57	0	4
Real GDP per capita growth	2.23	2.16	-4.45	11.08
Effective parties	3.91	1.51	1.69	9.05
Niche	0.25	0.43	0	1

movement as a move *toward* the government. On the other hand, if the original distance was smaller – that is, if the party leapfrogged the government and is now further away from the government – we consider this as a movement *away* from the government.¹¹

Our main independent variable is the occurrence of an NCM. Data on NCMs are taken from Williams (2011), which uses a mixture of sources like *Keesing's Record of World Events* (1960–2006) and parliamentary archives to determine the timing and outcomes of NCMs.¹² We create the variable *NCM* by counting the number of NCMs that occur against a government in the 12 months prior to an election. We use a 12-month time-frame because it is long enough to capture the variations in the time it takes for voters to react to policy outcomes (Conover et al. 1986), yet not so long that it demands that voters have long memories of policy outcomes.¹³

We use information on the state of the economy as the main signal for government performance that mediates the effect of an NCM on party policy change. We include the *real GDP per capita growth* from the Penn World Tables Version 7.0 in the year of the election (Heston et al. 2011). If the election occurs in the first six months of the year, we use the previous year's GDP growth rate. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics.

According to our hypothesis, we should see a reinforcing effect of NCMs and poor economic performance on opposition party change. In addition, increasing the number of NCMs should exacerbate this effect. We also expect the effects of NCMs to dissipate in the presence of strong economic performance. To test these conditional hypotheses, we create *NCMs*×*GDP*. Because we argue that the existence of an NCM should push opposition parties away from the government's position when the government's performance is weak, we expect a negative coefficient for *NCM*, which would indicate that parties move away from the government when *GDP growth* is zero. We also expect a positive and statistically significant coefficient for *NCMs*×*GDP*. This positive coefficient would show that as *GDP growth* increases, the push effect of an *NCM* decreases and eventually disappears.

We include two control variables in our models: niche party status and effective number of parties. Since niche parties move less than mainstream parties in reaction to public opinion shifts (see Adams et al. (2006) for these findings), we would expect that they would have less incentive to move. Political parties that belong to green, ultra-right and communist party families are coded as niche parties (Adams et al. 2006).¹⁴ There is also a consistent empirical finding that parties have few incentives to leapfrog each other's positions (e.g., Budge 1994). Therefore, one can argue that political parties in crowded systems – that is, in systems with high effective number of parties – would have a more difficult time shifting their positions away or toward the government. To calculate the effective number of parties,

we use party seat shares and apply the Laakso and Taagepera's formula. The model also includes the lagged dependent variable *ideological change (t-1)* to account for the serial correlation problem otherwise present in the data.¹⁵

We test our hypotheses with OLS regression. Since there is reason to believe that our empirical model may predict the movement in some elections better than others, we produce standard errors clustered around election.¹⁶

Empirical results

We present the empirical tests of our hypotheses in Table 3. In all models we exclude those observations where an opposition party was successful in passing the NCM and triggering early elections. Our concern is that the results would be dominated by those times where a massive policy failure allows the opposition to take down the government. By excluding these cases, we feel that we are setting up a hard test of our hypotheses since these are the cases most likely to influence party change.¹⁷

To examine the effect of NCMs on party change we need to examine them in tandem with the indicator of government performance. In the main model (Table 3) the first two variables represent the lower-order variables that make up the interactive term (*NCMs*×*GDP*). The coefficient for *NCM* indicates that when the *GDP per capita growth* is 0, there is a negative marginal effect of an NCM on opposition party change – that is, opposition parties move away from the government in the presence of an NCM and zero economic growth. This push-effect increases for negative values of *GDP per capita growth* given the positive coefficient for the interaction variable, and decreases for positive and higher values of *GDP per capita growth*.¹⁸ However, the inferences that one can make from the coefficients themselves are rather limited in an interactive model, especially regarding the statistical significance of these marginal effects. To draw some more substantive conclusions of the interactive relationship, we present Figure 1.

Figure 1 presents the marginal effects of an *NCM* (and 95 per cent confidence intervals) on opposition party ideological shifts across the range of *real GDP per capita growth* from the minimum GDP value in our dataset to one standard deviation above the mean value (+4.3) beyond which the results stay insignificant. When the government presides over a lagging economy (i.e., negative *GDP per capita growth*), NCMs trigger shifts away from government (with negative marginal effects), supporting our conditional hypothesis. The marginal effect of an *NCM* is negative and statistically significant when *GDP per capita growth* is less than about -0.3 per cent. This negative marginal effect indicates that when *GDP per capita growth* is negative, political parties on average increase their distance from the government in the presence of an *NCM*. As the economy improves, the effect of an *NCM* becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero. For the minimum value of *real GDP per capita growth* in our sample (-4.5 per cent), the existence of an *NCM* pushes opposition parties by 4.8 points on average away from the government. While a 4.8 point change may not look substantial given that the potential manifesto change of parties goes up to 200 (if a party moves from one extreme to another), we note that the median change of opposition parties in our data is 9.43, which suggests that NCMs have an important effect on party policy strategies.¹⁹ Finally, our control variables, niche party status and effective

Table 3. Regression results for the relationship between economic growth and no-confidence motions on ideological change of opposition parties relative to government

	Main model	Scandals	Proposers and non-proposers	Economic NCMs	Other NCMs
No-confidence motions	-1.610* (0.925)	3.126 (2.399)	-2.090** (0.906)	-4.410 (2.756)	-2.038 (1.618)
Real GDP per capita growth	-0.952** (0.389)		-0.939** (0.389)	-0.947** (0.369)	-0.889** (0.387)
NCMs x GDP	0.691* (0.392)		0.973*** (0.309)	2.665*** (1.030)	0.655 (0.455)
Scandals		1.222 (2.122)			
NCMs x Scandals		-6.447** (2.812)			
Proposers: NCMs			3.250 (3.636)		
Proposers NCMs x GDP			-1.170 (1.118)		
Niche party	1.797 (1.505)	0.559 (1.604)	1.769 (1.524)	1.889 (1.499)	1.767 (1.507)
Effective number of parties	0.038 (0.436)	-0.279 (0.469)	0.081 (0.440)	-0.025 (0.416)	0.048 (0.454)
Lagged ideological change	-0.224*** (0.060)	-0.192** (0.071)	-0.223*** (0.060)	-0.221*** (0.060)	-0.225*** (0.060)
Constant	0.459 (1.985)	-0.523 (2.260)	0.256 (1.994)	0.695 (1.967)	0.287 (2.025)
Observations	570	436	570	570	570
Adjusted R ²	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.06

Notes: Dependent variable in these models is *Ideological Change*. It takes negative values as parties move away from the government's position. These models exclude those observations where successful NCMs triggered elections. Standard errors (clustered by election) in parentheses. *** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.1

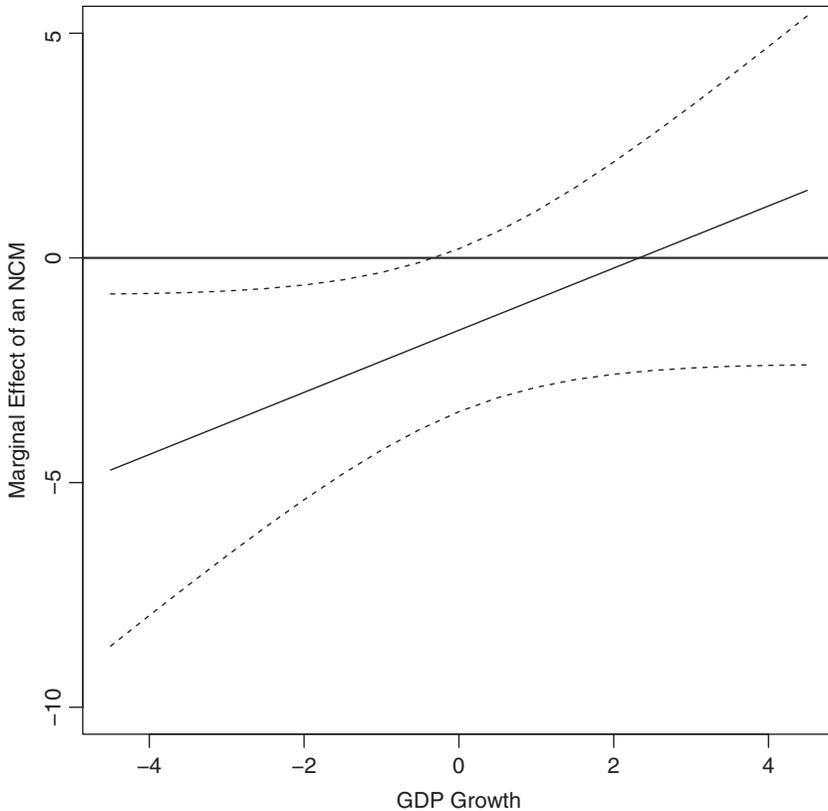


Figure 1. Marginal effect of a no-confidence motion across economic growth (main model).

Notes: The solid line in the figure shows the marginal effect of an NCM on the dependent variable of party policy shifts with respect to the government position for the different values of GDP growth rates. The dashed lines are the standard errors (95 per cent confidence intervals).

number parties, do not have any significant effects on ideological change. Our results continue to hold both statistically and substantively if we drop these control variables.

Sensitivity checks

We have so far shown that opposition parties move away from governments that are challenged by NCMs, and particularly when government has weak economic performance. As a first sensitivity check of our results, we replicate our analysis replacing economic performance (i.e., GDP growth rate) with a different indicator of government performance: *scandals*. Using the data provided by Kumlin and Esaiasson (2011), we code each election for whether there was a scandal concerning the parties or the MPs in government leading to the election and interact this dummy variable with *NCMs* to test the conditionality hypotheses. Column 2 in Table 3 shows the results. We note that we lose a significant number of cases due to the limitations of the data (our number of cases drop from 610 to

436). Despite this loss, the interaction variable is highly significant. The marginal effect of an NCM when there is a scandal is -3.321 , and suggests that opposition parties are motivated to move away from scandal-ridden governments when there is an NCM. This robust finding for an alternative performance indicator shows that our results are not driven by economic performance, but also are robust for alternative specifications of government performance.

As NCMs vary depending on the credibility of their signal, we may also expect that opposition parties differ in their response to NCMs. As we noted before, the set of opposition parties include both NCM-proposers and non-proposers. While opposition parties may all unite to propose an NCM, usually a subset of opposition parties challenges the government. Should we expect proposers and non-proposers to respond differently to these NCMs? On the one hand, we may expect that non-proposers shift to demonstrate their differences from the government. Proposers indicate their opposition for government policies by challenging the government, and do not have to significantly shift away from the government to further show their differences. Non-proposers, on the other hand, should show their difference from the government by shifting their position away from it. At the same time, one can expect proposers to shift their position further away from the government given they would be seen especially hypocritical if they challenge the government with an NCM and do not distinguish themselves from those whose policies they criticise. We test the difference between proposers and non-proposers in the third column of Table 3. In addition to the original variables, the model includes a dummy variable that is coded 1 for the NCM-proposers and its interaction with GDP growth.²⁰ While the findings show that the marginal effect of an NCM is statistically significant for non-proposers but is not statistically significant for proposers (we show the marginal effect figures in the online supplementary document), a seemingly unrelated regression test suggests that the marginal effects are not statistically different between proposers and non-proposers. The reason that we do not find a statistical difference across models might be either because of the low number of proposers in our data or high correlation between the variables in the model (particularly between the NCM and proposers variables). As a result, we conclude that opposition parties, regardless of whether they are the proposers of the NCM or not, react similarly to the NCMs. We believe that this similarity is a result of both of the mechanisms we listed above: while proposers do not need to change their positions as much given their existing signal, they would look insincere if they do not change their positions.

As another sensitivity check, we differentiated NCMs based on their topics. One may argue that because our focus is on changes on the left–right scale and because we test how GDP growth mediates the effect of NCMs, NCMs that focus on economic policies may have larger effects on political parties compared to other NCMs that are driven by non-economic policies or events (such as scandals). In the presence of weak economic performance these economy-driven NCMs would more strongly highlight the failings of governing parties. In the presence of strong economic performance, on the other hand, these economic NCMs would be seen even more sceptically as attempts by opposition parties to damage the otherwise strong performance evaluations of governments. We test these possibilities with the *Economic NCMs* and *Other NCMs* models in Table 3.²¹ As expected, we see that the coefficient for $NCMs \times GDP$ is larger for economic NCMs than non-economic NCMs. While the interaction coefficient fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance for non-economic NCMs, the plot of the marginal effects (see the

online supplementary document) shows that non-economic NCMs still push parties away from the government's position at low levels of economic performance (i.e., when *real GDP per capita growth* is less than about -2.5 per cent). These results suggest that while NCMs that are about economic policies strongly clarify government's weaknesses and motivate parties to change their left-right positions, NCMs on non-economic issues and events still affect evaluations of the government and encourage parties to move away from the government's position.

Furthermore, we also examined the possibility that non-economic NCMs may result in ideological change in those specific positions rather than a change in the overall left-right position. Unfortunately, finding an issue area with a significant number of NCMs is challenging since NCMs in our data are on a wide range of topics. Nevertheless, in the online supplementary document we show preliminary evidence that NCMs related to military issues have a strong and negative effect on party policy shifts relative to the government's position on pro- and anti-military issues. We also tested whether institutional constraints with respect to NCMs (e.g., whether a constructive no-confidence motion is required) condition our relationship. The findings we report in the online supplementary document suggest that institutional constraints on proposing NCMs do not condition ideological shifts.

Conclusion

We theorised that NCMs act as (noisy) signals for political actors in a world where parties' electoral fortunes are largely uncertain. We presented a theory that builds on the work by Williams (2011) and argued that opposition parties would not want to present policies that are similar to the policies of an incompetent government when the government is challenged by NCMs. As a result, opposition parties have incentives to move away from the positions held by the government that have been the target of attacks by the opposition. Yet, we also showed that these NCMs are noisy signals and hence their effects on opposition party strategies depend on information about the government's performance.

One of the main contributions of this project is the use of NCMs as factors that affect party strategies. A wide variety of policy outcomes can trigger NCMs, including scandals (e.g., France in May 2006 over the Clearstream affair), terrorism (e.g., France in February 1992), losses by state-owned companies (e.g., Austria in December 1985) and territorial devolution (e.g., Britain in March 1979) (*Keesing's Record of World Events 1960–2006*: 47280, 38782, 34110 and 29609). These are all important policy outcomes that had substantial effects on election results and the subsequent composition of governments, yet all would be virtually ignored in previous empirical models of ideological change. This is also the first study, to our knowledge, that examines how parliamentary events can influence election results and party policy shifts.

While the empirical evidence is consistent with our theory that NCMs act as signals, it is important to further explore the factors influencing the credibility – and thus the overall effect – of the signal. A number of different circumstances and conditions may influence the signal's credibility including, among others, the characteristics of the opposition party, media attention to the NCMs, voter information about NCMs and circumstances around

the NCMs, the extent of support for the NCMs, and the salience of the policy issue that is the topic of the NCM. Controlling for these conditions would require a massive expansion of the dataset and is thus beyond the scope of this project. Nevertheless, we are confident that our theoretical model and empirical results accurately capture the dynamics of performance and ideological change, and believe that this article is a first step toward understanding the effects of NCMs on party policies.

Another interesting question for future research is to examine the consequences of these policy changes for elections. We have argued that opposition parties are active agents that would like to capitalise on government losses in the presence of NCMs. They distance themselves from a failing government to increase their chances to win in the elections. Whether they actually benefit from these changes and gain votes is an interesting question to examine in the future. Acknowledging that there are multiple factors that affect election results from incumbency status to clarity of responsibility and performance, if one finds that there is evidence that policy shifts in response to NCMs affect opposition parties, this would provide further evidence for the implications of NCMs for political competition, beyond their effects on government performance, as Williams (2011) shows, and on opposition party shifts, as we have examined here.²²

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Notes

1. 'No-confidence motions' are defined as legislative motions proposed by some or all opposition parties against the government. Therefore, they are different from confidence motions put forward by government parties themselves, typically for the purposes of bringing cohesion to the governing coalition (e.g., Huber 1996).
2. This expectation is consistent with Adams and Merrill's (2009) work on valence effects on position-taking for policy-seeking parties, and runs counter to Schofield (2003). Adams and Merrill show with a spatial model that policy-seeking high-valence parties are expected to move away from the centre. Our focus is on shifts away from the government, and while we do not argue that all opposition parties are high-valence parties, our findings show some support for the Adams and Merrill (2009) model.
3. Our focus is on opposition parties for several reasons. First, shifting their positions may prove more difficult for governing parties since voters have information about the government's performance in office (Cho & Endersby 2003). In addition, voters tend to evaluate government parties more on performance and less on issue proximity (Alvarez et al. 2000), which reduces the value of these types of strategic shifts for governing parties. Third, while opposition parties would look hypocritical if they criticised the government and would not change their positions, government parties do not have similar motivations. Finally, while governing parties' responses to NCMs are also interesting to explore, modeling the various responses of different governing parties (such as

minor versus major coalition partners) is challenging and should be the topic of a different article. Nevertheless, as a preliminary test, we replicated our models for governing parties. We report these findings in the online supplementary document, and show that governing parties similarly move away from their previous position but the effect is not statistically significant. The supplementary document is available on our webpage at: <http://web.missouri.edu/~williamslaro/>.

4. In the section on sensitivity checks, we show that our results stay robust when we use scandals as another indicator of government performance.
5. In the set of opposition parties we have include both NCM-proposers and non-proposers. While opposition parties may all unite to propose an NCM, usually a subset of opposition parties challenges the government. We test our hypothesis using all opposition parties together, but we also test whether proposing the NCM conditions our results (see column 3 in Table 3).
6. One possibility that potentially complicates our model is that NCMs are endogenous to GDP growth. We tested the effect of GDP growth on the likelihood of NCMs in a model where the dependent variable is a dummy variable for the existence or absence of a NCM and the main independent variable is the GDP growth rate. There is no statistically significant effect of growth on the likelihood of NCMs (p -value = 0.92). Hence we can rule out this potential source of endogeneity.
7. There are 25 advanced democracies in the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data. Out of those 25 countries, we exclude the United States and Switzerland because the presidential system in the former and the federal system in the latter with rotation of power do not allow any NCMs. We also exclude Israel, Japan, Turkey and Luxembourg because we do not have data for NCMs in these countries. We present the details of our sample in our online supplementary document (see Note 3 above).
8. The actual party positions in our data range between -64.3 and $+59.8$, with a mean of -4.41 and a standard deviation of 22.93 .
9. There are alternative datasets for party left–right positions estimated using expert surveys (see, e.g., Huber & Inglehart 1995; Benoit & Laver 2006) or opinion polls (see, e.g., Adams et al. 2011). However, none of these datasets covers the range of issues, countries and time-period that the CMP data cover. Moreover, the CMP party program codings generally correlate with these other widely used datasets on party positioning (Hearl 2001; Laver et al. 2003).
10. The CMP data are the most comprehensive time-series cross-sectional data on party positions. The drawback of the data, however, is that we do not have information on party positions, hence on government positions, within election periods. We calculate the position of the government at time $t-1$ also because this is one of the few informational cues the parties have when they start writing their manifestos. Most of the time, they do not observe the current manifesto positions of other parties before they start writing their own manifestos.
11. In our dataset, there are 73 cases out of 570 where the opposition party leapfrogged the government position, and in 32 of these cases they are coded as moving away from the government. We replicated our analyses by dropping those 32 cases where the opposition party leapfrogged the government and was coded as ‘moving away’ from the government. Our results stay robust when we exclude these cases.
12. *Keesing's World Archives* relies on leading international newspapers, which means that these NCMs meet our theory's basic requirements of being prominently reported in the country's media.
13. We also tested our models using different time-frames, such as the 18-month period before an election and the 24-month period. While the results are largely consistent with the results we report below, they weaken to some extent as we extend the time period. This is not surprising given that elapsed time has been shown to have a modifying effect on party behaviour (Somer-Topcu 2009).
14. In a robustness check in the online supplementary document we control for the possibility that opposition parties may be instead responding to previous election results (Somer-Topcu 2009) or shifts in the same direction as the median voter (Adams et al. 2004; Ezrow et al. 2011). The results suggest that previous vote change has no influence on ideological change, but opposition parties tend to move in the same direction (relative to the government) as the median voter. More importantly, our key interactive relationship is robust to these changes.
15. The Lagrange multiplier test fails to reject the null hypothesis of no serial correlation when we include the lagged dependent variable into the model.
16. To eliminate any methodological concerns we tested our results with panel-corrected standard errors and different clusters. The overall shape of the relationship remains consistent with the models presented

- in the manuscript. Another potential methodological problem is the measurement error present in the CMP data (Benoit et al. 2009). Nevertheless, to the extent there is measurement error in the CMP-based estimates of parties' left–right positions, this should attenuate the parameter estimates in the empirical analyses and thereby bias these tests against providing statistically significant support for the hypotheses.
17. As a sensitivity check we replicate our model including NCMs that passed in the parliament. The results were robust and are available in the online supplementary document.
 18. We also examined the direct effect of an NCM (not mediated by the information on economic performance) on opposition party change. As expected, this additive model does not show a statistically significant effect for NCMs if we do not control for the mediating effect of economic performance. These results are available in the online supplementary document.
 19. We note that although the R^2 values might seem small, overall they are in line with other studies using the CMP left–right locations of parties as the dependent variable (see, e.g., Adams et al. 2006; Somer-Topcu 2009).
 20. Note that because the proposers dummy variable is a subcategory of the NCM variable, we cannot interact it with the NCM variable or add a triple interaction variable between the proposers, NCMs and GDP growth.
 21. 40 per cent of the NCMs in our data were proposed to challenge the economic policies of the governments.
 22. In preliminary models (available in the online supplementary document), we find that shifts toward the government's position in the presence of two or more NCMs cost the opposition parties at least half a percentage point.

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