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Protest and Opposition Parties' Election Strategies

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Political parties use heuristics or “cognitive shortcuts” to adopt election policies under conditions of uncertainty. We contend that protest against the government can be another form of such heuristics, which opposition parties employ. When incumbents face high levels of demonstrations, opposition parties have incentives to distance their policies from them. Empirically, this “protest distancing” effect is supported by two-way fixed-effects models, a selection estimator, and matching analyses of opposition parties’ programmatic policy positions across 24 European democracies between 2000-2015. The findings advance our understanding of parties’ election strategies and the implications of political protest.

Keywords: Elections; Opposition Parties; Party Policy Positions; Political Representation; Protest

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Political parties are responsive to rival parties' policy positions (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Meguid 2005, 2008; Spoon 2011; Williams and Whitten 2015; Williams et al. 2016) and election outcomes (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020; Abou-Chadi and Orłowski 2016; Lindvall, Rueda, and Zhai 2023). Studies have also emphasized the international influences on parties, including how parties abroad can shape domestic party positions (e.g., Böhmelt et al. 2016; 2017; Schleiter et al. 2021; Senninger et al. 2021; Ezrow et al. 2021), or how party platforms respond to economic globalization (Adams et al. 2009; Ward et al. 2011). Combining this information about other parties' positions, past election results, parties abroad, etc., parties may choose to retain or alter their policies (e.g., Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012; Greene 2015; Budge 1994; Budge et al. 2010); emphasize specific issue areas while de-emphasizing others (Aragonès et al. 2015); make clear or ambiguous policy commitments (Lo et al. 2016); select broad or narrow appeals (Somer-Topcu 2015); or de-emphasize issues altogether to focus on valence (Stokes 1992; Clark 2009; see also Clark and Leiter 2014).

The following research evaluates whether political parties respond systematically to political protest.¹ Protest behavior has risen considerably over the past few decades (Dalton 2020). Dalton (2020: 57) suggests that protest now is essentially a mainstream form of political participation, because protest activity has become “more common than some other conventional forms of [political] action.” This is consistent with Norris (2002: 190-191) who states that “new social movements may be adopting mixed action repertoires combining traditional acts such as voting and lobbying with a variety of alternative modes, such as internet networking, street protests, consumer boycotts, and direct action.” The increase in protest behavior is important, in part, because it can affect government outside of voting and in between elections. Its role becomes even more meaningful when considering the trend of declining party membership in European

¹ Following the “PolDem” Protest Dataset by Kriesi et al. (2020), we define protest as “politically motivated public gatherings such as demonstrations, marches, rallies, camps, meetings, [and] vigils.” Also note the related literature on parties actively getting involved in protests themselves (e.g., Somma 2018; Semenov et al. 2016; Hutter 2016).

democracies (Van Biezen et al. 2012).² And, furthermore, protest is associated with a number of political phenomena (see also Munoz and Anduiza 2019; Hager et al. 2022; Wouters 2019), including elite roll-call voting behavior (Gause 2022), public trust in elites (Valentim 2021), parties' questions in parliament (Hutter and Vliegenthart 2018), or issue salience in public opinion (Bernardi et al. 2021).

The focus on opposition parties, instead of governing parties, is due to the expectation that emerges if protest indicates the popularity of the government's policy position, i.e., the status quo. We assert that opposition parties will distance themselves from the status quo policy position of governing parties after protest occurs. By contrast, predictions concerning governing parties – and how or whether they will respond to protest, given institutional constraints on government policy change (Budge et al. 2012) – are less clear. Klüver and Spoon (2016) report similar findings with respect to issue priorities in the electorate, i.e., governments are less responsive to shifts in issue priorities within the electorate. By contrast, opposition parties are more willing to adapt or change their pledges from their previous election manifestos (see also Somer-Topcu 2009).³

We argue that opposition parties use protest as a heuristic or a “cognitive shortcut” to craft their policy images. Hutter and Vliegenthart (2018) contend that parties' activity in parliament responds to media reports of protest. We extend this finding that links parties and protests to examine how opposition parties systematically shift their policy positions when protests occur. The expectation that we develop relies on traditional insight that political parties operate in a context of uncertainty (Budge 1994: 445; see also Somer-Topcu 2009, 2015). This, in turn, creates incentives for them to rely on heuristics (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982; see also Rosenau 1990) – and we contend that opposition parties use protest as one of these shortcuts to decide whether to emulate or distance from governing parties' policies. Ultimately, we develop

² Our study implies that protest may be related to policy outcomes through its influence on opposition parties' policy positions.

³ We still return to the issue of governing parties moving in the Supporting Information (SI).

the claim that opposition parties will systematically distance their programs from those of governing parties when there are political protests against the incumbent. One prominent example of opposition parties engaging in “protest distancing” is France, where the Yellow Vest movement (“Gilets Jaunes”) formed in late 2018 to protest the government’s economic policies and rising inequality. In response to this movement, opposition parties positioned themselves further from the governing policies of the Macron administration.⁴

While it may appear intuitive that opposition parties react to protests by distancing themselves from the parties in power, such a response is far from guaranteed. Protests could simply be seen as noisy and ambiguous signals of public discontent, frequently involving heterogeneous actors and demands that are difficult to interpret (see Wouters and Walgrave 2017). Moreover, aligning with protest movements can entail substantial risks, including electoral backlash if protests are perceived as radical or unrepresentative (Feinberg et al. 2020).

Empirically, we analyze election manifestos of 153 opposition parties and 104 governing parties in 24 European democracies between 2000 and 2015. We use two-way fixed-effects models, a selection estimator, and matching. These different specifications essentially compare governing parties being exposed to protests with those incumbents that have not experienced similar events (e.g., Fowler and Hall 2015: 45), and also account for the fact that protests, riots, and demonstrations are not randomly assigned (Meyer 2004; Fisher et al. 2005). Instead, protest behavior becomes more likely when economic grievances and political opportunity structures are given (Bermeo and Bartels 2014; see also Kurer et al. 2019), and ignoring this process may bias estimates of protest effects. Ultimately, our findings show that domestic opposition parties tend to distance their positions from those of governing incumbents across the left-right dimension.

The “protest distancing” effect we identify advances research on parties’ election strategies (e.g., Dassonneville 2018; Dassonneville et al. 2025; Klüver and Spoon 2016; Adams 2001;

⁴ See online at: <https://tinyurl.com/2zcrkn3s>.

Spoon 2011), and on the effects of protest (Munoz and Anduiza 2019; Hager et al. 2022; Wouters 2019). With respect to explaining parties' election strategies, previous work emphasizes the role of the median voter and rival parties' positions (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Williams 2015), strategies that different party types employ (Meguid 2005, 2008; Adams et al. 2006; De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Pereira 2020; see also Bischof and Wagner 2020), or the role of electoral systems (Cox 1990; Dow 2001, 2011; Ezrow 2010). We contribute to this research on party competition by demonstrating that protest influences opposition parties' election strategies.

Our work also adds to the understanding of the effects of protest. Protests are related to public opinion (Branton et al. 2014; Valentim 2026; Madestam et al. 2013), as well as voter and elite behavior (Engist and Schafmeister 2022; Bernardi et al. 2021; Gause 2022). Protest has also been shown to influence parties' questions in parliament (Hutter and Vliegenthart 2018) and election results (Bremer et al. 2020; Valentim 2026). By modeling opposition parties' policy positions as a function of earlier protest behavior, we disclose that protest systematically shapes opposition parties' policy positions.⁵

Governing Parties, Protest, and Opposition “Protest Distancing”

Numerous studies argue and find that political parties shape their election strategies under uncertainty (Budge 1994; Budge et al. 2010; Lindvall, Rueda, and Zhai 2023). Parties can respond to this uncertainty by relying on heuristics, i.e., “cognitive shortcuts” that may help produce rational action in uncertain and complex environments (e.g., Tversky and Kahneman 1974, 1982; see also Weyland 2005). Kahneman and Frederick's (2002: 53) definition of heuristics is that “judgment is modified by a heuristic when an individual assesses a specified target attribute of judgment by substituting another property of that object – the heuristic attribute

⁵ Our results also have direct implications for political polarization (McCarty et al. 2006). Our central finding is that opposition parties distance their policy positions from the government in the wake of protest. But we also show in the SI that the cumulative effect of “protest distancing” increases polarization of party systems. That is, parties, on balance, distance themselves from the government by adopting more extreme positions from the median. Indeed, the link between protest and polarization has been highlighted in the German context (Heinze and Weisskircher 2022; see also Hutter and Weisskircher 2022).

– which comes more readily to mind” (see also Kollman et al. 1992, 1998; Bendor et al. 2005; Jackson 2003). Note that heuristics and biases are closely related (Kahneman and Frederick 2002), with heuristics potentially leading to biases (and vice versa, with biases influencing the choices of heuristics). Heuristics can thus lead to relevant information being overlooked (e.g., Pereira 2021). Nevertheless, there is evidence that political parties do use heuristics. For example, Somer-Topcu (2009) asserts that electoral defeat leads parties to conclude that the electorate has moved away from their position (Somer-Topcu 2009: 240). Similarly, heuristics have been shown to facilitate transnational policy diffusion (Böhmelt et al. 2016, 2017; Ezrow et al. 2021; Schleiter et al. 2021; Wiesehomeier et al. 2026) as parties take cues from the most relevant and visible (successful) precedents set by their foreign peers.

Although the studies above focus on party organizations (not individuals) employing heuristics, several studies apply the “heuristics” framework to individuals within parties, e.g., politicians, as well. Butler and Vis (2023) evaluate how the use of heuristics of key policymakers, including Ministers and their advisers, led to misperceptions about the electorate (see also Stolwijk and Vis 2021). Pereira (2021) similarly identifies misperceptions of (individual) Swedish parliamentarians and Swiss representatives, showing that the “availability” heuristic⁶ leads them to prioritize political preferences of high-status voters over those of the general electorate.

Our application of the heuristics framework is nuanced in that we expect that political protest against incumbents is associated to policy “distancing” by opposition parties rather than

⁶ The literature generally identifies two heuristics in political behavior: the availability heuristic and the representativeness heuristic. On one hand, “a person is said to employ the availability heuristic whenever he estimates frequency or probability by the ease with which instances or associations can be brought to mind” (Tversky and Kahneman 1982: 164). On the other hand, under the representativeness heuristic, “probabilities are evaluated by the degree to which A resembles B” (Tversky and Kahneman 1974: 1124). In the context of party competition and election performance, these heuristics may actually suggest that opposition parties will emulate governing parties. According to the availability heuristic, a party’s subjective probability of a certain policy helping it to win office will increase with the ease with which it can be recalled that incumbents successfully adopted this policy as part of their winning platforms. And the representativeness heuristic implies that a party may judge its chances of success are higher if its policies resemble those of incumbents (see also Ezrow et al. 2021).

emulation. What incumbent governments do and experience are both *visible* and *relevant* for opposition parties. Participation in government is visible because it attracts disproportionate media coverage (Green-Pedersen et al. 2018; Hopmann et al. 2011; Schoenbach et al. 2001; Semetko 1996); and it is relevant because information about the effectiveness of incumbents' programmatic stances is provided. In particular, protests indicate that governing parties' policies are unsuccessful. Furthermore, participants in protest tend to have higher levels of turnout (Norris 2002) and, thus, electoral punishment could become more likely as a result.

In sum, we argue that the government and its policies are deemed more unsuccessful when public protest against them occurs. This constitutes a relevant and visible precedent for opposition parties in the system. Thus, we propose a “protest distancing” effect, whereby *opposition parties will distance their own policy programs from parties in office when protest occurs.*

Sample, Data, and Variables

In order to test our theoretical expectation, we combined several sources on political parties and protest behavior to create a unique time-series cross-sectional data set comprising information from 24 European democracies between 2000 and 2015. The unit of analysis in these data is the “opposition party–incumbent party election-year.” That is, for each year in which a national election takes place, we create observations that pair each opposition party with each governing party. The incumbent or opposition status of a party refers to the term before the election under study. For example, the UK held a general election in 2015, and the incumbent coalition government of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats was in office since 2010. We thus obtain two observations for the Labour party in 2015: one paired with the Conservatives and a second paired with the Liberal Democrats.⁷ The dyadic structure is ideal for modeling whether

⁷ We code government and opposition parties already if they only spent one day in the government or the opposition, respectively. This considers cases where a party leaves the government before an election and becomes a member of the opposition.

opposition parties tend to distance themselves from incumbents. In the case of single-party governments, there is only one observation per opposition party for each election.

New parties enter the data set after their first election and, similarly, parties leave the data set when they no longer compete in national elections. To define parties, their entry and exit dates, we rely on the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP; Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; Volkens et al. 2015). All parties are included, including regional, agrarian, and other small (specialized) party families coded by the CMP. After accounting for missing values, we obtain a total of 641 *opposition party–incumbent party* election-year observations.

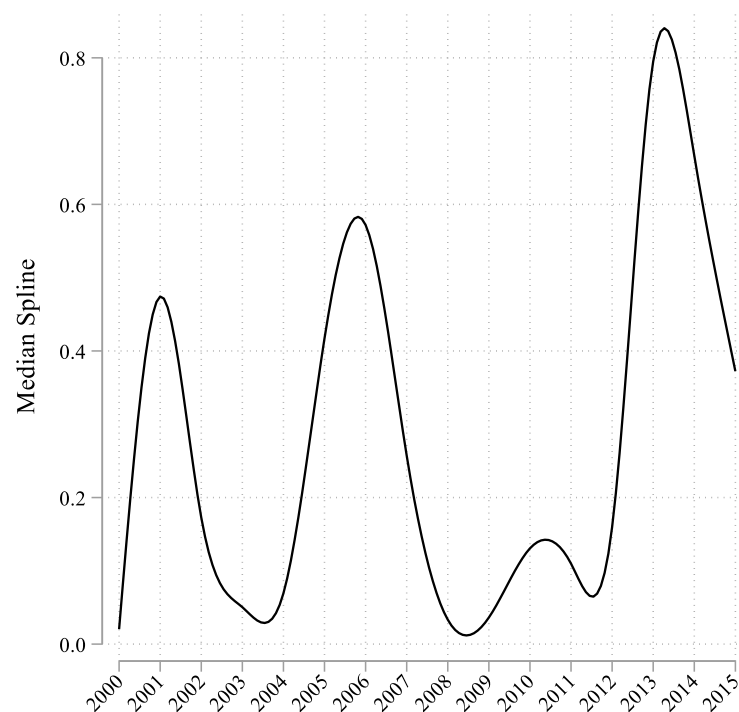
For the dependent variable, our starting point is the CMP’s left-right measure on party positions (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; Volkens et al. 2015). Left-right positions represent a crucial orientation for voters: indeed, left-right congruence between voters and parties is a stronger predictor of vote choice if compared with congruence on other political subdimensions (Lichteblau, Giebler, and Wagner 2020; see also Lachat 2018).⁸ We first rescaled the original CMP information to an interval ranging from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right) to make it consistent with the median voter scale used below. In turn, for each election, we calculate the absolute squared change in an opposition party’s distance to an incumbent party since the last election.⁹ For example, Germany had national elections in 2009 and 2013. After the former election, a coalition government comprising the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the liberals (FDP) emerged. In turn, for the 2013 election, each parliamentary opposition party (the Left, the Greens, and the Social Democrats) is paired with each government party (CDU/CSU and the FDP). In 2009, the absolute squared distance between, e.g., the Greens and the CDU/CSU was about 1.007; in 2013, the absolute squared distance between these platforms was about 1.624, with the absolute squared distance of these two values being 0.381. Adding the value of 1

⁸ Ideally, we would also explore effects for additional dimensions such as immigration. Data availability prevents us from conducting these analyses, which we suggest for future research in the conclusion.

⁹ Not calculating the squared value and, instead, using the absolute distances does not affect the substance of our findings.

and log-transforming this estimate, we obtain 0.323. This is the value of our final dependent variable. Higher values stand for an increase in an opposition party’s policy distance to an incumbent compared to the last election. The variable ranges between 0 and 5.125 in our sample, with a mean of 0.625 and a standard deviation of 0.921. Figure 1 plots the median spline (median value across all countries per year) of our dependent variable for the sample period. A clear pattern is not given, which provides evidence against overtime trending in the data. But there are local peaks around 2001, 2006, 2011, and 2013-2014.

Figure 1. Median Spline for *Distance to Incumbent Party*

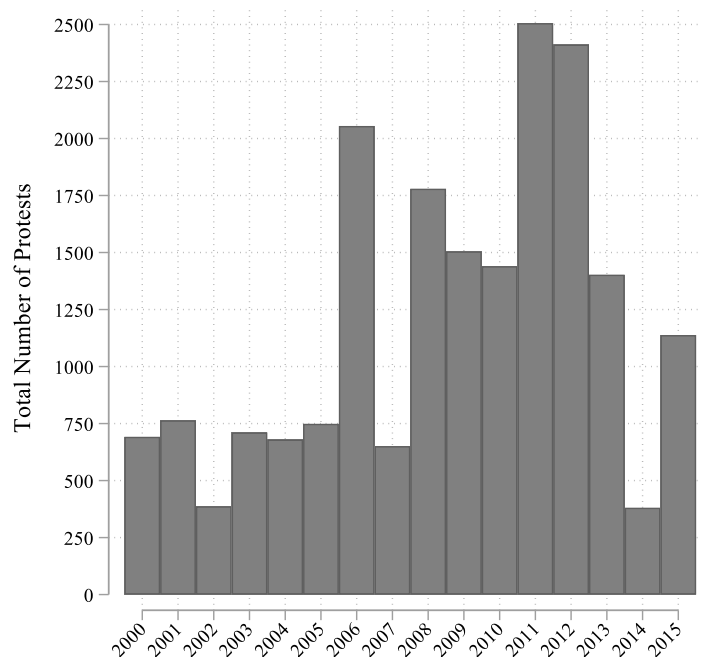


Notes. Graph displays the median spline for *Distance to Incumbent Party*.

Our core explanatory variable is the number of political protests against the government. One of the most comprehensive and recent data sets on political protests in Western democracies is the PolDem Protest Dataset by Kriesi et al. (2020). These data are based on a semiautomated coding of newswire reports in European countries between 2000 and 2015. The unit of analysis in the PolDem data is the protest event, which is defined as a “politically motivated public gatherings such as demonstrations, marches, rallies, camps, meetings, vigils, etc.” The PolDem

data does not code the duration of an event and, thus, a protest counts as one regardless of how many days it lasts. We focus on those events that involve economic claims addressed to public institutions, i.e., the state or the executive. These events may pertain to issues areas such as welfare, budget policies, agricultural policies, labor regulation, or state regulation of the economy more generally. They could be radical, confrontational, or non-radical. We also consider symbolic actions, demonstrations, strikes, blockades, violent protests, and other forms of civil disobedience. Against this background of protest against governments and the availability of protest data, the main coding criteria for us are whether an economic issue is addressed and whether the state/government is the target.¹⁰

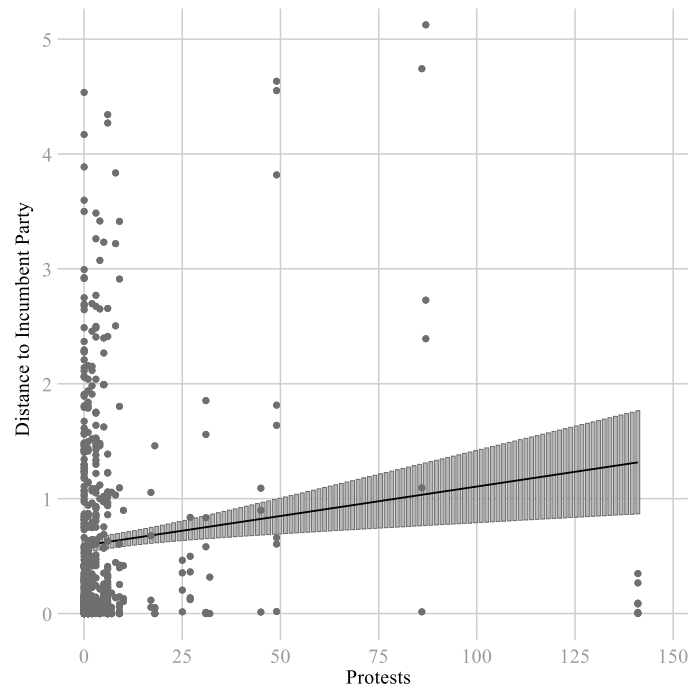
Figure 2. Total Number of Protests per Year



Notes. Graph displays the total number of protests (summed up across all countries) per year.

¹⁰ Protest events directed at private firms, employers, or opposition parties are not considered. Further note that we focus on protests over economic issues directed at public institutions. Based on the nature of these claims, we interpret these protests as challenging the status quo and, by extension, anti-government. While some issue areas may feature pro-government protests or counterprotests, we are not aware of such cases in the economic domain we study. A limitation of our research is that the data do not include sufficient information on the political alignment of protesters, so we cannot empirically assess the role of pro-government mobilization. Future work could explore this question in other policy domains.

Figure 3. Bivariate Relationship between *Distance to Incumbent Party* and *Protests*



Notes. Graph displays scatter plot (dots) for *Distance to Incumbent Party* and *Protests*. The line stands for the linear prediction and the bars signify the 90 percent confidence interval.

We use these data to construct a count variable on the number of protests in the year of an election, but *before* the election month as such. For example, a national election may have taken place in May of a certain year: we count all protests events in January-April, but omit cases in May-December.¹¹ The mean value of our final variable is 6.378 (standard deviation of 18.071) and it ranges between 0 and 141. Figure 2 plots the total number of protests (across all sample countries) per year in our data: there is sufficient variation in the data set and, arguably as expected, the number of protests peaks in 2011-2012 – the height of the European debt crisis. In Figure 3, we explore the bivariate relationship between *Distance to Incumbent Party* and *Protests*. The pairwise correlation (Pearson's r) underlying this graph is 0.111 (significant at the 1 percent level), which provides some preliminary evidence for the positive effect of protests on

¹¹ This operationalization is necessary to avoid counting protests after an election occurred. However, a concern might be that, on average, there are more protests coded for elections that take place later in a year. We address this issue in several ways, including via different operationalizations for the protest variable, in the SI.

opposition parties distancing themselves from governing parties. Clearly, though, the confidence interval increases with higher values for protests as fewer cases like that exist in the data. In the SI, we explore the robustness of our main finding adopting several alternative ways to measure protest, including: only larger protests (i.e., over 10,000 participants for countries with a population of more than five million inhabitants); the cumulative number of protests since the last general election; extending the lag so that we consider the number of protests from the year before an election; and a protest variable that weighs different document sampling probabilities, the newswire focus on single countries, country size, and event occurrence likelihood. The corresponding models also address the issue that party manifestos may be developed well before an election as such (Däubler 2012; Dolezal et al. 2021).

We also consider several control variables that are all temporally lagged to avoid issues stemming from post-treatment bias, to address concerns over alternative influences of parties' distancing to incumbent parties, and to allow for delayed responses by parties. First, we control for the absolute squared distance between a political party and the median voter. The position of the median voter is derived from Eurobarometer data (Schmitt and Scholtz 2005) on respondents' left-right self-placement on a scale of 1 (left) to 10 (right). We employ Tukey's method (see Böhmelt et al. 2016, 2017) to calculate the country-level median voter position from the individual-level data. The information is measured in the calendar year before a focal election, which also ensures that the data are compiled before protests took place. We then subtract this variable from a party's policy position in the last election and calculate the absolute squared value. This variable captures how far a political party was in the previous election from the political center ground in the electorate. Presumably, parties farther away from the median voter before have more space to position themselves in a current election. We create two such variables: one for the opposition party of an observation, and one for the incumbent party of that dyad in our data set. As party positions are not only affected by the position of the median voter,

but also shaped by what other (rival) parties do (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Williams 2015; Williams and Whitten 2016), we interact the two variables using a multiplicative specification.

Second, Böhmelt et al. (2016, 2017) show that political parties also learn from parties abroad. Foreign parties are often emulated if they were effective with their policy programs to the extent that they were able to secure positions in the government after an election (see also Ezrow et al. 2021). Eventually, due to the influence of political parties that recently governed abroad, political parties shift positions. We thus consider a spatial variable comprising information on the party-policy positions of all foreign parties that governed recently, i.e., in the year before the last election. We expect a negative and significant coefficient for this variable: successful parties abroad can influence domestic parties; in turn, within the focal country, opposition parties might be less inclined to distance themselves from the incumbent.

Third, we control for the electoral performance and, hence, the size of an opposition party using seat share that we capture with the data from the CMP (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; Volkens et al. 2015). Larger parties likely have less flexibility in positioning themselves on the left-right scale as they have an incentive to moderate their positions (Abou-Chadi and Orłowski 2016).

Finally, relying on the World Bank Development Indicators, we include a variable on the economic circumstances of a country: economic growth. We compiled the World Bank's GDP data, which captures the sum of gross value added by all resident producers in the economy plus any product taxes and minus any subsidies not included in the value of the products. Data are in constant 2000 billion US Dollars. We then subtract this variable's lagged values from its current ones to obtain the growth measure. As demonstrated in Williams et al. (2016), parties respond to worsening economic conditions by emphasizing the economy, which can also affect the campaign strategies of other parties.

Estimation and Identification

The main empirical models we present are based on two-way fixed effects OLS regression, a Heckman selection model, and Coarsened Exact Matching. First, the fixed effects are based on opposition parties and years and, thus, control for unobserved (time-invariant unit-level) influences and common temporal shocks.¹² We also cluster the standard errors by opposition party. We also consider the robustness of our findings when using random effects or excluding unit-level fixed effects from the estimation in the SI. None of these changes in our design affects the substance of the findings.

Second, protests do not occur at random (Meyer 2004; Fisher et al. 2005; Beremo and Bartels 2014; see also Kurer et al. 2019), but their onset follows strategic patterns. The fixed-effects models control for selection effects to some degree, but we consider Coarsened Exact Matching (CEM; Blackwell et al. 2009; Iacus et al. 2012) to pre-process the data. This allows us to identify a direct influence stemming from political protests with more precision as we analyze a sample that is virtually identical in the control variables: opposition party–incumbent party election-years only differ in whether they have seen protest occurrence or not.

Third, we model the strategic process of protest “onset” and the association with opposition parties distancing to the government explicitly as a two-stage process. The first stage is the “selection of protest,” i.e., citizens make the decision to protest or not, while the second stage pertains to the correlation of the number of demonstrations with opposition parties’ distancing. Since features that are linked to the consequences of protests may also affect the prospects for whether a demonstration forms in the first place, e.g., (unobserved) influences pertaining to the “protest culture” of a country (Meyer 2004; Fisher et al. 2005; Beremo and Bartels 2014; see also Kurer et al. 2019), the two stages could be considered jointly as they are unlikely to be independent of each other. As discussed in Böhmelt (2010), features that affect the likelihood of protest onset in the first place may also influence the association of protest with opposition

¹² For example, the two-way fixed effects model used in this setting controls for non-varying country-specific legislation on protests or large parts of the EU’s influence on the economy during our observation period.

parties' behavior in turn. We employ a Heckman (1979) selection model correspondingly, where the estimated mean function in the outcome stage is conditioned on the first-stage selection process, and thereby provides a consistent estimate for the truncated distribution of the second-stage sample (Heckman 1979). The Heckman estimator is appropriate as long as at least one variable influences only the first, but not the second. Existing literature has suggested a number of structural variables that may affect the decision to protest, which refer to domestic-level (macro) economic indicators and will be discussed in greater detail below. We treat these as sole influences of the selection stage (and not as determinants of the second stage where we model how protests are associated with opposition party distancing) to meet the estimator's exclusion restriction.

The combination of the three different estimation strategies is important as, on their own, each approach has certain shortcomings and cannot fully address concerns over selection bias or a causal influence on opposition party distancing. However, considered together, the two-way fixed effects regression models, the CEM, and the Heckman selection model help support teasing out and identifying a clear association between protests and our dependent variable.

Empirical Results

We expect that protest against the government leads to opposition parties distancing themselves from the policy positions of incumbents. Hence, our core explanatory variable, *Protests*, should be positively and significantly related to the outcome variable: an increased absolute distance to an incumbent party since the last election. Table 1 presents five two-way fixed effects OLS regression models: Model 1 includes *Protests* as the only independent variable next to the fixed effects for opposition parties and years. Model 2 additionally comprises the controls on parties' distances to the median voter and the multiplicative interaction. Model 3 further controls for economic growth and the spatial variable on foreign incumbents' policy positions. Model 4 is our full model as we consider all explanatory variables discussed above, including parties' seat shares

before an election. Finally, in Model 5, we only consider coalition governments to explore whether there is a difference in effects across single-party or multi-party executives (see, e.g., Powell and Whitten 1993; Whitten and Palmer 1999; Anderson 2000; Hobolt et al. 2013). Data for incumbency are taken from Döring and Manow (2012).

Table 1. Opposition Parties' Distancing to Incumbents – The Importance of Political Protests

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Protests	0.006* (0.003)	0.007** (0.003)	0.006** (0.003)	0.006** (0.002)	0.009** (0.004)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter		0.453* (0.268)	0.487* (0.249)	0.498** (0.244)	0.465** (0.232)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter		0.889*** (0.164)	0.918*** (0.163)	0.932*** (0.164)	0.891*** (0.167)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter *		-0.873*** (0.229)	-0.893*** (0.231)	-0.921*** (0.234)	-0.969*** (0.228)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter					
GDP Growth			-0.087** (0.038)	-0.104** (0.037)	-0.113*** (0.040)
W _y ^{Foreign Win}			-0.046** (0.020)	-0.051** (0.020)	-0.043** (0.019)
Seat Share				-2.470 (1.625)	-3.177* (1.759)
Observations	641	641	641	622	574
Year and Party FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
AIC	1203.385	1134.100	1102.233	1074.616	979.834

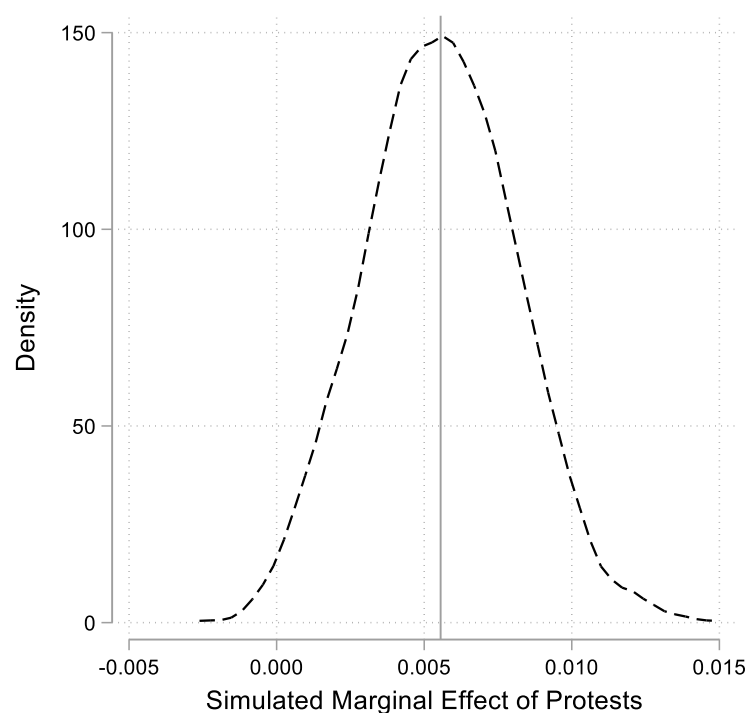
Notes. Table entries are coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; constant as well as year and party fixed effects included in all models, but omitted from presentation.

* p<0.10; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Protests is consistently positively signed and statistically significant in all models of Table 1. The coefficient estimate ranges between 0.006 and 0.009, which translates, on average, to a 7.8 percent increase in the absolute squared distance to an incumbent party for every 10 protests in a country-year before an election. Note that this is the average effect per opposition party; thus, the cumulative effect within the party system on distancing from the government is substantial. We simulate the marginal effect of *Protests* (based on our full model, i.e., Model 4) 1,000 times using the method in King et al. (2000) in Figure 4. The mean value of the simulated marginal-effect parameter is close to our estimations in Table 1. It ranges in [-0.004; 0.014], but, importantly,

only a small share of the 1,000 simulations (2.1 percent of all simulations based on Model 4) is linked to a coefficient estimate of smaller than or equal to 0. The simulated maximum estimate of 0.014 means in substantive terms that there is a 15 percent increase in the absolute squared distance to an incumbent party for every 10 protests in a country-year before an election. Hence, there is robust evidence that *Protests* has, in fact, a positive, significant, and substantive association with our dependent variable.

Figure 4. Simulated Marginal Effect

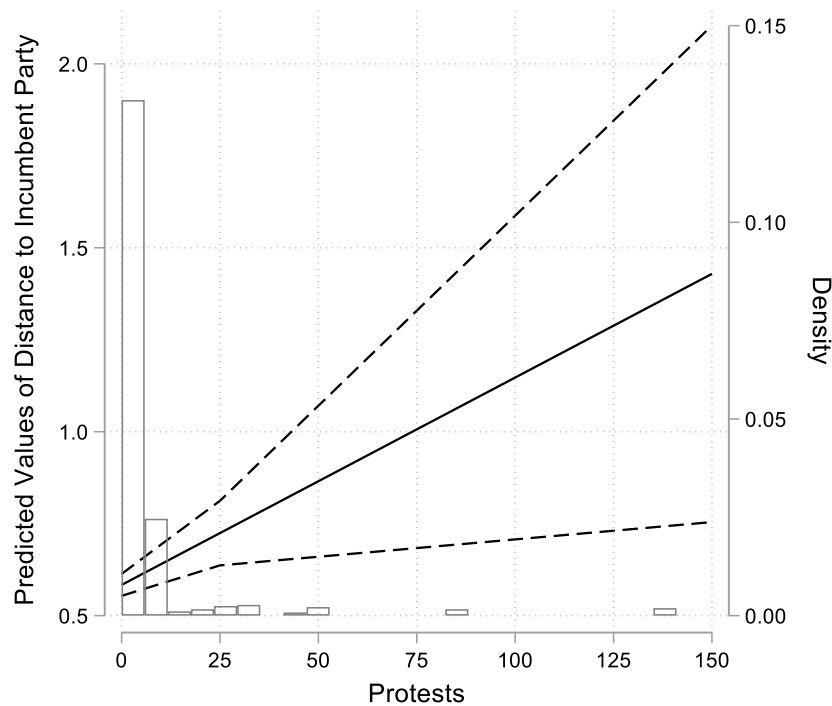


Notes. Graph displays distribution of simulated marginal effect (N=1,000 simulations). The solid line stands for the mean value of the simulated effect. The graph is based on Model 4.

We also plot the predicted values of our outcome variable, *Distance to Incumbent Party*, for the entire range of values of *Protests* (Figure 5). An opposition party's distance to an incumbent rapidly increases with the number of protests: with no or a few protests before an election, the change in the absolute squared distance to a governing party increases by only 0.50. When there were approximately 25 protests, demonstrations, or riots against the economic policy of the executive, opposition parties do distance themselves more strongly from governing parties as the

predicted value is now at almost 0.75. The specific scenarios and predicted values for this comparison are: one protest in an election year is linked to a predicted value of 0.589 for opposition party distancing (95 percent confidence interval in [0.564; 0.614]); conversely, if there have been 25 protest events in an election year, the predicted value of opposition party distancing is now estimated at 0.724 (95 percent confidence interval in [0.636; 0.812]). The two scenarios' estimates are statistically different from each other. Approaching the maximum value of *Protests*, the absolute squared distance between an opposition party and a party of the government is higher by almost 1.50 units. Note, however, the outliers of the protest variable here: we examine this in detail, also by removing extreme values of *Protests*, in the SI.

Figure 5. Predicted Values of Distance to Incumbent Party



Notes. Graph displays the predicted values of *Distance to Incumbent Party*. The dashed lines stand for the 95 percent confidence interval. The distribution of *Protests* is depicted by the histogram on the horizontal axis. The results hold for the matching analysis, which combines observations with and without protests, the Heckman selection model, or for removing outliers (see SI). The graph is based on Model 4.

Table 2. Large Protests, Cumulation of Protests in Election Cycles, and Lagged Protests

	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11
Large Protests	0.013 (0.058)	0.108* (0.056)				
Cumulative Sum of Protests			0.002* (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)		
Lagged Protests (One Year)					0.001 (0.004)	0.015*** (0.003)
Observations	622	356	622	356	570	308
Year and Party FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes. Table entries are coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; constant, controls, as well as year and party fixed effects included in all models, but omitted from presentation.

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

We considered three alternatives for our protest variable. First, larger events may be more likely to be noted by policymakers, making them potentially more influential than smaller riots, demonstrations, or protests. We thus concentrate on “big events,” which had over 10,000 participants for countries with a population of more than five million inhabitants, or which had a participation rate that was above the threshold of the median plus one standard deviation for small countries with fewer than five million inhabitants. Models 6 and 7 are based on this variable *Large Protests*: Model 6 differs from Model 7 in that we take into account the weight introduced in the SI.¹³ Second, rather than counting the number of protest events in an election year before voters went to the polls, we created a cumulative sum of protest events since the last election took place. This variable then counts the number of protests in each country since the last national election, which usually took place four to five years before the focal election. The corresponding findings are presented in Models 8-9, with Model 9 relying again on the weight we introduce in the SI. Third, Models 10 and 11 are based on the number of protests in the calendar year before an election. Events that occurred before an election in the same year are not counted.

¹³ As discussed in the SI, the information in the PolDem data set to code events is based on different sources, e.g., newspapers or news wires, while more than one coder were assigned to specific cases. There are also different sampling probabilities in small, medium-sized, and large countries. To this end, analyses can be weighted by cases with high confidence in event occurrence and correction for sampling probabilities, agency bias, and country size.

The weighted sample is used for Model 11. The findings we summarize in Table 2 generally suggest that our main effect is robust. However, this mostly applies when taking into account the weight. In Models 6 and 10, which omit the weight, the protest variables are positively signed, but only approach statistical significance.

Table 3. Parties' Distancing to Incumbents – CEM and Heckman Selection Model

	Model 12	Model 13 (First Stage)	Model 13 (Second Stage)
Protests	0.021* (0.012)		0.006* (0.003)
Opposition Dist. Median			1.038** (0.183)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter			0.912*** (0.185)
Opposition Dist. Median			-0.838*** (0.246)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter			
GDP Growth		-0.033 (0.026)	-0.042 (0.025)
$W_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	0.002 (0.002)		-0.006 (0.012)
Seat Share			-0.092 (0.424)
Economic Globalization		-0.031** (0.246)	
Unemployment		0.044* (0.025)	
Observations	139		624
Year FEs	No		Yes
AIC	390.668		1,694.458

Notes. Table entries are coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; constant is included in both models, but omitted from presentation; year fixed effects included in Model 13 and also omitted from presentation; including party fixed effects in Model 13 does not lead to model convergence.

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

The models in Table 3 pertain to the analysis of pre-processed data by CEM (Model 12) and the Heckman selection estimator (Model 13). Hence, first, the sample analyzed in Model 12 is virtually identical in the control variables' values and distributions, but data points differ in whether they received the treatment, i.e., protests (binary variable, which we created with the count measure used in Models 1-5), or not. As described by Di Salvatore (2019: 849), CEM

“coarsens the sample on a set of variables; once observations are divided into strata, weights balance the number of treated [...] and untreated [...] observations in each stratum. This alleviates selection bias and model dependence.” We employ matching based on all control variables. The intuition here is to match cases that are similar in all regards, apart from levels of protest, and to evaluate variation in party responses to protest. For the final model estimation presented in Table 3, only the core variable of interest is considered and $W_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$. The latter is the only control variable for which differences across treatment and control groups persisted, and so including it in the analysis of the matched sample helps reducing any remaining imbalances. Second, Model 13 is divided into two stages, and below we report the parameter ρ , which is an estimate of the correlation of the error terms in the two stages.

Examining the results in Table 3 and comparing these with the earlier findings, we see that *Protests* remains positively signed and statistically significant. We obtain a coefficient of 0.021 in Model 12 and 0.006 in Model 13. In Model 13, the first stage comprises *GDP Growth*, *Economic Globalization*, and *Unemployment* as predictors next to the years elapsed since the last protest year, which refers to the cubic polynomial approximation by Carter and Signorino (2010). *GDP Growth* is the same variable as in the second stage of Model 13 and the models of Table 1. *Economic Globalization* is taken from the KOF Index of Globalization and measures the embeddedness of a country in the global network of economic relations. *Unemployment* is based on World Bank data measuring the share of the labor force that is without work but available for and seeking employment. All these variables are lagged by one year. Interestingly for the Heckman estimator, ρ is negative (-0.315) and has a significant Wald χ^2 -test statistic for the independence of the procedure’s two equations (stages): this implies that unobserved features that make protests more likely actually reduce the distancing of opposition parties from the government. Thus, the distancing effects we estimate in Model 13 likely underestimate the magnitude of the relationship since the model does not explicitly account for unobserved factors.

That said, the results presented in Table 3 further increase the confidence in a robust positive correlation of *Protests* with our outcome variable, *Distance to Incumbent Party*.

With respect to the control variables and different specifications used in Table 1, we find that a larger distance of either the opposition party or the government party to the median voter contributes to the distancing of opposition platforms from incumbents. On one hand, when parties were farther away from the median voter and did not enter office in the last election, there were strong incentives to shift positions to presumably converge on the median voter – a finding that is consistent with Bawn and Somer-Topcu (2012). On the other hand, if government parties were farther away from the median voter before, there might be more incentives in the current election to move away from them. Note, however, that we consider both variables, *Opposition Dist. Median Voter* and *Gov. Dist. Median Voter*, in a multiplicative interaction, which implies that each variable on their own can only be interpreted directly when the other constituent term is set to 0, which is not in the range of observed values. Hence, the focus should be on *Opposition Dist. Median Voter * Gov. Dist. Median Voter*, which is negatively signed and significant. This estimate suggests that opposition parties will lower the distance to an incumbent if they were farther away from the median voter before, but the governing party was closer to the “average voter.”

Second, *GDP Growth* is negatively signed and statistically significant in Table 1. The parameter estimate in Model 4 suggests that parties move closer to the government when economic conditions have improved: specifically, there is an 11 percent decrease in the absolute squared distance to an incumbent party for every unit increase of growth. Governing parties’ electoral success still depends a lot on how well the economy does. If voters do better economically, they tend to reward the incumbent (Adams 2012; Somer-Topcu 2015; Williams and Whitten 2015). Hence, opposition parties have little incentive to move away from the governing parties’ positions under periods of economic growth as these distancing shifts would hurt them electorally.

Third, there is also evidence for a negative effect for the spatial variable that is based on foreign incumbent party positions. Opposition parties tend to lower their distance to the incumbent when foreign incumbent parties shift their positions. Learning from parties abroad can be an electorally effective strategy (Ezrow et al. 2021), which implies that moving away from the incumbent – that is influenced by parties abroad and also informs platforms in other countries themselves – is unlikely to be effective during campaigning. Finally, *Seat Share*, our proxy for larger parties, is negatively signed in Model 4-5, but only statistically significant in the latter model when focusing on coalition governments (and omitting single-party governments). Hence, there is some evidence that larger parties find it more difficult to move away from the incumbents' policy positions (Abou-Chadi and Orlowski 2016).

In the SI, we discuss multiple additional analyses. First, we consider an alternative operationalization for the dependent variable. Rather than exploring opposition parties' shifts towards or away from the incumbent's position at the last election, we assess how parties have changed their left-right position vis-à-vis the governing parties since the last year. Second, we consider additional controls on countries' level of globalization and unemployment. Third, we test for autocorrelation and perform a panel-corrected standard error estimation, with no effect on the substantive findings. Moreover, we calculate a generalized methods-of-moments dynamic panel estimator and present a random-effects model. Fourth, in light of the distribution of *Protests*, we examine the influence of outliers. On one hand, we calculate Cook's distance measure (Kim et al. 2001) and re-estimate the main model after removing potential extreme cases. On the other hand, as very few countries have experienced more than 20 protest events, we cap the variable *Protests* at 20 and estimate the core model again. Fifth, we employ a weight on protests that is based on different document sampling probabilities, the newswire focus on single countries, different country sizes, and event occurrence likelihood. Sixth, we explore the possibility of a U-shaped functional form of protest events in that distancing to incumbents first decreases but rises again after a tipping point (as well as how protests are related to party

polarization). In addition, we control for the month in which an election was held and we distinguish between “niche” and “mainstream” parties (see Meguid 2005, 2008) as the theory assumes that distancing to the incumbent is a vote-seeking strategy. Finally, we present a model that considers issue salience (inflation) and its moderating effect, we control for parties’ status in either government or opposition in the previous term, and we explore whether government parties do move too in light of protests.

Conclusion

Our study evaluates how opposition parties’ election strategies and political protest are related. We theorize that a “protest distancing” effect occurs, and opposition parties will seek to distance themselves from governing parties in the wake of political protests against incumbents. This distancing occurs because protest behavior sends a signal to the opposition about where the public stands vis-à-vis existing government policy. Our empirical analyses of 24 European democracies between 2000-2015 provide strong evidence of this distancing dynamic.

The “protest distancing” effect we identify in this research enhances our understanding of parties’ election strategies (e.g., Somer-Topcu 2009, 2015; Spoon 2011) and about the effects of political protest (e.g., Valentim 2026). With respect to parties’ election strategies, studies generally report on numerous factors that affect party positions (for a review, see Adams 2012). We provide a systematic large-scale comparative study showing that parties’ election strategies are influenced by previous protest behavior. When we focus on the protest literature, which has evaluated effects of protest in a number of areas, our work underlines that there are profound effects on parties’ policy offerings in elections.

The results provide several avenues for future research. First, politics in one setting influences or *diffuses* to others (Williams and Whitten 2015; Williams et al. 2016; Böhmelt et al. 2016, 2017, 2024; Senninger et al. 2022). Adams et al. (2022) report that parties will distance their positions from foreign populists who face unique challenges and failures when they reach

government. With foreign policy diffusion in mind, it is possible that the effects on party systems from protests in one country could similarly reverberate across countries when foreign parties observe “protest distancing.”

Moreover, there is future work to be done on the electoral effects of “protest distancing.” It is possible that parties will, when they distance their positions from incumbents after protest, as we suggest, perform better in that election than parties that do not respond to protest. Studying the electoral effects of protest – along the lines of Bremer et al. (2020) who evaluate the conditional effects of economic performance on the relationship between protest and incumbent vote share, or Valentim (2026) who has analyzed the effect of environmental protest on Green party vote shares – would shed light on whether learning from protest by distancing from incumbents is actually a rational response for parties that are motivated by votes.

Yet additional studies will evaluate conditional effects on distancing to evaluate types of government, party, and protest. Do parties distance more from leftist or right-wing incumbents that face protest? It may well be plausible that distancing effects could be amplified when protest against right-wing executives is driven by citizens on the left (see Dalton 2020). Moreover, in preliminary models in the SI, we distinguish between mainstream and niche parties, and we show that the distancing effect occurs for the former more strongly. It would be worthwhile to explore the effects for other types of parties, such as “dominant” and “challenger” parties (De Vries and Hobolt 2020).¹⁴ And future work may also explore moderating influences of the media (see, e.g., Walgrave and Vliegenthart 2012; Poljak 2025).

Moreover, our core claim is also consistent with the opposition using protests as opportunities to attack the government (e.g., Poljak 2023). Exploring in detail parties’ attacks and negative campaigning would go beyond the scope of our research, but it seems to us as an alternative way for opposition parties to demonstrate how they distance themselves from the status quo on the basis of protests. Yet another question involves how governing parties respond to protest.

¹⁴ If distancing is indeed an effective electoral strategy, parties could be more likely to respond in electoral systems that produce disproportional vote-to-seat outcomes that further incentivize vote-seeking behavior (Cox 1990).

Although our focus has been on opposition party policy positions, governing parties may also respond in a number of ways. Here, an analysis of their positions and their *policies* would be welcomed.

Finally, the types of protest can be unpacked further. We focus specifically on protests over economic issues addressed to public institutions. In this policy domain, protests are inherently oriented toward changing existing policies and challenging the status quo, which implies an anti-government or anti-establishment stance. Unlike issue areas such as the environment, migration, or human and LGBTQ+ rights, for example, where pro-government mobilization or organized counterprotests are documented, we are not aware of cases in which economic protests are organized by governing parties or express support for current government policy. While it is thus consistent and logical to claim that the events we analyze are indeed about outside (of the executive) actors protesting against governmental economic policy, we cannot empirically test for or assess the presence and impact of pro-government protests or counterprotests. Future work may try to disaggregate more by protests organized by governing parties or pro-government counterprotests in reaction to opposition parties-led protests. Regardless of how scholars choose to further engage with our work, our findings show that protest influences opposition parties' election strategies.

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Protest and Opposition Parties' Election Strategies – Supporting Information

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Alternative Dependent Variable (Table A1)

Our first robustness check re-estimates the core model (Table 1, Model 4 in the main text) using a different specification for the dependent variable. Rather than exploring opposition parties' shift towards or away from the incumbent's position at the last election, we assess how parties have changed their left-right in relation to the governing parties' position of the last year. On one hand, this reduces the time elapsed between the points in time we use for calculating our outcome measure. On the other hand, temporal variation in the dependent variable decreases with this operationalization as well as values change less frequently over time. Having said that, relying on the alternative specification for the outcome variable does not alter the substance of our main finding: Model A1 shows that *Protests* remains positively signed and statistically significant.

Table A1. Alternative Dependent Variable

	Model A1
Protests	0.005** (0.002)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter	0.863*** (0.235)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter	0.736*** (0.138)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter $\times$ Gov. Dist. Median Voter	-0.816*** (0.203)
GDP Growth	-0.093*** (0.035)
$W_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	-0.049*** (0.019)
Seat Share	-0.090 (0.892)
Constant	7.308*** (2.698)
Observations	622
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$ Standard errors in parentheses.	

Additional Control Variables (Table A2)

In the main article, we have opted for a straightforward, yet parsimonious set of control variables. In the following, we consider two additional items to control for. First, there is the economic component of the KOF Globalization Index (Dreher, 2006). This variable assigns higher values to countries more embedded in the global economic system. Second, there is *Unemployment*, which is based on World Bank data measuring the share of the labor force that is without work but available for and seeking employment. Both variables are lagged by one year and we also use them in the Heckman selection model of the main text. However, neither *Economic Globalization* nor *Unemployment* reach conventional levels of statistical significance in Model A2, while our core explanatory variable, *Protests*, is not affected by the inclusion of these additional controls. The results in Model A2 seem to suggest that both *Economic Globalization* nor *Unemployment* are more directly related to the onset of protests and, at best, affect parties' distancing from the incumbent only indirectly. In fact, the Heckman selection model in the main text points in the same direction.

Table A2. Additional Control Variables

	Model A2
Protests	0.006*** (0.002)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter	0.502** (0.243)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter	0.948*** (0.161)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter $\times$ Gov. Dist. Median Voter	-0.931*** (0.232)
GDP Growth	-0.116*** (0.039)
$W_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	-0.048** (0.020)
Seat Share	-2.501 (1.630)
Economic Globalization	0.060 (0.082)
Unemployment	-0.027 (0.021)
Constant	3.025 (7.201)
Observations	622

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Standard errors in parentheses.

Alternative Estimation Procedures (Table A3)

We replaced the estimation procedure of the main text as we consider three alternatives. First, we performed a Wooldridge test for autocorrelation in panel data and found evidence first order autocorrelation. One approach to address this issue is to rely on panel-corrected standard-error models (Beck and Katz, 1995) and specify that, within panels, there is first-order autocorrelation with the coefficient of this process being common to all panels. This approach addresses measurement errors, assuming that the error is “systematically related to the country, but does not change much over time” (Neumayer, 2003, p.628). Second, rather than fixed effects for units, we consider random effects. The methodological literature increasingly discusses two-way fixed effects and their usefulness, reaching the conclusion that such a specification may be inferior to using random effects (see Imai and Kim, 2021). Third, we present the findings from a generalized method-of-moments (GMM) dynamic panel estimator. This Arellano-Bond estimator contains both the levels and the first difference equations to account for trending in the data. These three estimation procedures are summarized in Table A3. Note the drop in the number of observations: due to the new estimation strategies, we focus on the opposition-party election-year as the unit of analysis and average out the distance to the executive across all government parties. Regardless of the estimation procedure used, though, the variable *Protests* is positively signed and significant, which mirrors the estimates for our models in the main text.

Table A3. Alternative Estimation Procedures

	Model A3 Prais-Winsten	Model A4 Random Effects	Model A5 GMM Estimator
Protests	0.004*** (0.001)	0.006* (0.003)	0.005*** (0.002)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter	0.567** (0.242)	1.074*** (0.209)	0.584*** (0.144)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter	0.842*** (0.202)	0.832*** (0.272)	0.897*** (0.205)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter $\times$ Gov. Dist. Median Voter	-0.816* (0.421)	-1.037*** (0.383)	-0.696** (0.277)
GDP Growth	-0.071*** (0.023)	-0.074*** (0.029)	
$\mathbf{W}_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	0.001 (0.001)	-0.021* (0.012)	
Seat Share	-2.250** (1.071)	-0.133 (0.347)	
Constant	0.034 (0.425)	3.077 (1.900)	-0.602 (0.412)
Observations	307	307	307

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Standard errors in parentheses.

Outliers and Influential Observations (Table A4)

As discussed in the main text, we have identified some overly influential observations in the data, which could bias the findings. We address this problem in two ways. First, using Cook’s distance measure D , which captures the effect of deleting a given observation in light of its residuals or leverage, we identified 60 observations that could be likely outliers. We removed these 60 cases from our sample and re-estimate the core model again for Model A6. Second, Figure 2 in the main text suggests that there are only few observations with more than 100 protests in the year before an election. We thus “cap” the protest variable at 100, i.e., cases with more than 100 protests are recoded as 100, which then constitutes the maximum value of the new variable. We do not omit cases from the analysis, however. Capping the protest variable is based on the idea that there will be decreasing returns with more riots, demonstrations, or any other protest event as soon as a certain threshold is reached. This threshold is 20 (Model A7) and our core result is robust.

Weighted Protest Variable (Table A5)

The PolDem data set is based on a protest event as the unit of analysis. The information to code events is based on different sources, e.g., newspapers or news wires, while more than one coder were assigned to specific cases. There are also different sampling probabilities in small, medium-sized, and large countries. As described in the codebook, “[f]or the numbers to be comparable across countries, we therefore have to adjust for the different sampling probabilities. Accordingly, numbers from countries where we drew a 0.25 sample were multiplied by 4, and those from countries where we drew a 0.5 sample were multiplied by 2.” The number of events at the aggregated macro (country) level is further adjusted by the size of a country’s population and the agency bias of news wires (i.e., news sources tend to focus and report on the larger countries). We

Table A4. Addressing Outliers

	Model A6	Model A7
Protests	0.002* (0.001)	0.023* (0.013)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter	0.277 (0.171)	0.485** (0.243)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter	0.787*** (0.129)	0.900*** (0.157)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter $\times$ Gov. Dist. Median Voter	-0.619*** (0.176)	-0.923*** (0.234)
GDP Growth	-0.048 (0.035)	-0.114*** (0.038)
$\mathbf{W}_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	-0.046*** (0.014)	-0.050** (0.020)
Seat Share	-1.577 (1.136)	-2.395 (1.627)
Constant	6.972*** (2.108)	7.702*** (2.919)
Observations	562	622

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$
Standard errors in parentheses.

assign a cut-off point of 0.5 for the weight, i.e., we consider only those cases with high confidence in event occurrence and correction for sampling probabilities, agency bias, and country size. Employing this weight reduces our sample size to 356, as shown in Model A8. However, *Protests* remains positively signed and statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

Table A5. Weighted Protest Variable

	Model A8
Protests	0.008** (0.003)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter	0.355 (0.331)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter	1.124*** (0.282)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter $\times$ Gov. Dist. Median Voter	-1.334*** (0.392)
GDP Growth	-0.206*** (0.065)
$\mathbf{W}_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	-0.022 (0.055)
Seat Share	-4.318*** (1.415)
Constant	4.970 (8.116)
Observations	356

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$
Standard errors in parentheses.

U-Shaped Protest Impact (Table A6)

As discussed in detail above, there are potential outliers. Removing these from the analysis does not produce qualitatively different results, but we considered the possibility of a U-shaped impact of protest events on opposition parties' distancing from the incumbent. That is, a few protests may not be widely covered in

the media, making it more difficult for parties to learn about the policy mood in the electorate. And even if parties learn about these instances of protest behavior, they may not be enough to provoke parties into considering to distance themselves from the incumbent, which is arguably closer to the median voter as they have just won the elections. Only after a tipping point has been reached might opposition platforms be inclined to move their position away from the governing party. To model this mechanism adequately, we added the square term of *Protests* to the estimations in Table A6: Model A9 is based on the regular *Protests* variable, Model A10 employs the weight as introduced above, and Model A11 focuses on protest events in the year before an election year, i.e., we use the same variable as in Table 2 of the main text.

Table A6. U-Shaped Protest Impact

	Model A9	Model A10	Model A11
Protests	0.021 (0.015)	0.040** (0.018)	-0.013 (0.016)
Protests ²	0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter	0.474** (0.237)	0.301 (0.306)	0.435* (0.227)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter	0.900*** (0.158)	1.034*** (0.262)	0.913*** (0.160)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter $\times$ Gov. Dist. Median Voter	-0.922*** (0.234)	-1.331*** (0.383)	-0.889*** (0.233)
GDP Growth	-0.102*** (0.035)	-0.206*** (0.067)	-0.031 (0.034)
$\mathbf{W}_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	-0.049** (0.020)	-0.011 (0.055)	-0.048** (0.019)
Seat Share	-2.362 (1.643)	-3.780** (1.515)	-2.244 (1.617)
Constant	7.739*** (2.925)	3.263 (8.242)	7.375*** (2.777)
Observations	622	356	615

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$
Standard errors in parentheses.

Table A6 provides little evidence for a U-shaped impact, however. In Model A9, the protest variables are both statistically insignificant. In Model A10, we obtain a positive and significant effect for *Protests*, but, although the estimate for *Protests*² is negative, its effect size is virtually 0. And in Model A11, only *Protests*² is statistically significant at conventional levels (positively signed). In sum, the results in Table A6 do point toward a linear effect of protest events on opposition parties distancing from the incumbent.

Country-Level Polarization (Table A7)

Our central finding is that opposition parties tend to distance their policy positions from the government after protest occurs. An implication of this should be that the cumulative effect of parties' "protest distancing" is the increased polarization of party systems. That is, parties, on balance, will distance themselves from governments by adopting more extreme positions from the median. In Table A7, we show that this relationship holds generally between current levels of protest and future levels of polarization due, in part, to parties' positioning strategies in elections. We present four models in Table A7, based on different operationalizations of polarization. In Models A12-A13, the dependent variable is the level of polarization after an election

outcome. Using data on all parties' positions, we calculated the squared distance of each party from the average party-position value in a given year and weigh this by the total number of parties in the system. Model A12 includes the level of polarization at the last election (lagged dependent variable), but we leave this out in Model A13. Model A14 (with lagged dependent variable) and A15 (without lagged dependent variable) use the standard deviation of parties' policy position in each election-year to arrive at our final, country-level polarization score. Larger values for either operationalization stand for a more polarized party system on the left-right scale. Table A7, which is now based at the country-year level and thus omits all party-level covariates, shows that *Protests* is positively signed and significant, regardless of model specification. Hence, as expected by our argument, one implication of our theory is indeed that more protests in a country are linked to higher levels of party polarization.

Table A7. Country-Level Polarization

	Model A12	Model A13	Model A14	Model A15
Lagged Dependent Variable	0.300*** (0.099)		0.291** (0.109)	
Protests	0.003** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.003* (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)
GDP Growth	0.044** (0.020)	0.037* (0.020)	0.044* (0.025)	0.032 (0.023)
$\mathbf{W}_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	0.012 (0.008)	0.013 (0.008)	0.016 (0.010)	0.018* (0.009)
Constant	-1.750 (1.373)	-1.607 (1.317)	-2.271 (1.540)	-2.308 (1.477)
Observations	78	78	77	77

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Standard errors in parentheses.

Table A8. Controlling for Election Month

	Model A16	Model A17
Protests	0.007** (0.003)	0.034** (0.013)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter	0.522** (0.247)	0.416 (0.257)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter	0.927*** (0.164)	1.052*** (0.210)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter $\times$ Gov. Dist. Median Voter	-0.948*** (0.233)	-1.101*** (0.302)
GDP Growth	-0.090** (0.035)	-0.097** (0.045)
$\mathbf{W}_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	-0.059*** (0.022)	0.005 (0.027)
Seat Share	-2.585 (1.634)	-2.645 (2.122)
Election Month	-0.047 (0.034)	
Constant	9.272*** (3.253)	0.393 (4.154)
Observations	622	394

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Standard errors in parentheses.

Controlling for Election Month (Table A8)

The core explanatory variable in the main text is a count variable on the number of protests in the year of an election, but we leave out any protests after an election as such even if these occurred in the same year. This operationalization avoids the consideration of protests after an election, which would induce endogeneity by default. However, a concern might be that, on average, there are more protests coded for elections that take place later in a year as there are more months for protest to occur preceding the election. We address this in several ways, including a number of different operationalizations for the protest variable above. In Models A16 and A17, additionally, we consider two alternative ways to control for this problem. First, we include a variable capturing the month in which an election took place. Second, we constrain the sample so that years with elections in July, August, September, October, November, or December are omitted from the analysis. We thus focus on elections in the first half of a calendar year only. As shown in Table A8, though, the variable *Election Month* is not statistically significant, while the item *Protests* remains positively signed and significant – even when constraining the sample to election months January-June.

Distinction between Party Types (Table A9)

We further distinguish between niche and mainstream parties as our argument assumes that distancing to the incumbent is a vote-seeking strategy, which then mainly applies to the mainstream parties. Using the CMP data, we coded for each opposition party whether it can be classified as a mainstream or niche party. We group ecologist, left socialist (and other left), nationalist, agrarian, ethnic, and special-issue parties as niche parties. Conversely, social-democratic, liberal, Christian-democratic, and conservative parties belong to the mainstream cluster.

Table A9. Distinction between Party Types

	Model A18 Niche Parties	Model A19 Mainstream Parties
Protests	0.004 (0.003)	0.018** (0.008)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter	0.639* (0.334)	0.397 (0.294)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter	0.840*** (0.224)	1.125*** (0.226)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter $\times$ Gov. Dist. Median Voter	-0.942*** (0.307)	-0.984*** (0.335)
GDP Growth	-0.100** (0.046)	-0.025 (0.056)
$\mathbf{W}_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	-0.069** (0.028)	-0.012 (0.032)
Seat Share	-3.878 (2.675)	0.290 (2.091)
Constant	10.481** (4.036)	1.544 (4.829)
Observations	358	264

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$
Standard errors in parentheses.

Using this information, we replicate our main model (Table 1, Model 4 of the main text) for a niche-party sample and for a sample comprising only mainstream opposition parties. The findings are summarized in Table A9. While the item *Protests* remains positively signed and significant for mainstream parties, the variable is no longer significant for niche parties. Hence, and this is consistent with our argument, the type of opposition party matters: increasing the distance to the incumbent in light of protest is, presumably, an election strategy for vote- and office-seeking parties – mainstream parties. Niche parties likely have lower chances to gain a lot of votes or make it into office to begin with, which should weaken the effect of protests on their policy distancing to the government.

Issue Salience: Interaction with Inflation (Table A10)

We also tested for an interaction with public issue salience. How salient or important the core issue we focus on is to the public may have implications for the relationship between protests and opposition party distancing. To proxy issue salience, we rely on inflation data from the World Bank Development Indicators. As described there, “inflation as measured by the consumer price index reflects the annual percentage change in the cost to the average consumer of acquiring a basket of goods and services that may be fixed or changed at specified intervals, such as yearly. This indicator denotes the percentage change over each previous year of the constant price (base year 2015) series in US Dollars.” We contend that this variable is a reasonable proxy for issue salience in our case as inflation is directly felt and perceived by the public, and it matches the issue area of economic policy positions of parties and economic protests. Table A10 presents the results.

Table A10. Issue Salience: Interaction with Inflation

	Model A20
Protests	−0.006 (0.005)
Inflation	−0.045 (0.055)
Protests × Inflation	0.006*** (0.002)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter	0.481** (0.236)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter	0.925*** (0.165)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter × Gov. Dist. Median Voter	−0.863*** (0.239)
GDP Growth	−0.076** (0.037)
$\mathbf{W}_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	−0.052*** (0.019)
Seat Share	−2.612* (1.565)
Constant	8.056*** (2.828)
Observations	622

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Standard errors in parentheses.

When interacting *Protests* with *Inflation* (one-year lag), we obtain evidence for a positive and significant effect. The constituent term *Protests*, which captures the effect when *Inflation* is set to 0, is negatively signed and statistically insignificant. This analysis thus supports the idea that moderating factors, such as issue salience, can shape – and even enhance – the effect protests can have on opposition party distancing.

Controlling for Past Government/Opposition Status (Table A11)

We further control for the status of each party (governing or opposition) before the previous election. It seems plausible that the main effect we identify could be different depending on how the status of the parties has been in the past. For example, two parties may have been in opposition together prior to the previous election — and if the relationship changes, policy may also change in light of protest behavior. We address this issue by adding two new variables to our preferred specification: one that captures the opposition party’s status before the previous election, and one that codes whether the focal governing party has been in power or in opposition before the last election. As demonstrated in Table A11, however, none of these newly added variables is statistically significant, while the main effect stemming from *Protests* is robust.

Table A11. Controlling for Government/Opposition Status Last Term (Table A11)

	Model A21
Protests	0.007** (0.003)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter	0.874*** (0.290)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter	1.075*** (0.180)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter $\times$ Gov. Dist. Median Voter	−0.968*** (0.258)
GDP Growth	−0.078** (0.039)
$\mathbf{W}_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	−0.048** (0.020)
Seat Share	−0.480 (1.196)
Governing Status Opposition Party	0.141 (0.167)
Governing Status Government Party	−0.009 (0.068)
Constant	6.770** (2.793)
Observations	497

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$
Standard errors in parentheses.

Moving of Opposition and Governing Parties (Table A12)

In a last robustness test, we explore whether also governing parties move. In principle, government parties’ shifts could also shape our core dependent variable. We assess this with two models in Table A12, which focus on movement by the governing parties (Model A23) or the opposition (Model A22). Hence, these individual shifts are now the dependent variables across the two models in Table A12. As shown there, governing parties

do move as well (which is also consistent with our argument), but opposition parties do move more strongly as indicated by the size of the coefficient. However, the two estimates are not statistically significantly different from each other.

Table A12. Policy Position Shifts of Opposition and Governing Parties

	Model A22 Opposition Party Shift	Model A23 Governing Party Shift
Protests	0.020*** (0.006)	0.015* (0.009)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter	2.868*** (0.342)	0.292 (0.398)
Gov. Dist. Median Voter	3.852*** (0.275)	2.710*** (0.318)
Opposition Dist. Median Voter $\times$ Gov. Dist. Median Voter	-4.633*** (0.518)	-2.069*** (0.543)
GDP Growth	-0.018 (0.073)	-0.053 (0.089)
$\mathbf{W}_y^{\text{Foreign Win}}$	-0.095*** (0.028)	-0.078** (0.036)
Seat Share	3.373 (2.093)	-2.716 (3.981)
Constant	10.210** (4.213)	11.405** (5.562)
Observations	622	622

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Standard errors in parentheses.

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