Education, political sophistication, cohesive policy signals and proximity voting:
Do voters choose the party that reflects their interests?

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1. Introduction

Theories of proximity voting have been frequently adopted to test the impact of ideology in general and policy area-specific distances in particular on decision-making processes of voters. Most of the studies find a statistically significant negative impact of distances between the perceived positions of parties and citizens: voters are more likely to vote for a party the smaller the distance to a party and its candidate is (e.g., Adams et al. 2005; Costello et al. 2012; Mauerer et al. 2015). This is – from a normative perspective – a desirable finding because voters then decide for the 'right agents' who serve in their interests in parliaments and governments (Müller 2000; Powell 2004). However, 'calculating' the policy distances towards the parties that compete for votes and deciding on the basis of the set of individual distance scores are often considered to be a complicated process (e.g., Macdonald et al. 1995) that depends on several contextual features, some of them based on characteristics of voters on the one side, others based on features of parties and their election campaign strategies on the other (e.g., Singh 2010).

I argue in this contribution that voters with a higher degree of education or a high degree of political sophistication are more likely to choose the party closest to their own ideal point compared to voters with a lower degree of education or sophistication. This pattern should, yet, depend on contextual features: the degree of education and political sophistication of voters should be less important for the impact of proximity-based issue voting if (1) the left-right axis or the specific policy dimensions cover general issues instead of more specific issues and if (2) the party representatives send clear and cohesive programmatic signals before the election. I test these expectations on the basis of voter survey data and a novel dataset that covers information on the policy statements of party representatives before the 2009 and 2013 German Bundestag elections. The results show

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that, first, voters are more likely to vote for a party that is close to them on a left-right dimension, regardless of their degree of education and political sophistication. When shifting the focus to policy area-specific dimensions, I find, however, that political sophistication and – albeit to a lesser degree – education matter: in comparison to less sophisticated voters, politically sophisticated and more educated voters are more likely to vote for a party that is located closer to them on an economic and societal policy dimension. Furthermore, there is – albeit limited – evidence that the performance of the proximity model is lower for explaining voting behaviour if the respective parties appeared less cohesive during the election campaign.

To derive these findings, the following section provides a brief review of the literature on the relationship between political sophistication, education, cohesive policy signals of parties during campaigns, and proximity voting. On this basis, I derive a set of expectations that structure the empirical analysis. Before evaluating the hypotheses, section three gives an overview on the case selection, the data, the operationalization of the variables and the statistical method applied in this paper. The conclusion summarizes the findings and discusses incentives for further research.

2. Literature review and theoretical argument

There is a large number of studies that examine the impact of education, political interest or political sophistication of an individual on their political behaviour in general and voting behaviour in particular (e.g., Suzuki 1991; MacKuen et al. 1992; Singh 2010; Singh/Roy 2014). Gomez and Wilson (2001), for instance, focus on economic voting (Lewis-Beck 1986; Lewis-Beck/Stegmaier 2000) and argue that political sophistication – in terms of, for instance, political knowledge, indicated by respondents' statements on key political facts – should influence the relative importance of economic judgments which should then impact on voters' preferences for presidential candidates. The authors demonstrate on the basis of the 1992, 1996 and 1998 US presidential and congressional elections that voters with a low degree of political sophistication tend to assume that the national economy is entirely in the President's hands (and vote accordingly). In contrast, more sophisticated voters understand that the economy is affected by many actors and conditions – like the partisan composition of Congress – that are largely beyond the President's control. Macdonald et al. (1995) examine the impact of education and political sophistication of voters on

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the basis of the proximity and directional model of voting and argue that better educated and more politically involved voters would rely on the more complicated proximity model in which individually perceived distances between voters and parties should matter for voters' decision-making. Less sophisticated voters should, on the contrary, follow the directional model of voting behaviour where it matters if a voter and a party are on the same side of a policy dimension (Rabinowitz/Macdonald 1989). Macdonald et al. (1995) find – on the basis of survey data from the 1988 US presidential election and the 1989 Norwegian parliamentary election – that at all levels of sophistication and in both countries, voters generally follow the directional model of voting. However, the degree of sophistication matters: "sophisticated voters are more aware of issue information and more readily incorporate it in their decision making" (Macdonald et al. 1995: 473).

Yet, Joesten and Stone (2014) find that proximity voting is common, even among voters unaware of candidates' ideological positions in US congressional elections. According to their findings, the political sophistication of voters does not matter. In an experimental design, Singh and Roy (2014) conclude that more politically knowledgeable individuals engage in a deeper and broader decision-making process prior to casting their ballot. In turn, a more detailed decision process boosts the likelihood to vote based on proximity. Furthermore, Singh and Roy (2014) demonstrate that detailed decision-making processes have a stronger link with proximity voting among the most knowledgeable individuals who are able to skilfully engage with new information. Building on these findings of previous research, I expect that highly educated voters – in terms of having a university degree – or politically more sophisticated voters – that is, voters who have a high degree of political knowledge – are more likely to vote according to the proximity model compared to voters with a lower degree of education or political sophistication. This is because voters with a high degree of political knowledge should be more likely to be informed of the positions of parties on a general left-right dimension or on more concrete policy dimensions, while highly educated voters should be more likely to estimate distances between themselves and the parties competing for votes. We should observe these patterns to a stronger degree if the focus is on more specific policy dimensions like, for instance, European integration or education policy which are less often on the top of the political agenda, so that voters who are politically more sophisticated or highly educated should base their choices on the distances between the parties and themselves on policy-area specific dimensions.

As already indicated, several scholars stress the importance of contextual features for the significance of proximity-based voting. In his seminal model of spatial party competition, Downs (1957; see Grofman 2004 for an overview) argued that a single left-right dimension structures party competition, and that voters who are able to locate their positions and the ones of the parties and their candidates on this single dimension make their choices based on the spatial distance between themselves and the parties. In a comparative research design, Singh (2010) demonstrates that not only several individual-level factors, but also election-level factors affect the likelihood of a proximity vote. For instance, proximity voting occurs less in countries where political variation is not well captured by a single policy dimension, indicating that not only characteristics of individuals, but also factors that operate on the meso- or macro-level like party characteristics and the conflict structure of a society matter for the performance of the proximity voting model. Lachat (2008) found evidence that high levels of party system dispersion and polarization reinforce voters' reliance on ideological distances when voting. This is because parties place greater emphasis on issue positions in polarized systems. Thus, the issues associated with ideology should become "more easily accessible to voters" as dispersion increases (Lachat 2008: 688). However, Singh (2010) points out that characteristics of individuals still matter: voters with a college education, a relatively high income, a party ID and a tendency to see elections as consequential are more likely to vote according to the proximity model.

These findings are in line with approaches that highlight the role of party elites in the process of informing citizens about the policy positions of the parties the elites represent. Converse (1964) already argued that one of the most important roles of elites is to tell people how things relate to each other, including which party stands for which issue. Zaller (1992) argues that as the frequency with which a political message is repeated or the volume of the message increases, more people (including those with generally low levels of political awareness) are likely to hear it. The heuristic-based logic (Popkin 1991; Rahn 1993; Lupia/McCubbins 1998; Lupia et al. 2000) argues that people rely on information shortcuts that they receive from 'others' in order to form opinions about politics. These others may include (party) elites and campaign events (Popkin 1991; Lupia/McCubbins 1998) or predominant patterns of coalition politics (Debus/Müller 2014; Eberl/Plescia 2018; Nyhuis/Plescia 2018; Fortunato 2021). While this literature lists parties as just one of the many information sources, one can argue that a party's own messages are qualitatively different from the

information provided by other sources because such information is likely to be more reliable. Therefore, this party-provided (rather than mediated) information, either in the form of direct messages or information shortcuts, are important for citizens to be able to form perceptions of parties' policy positions.

In line with this existing literature, I follow Somer-Topcu (2015) and argue that the most obvious way voters develop perceptions about party positions is to acquire substantive, clear and consistent information about the parties' positions. Furthermore, the information parties and their representatives – e.g., candidates for political offices or the party leaders – provide have to be available to voters. If a party is ambiguous or unclear about its policy positions, citizens may hear different things about that party's position. This increases the variance in the individual perceptions about party positions across voters and results in decreased perceptual agreement. Existing literature suggests that the more clearly parties state their positions, the easier voters can use this information to infer party positions (see, for example, Merolla et al. 2008; Brader/Tucker 2009; Slothuus 2009). If, however, parties' policy messages are vague, ambiguous or uninterpretable, voters may base their judgments on other information like changes in the party leadership (Fernandez-Vazquez/Somer-Topcu 2019). In sum, the clearer the party-provided information about their positions and the more consistent these positions are during, for instance, an election campaign, the better voters are able to hear the same message and to use this information in developing their perceptions of party positions.

A prerequisite is, of course, that information on the policy positions of parties is available and easily accessible. The easier the access to information on parties' positions on various policy issues is, the easier and cheaper the voter can obtain the necessary information and use it for making an informed decision in the polling booth. Furthermore, if the party-provided information is easily and cheaply available, i.e., the volume of the party-provided messages is high, then voters are more likely to hear this information (Zaller 1992). I therefore argue that the less consistent, the less clear and the less accessible the positions of a party are, the less should voters base their choice on the proximity model of voting behaviour, which requires a lot of information and cognitive capacity, in particular if the voters are not politically sophisticated or do not have a high degree of education.

The set of hypotheses that I derive from these considerations is as follows:

H1a: Highly educated voters or politically more sophisticated voters are more likely to vote according to the proximity model compared to voters with a lower degree of education or political sophistication.

H1b: The relationship in H1a should be stronger in case of specific policy dimensions than on a general left-right heuristic.

H2a: The less consistent, the less clear and the less accessible the positions of a party are, the less should voters base their choice on the proximity model of voting behaviour.

H2b: The relationship in H2a should be stronger if the voters are not politically sophisticated or do not have a high degree of education.

3. Case selection, data and methods

I test the hypotheses using two datasets on the 2009 and 2013 German *Bundestag* elections. First, the *German Longitudinal Election Study* (GLES; see Rattinger et al. 2011; Schmitt-Beck et al. 2014) provides high quality survey data of the required variable that reflect the theoretical approach, that is, proximity-based voting theories that focus on a general left-right dimension and on policy-area specific dimensions[1]. Second, I use a dataset that covers information on the policy cohesiveness of parties during the final weeks of the election campaign. I make use of the *Comparative Campaign Dynamics Project* dataset (Debus et al. 2016; Baumann/Gross 2016) that provides information on the programmatic coherence of parties in the weeks before the election. The data set is based on the coding of statements of party representatives like their members or candidates for parliament in media reports; the observation period ranges from 2006 to 2013 and covers for the German case the *Bundestag* elections of 2009 and 2013. For each election, we collected information on the parties' campaign statements from two daily broadsheet

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1 In addition to a general left-right dimension, I select an economic policy dimension, differentiating between positions against or in favour of a strong welfare state, and a societal policy dimension, which reflects the opposite between libertarian and authoritarian views on further immigration, as indicators for proximity voting in more specific policy areas. These two policy dimensions are widely seen as the most important ones that structure voting behaviour and party competition in Germany (e.g., Benoit/Laver 2006).
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newspapers (one left-leaning newspaper and one with a centre-right political orientation) with the highest circulation during a pre-election period of thirty days. All first page articles related to the campaign were coded as well as a five percent random sample of the rest of the election-related articles until the minimum article number requirement of 60 articles per newspaper/election had been reached. In the case of Germany, we selected the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* as a centre-left newspaper and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* as a daily newspaper which adopts rather conservative positions.

The data covers those statements that parties and their representatives made in the public sphere during the final period of an election campaign and policy issues. I identify those issues that reflect, first, the economic policy dimension, differentiating between redistributive policies and market-liberal orientations, and, secondly, the societal conflict dimension which differentiates between liberal and conservative views on a broad set of issues that cover, for instance, family policy, education policy and immigration issues. These two policy areas are closely related to the policy dimensions covered in the 2009 and 2013 *German Longitudinal Election Study*, so that I can identify if lower degrees of intensity and consistency in the policy messages of party representatives like candidates for political offices or the members of the party leadership during the election campaign make policy-area specific proximity voting less likely to occur. The coding of the respective policy issues contains the position (positive/expansive, neutral and negative/restrictive) that the party representative adopted in the media report. In order to display the variance or the amount of contradiction in the statements of party representatives, I calculate Rice cohesion scores for the five parliamentary party groups represented in the *Bundestag* elected in 2009 and 2013 (CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens, and The Left). The Rice index scores reflect the degree of congruence within groups and are established as a measure of cohesion in the field of legislative studies (cf., e.g., Cox/McCubbins 1991; Morgenstern 2004).

Specifically, I use the absolute difference between positive and negative statements in proportion to the total number of statements by policy area in order to determine the cohesion of the statements of a party in the media. A perfect balance of positive and negative statements leads to a value of zero (total dissent) while completely coherent statements lead to a value of one (total unity). Table 1 shows the aggregated Rice indices and the number of statements, which are an indicator for presence and availability of the party positions for the five parties under study. The Rice index scores reflect the degree of consistency and clarity of party campaign statements by policy area while the number of statements is an indicator for the availability of informa-

tion on the party positions that the voters can retrieve from the media. As the results of the media analysis presented in Table 1 indicate, the representatives of German parties made highly cohesive statements during the 2009 and 2013 election campaigns. This finding holds for both policy dimensions. Only representatives of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) came up with deviating positions in economic issues during the 2009 campaign, whereas in 2013 particularly representatives of the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), but also of the Greens and the socialist Left Party were less cohesive in their election campaign statements on issues related to societal policy. Since I argue that proximity-based voting behaviour should be less influential in the case of less programmatically cohesive parties (based on their positional statements during the election campaign), I expect the individually perceived distance on economic issues between voters and parties to matter less in case of the CDU/CSU in 2009 and in case of FDP, Greens and the Left on societal issues in the 2013 *Bundestag* election. These patterns should be particularly outspoken for voters with lower degrees of education and less politically sophisticated voters.

Table 1: *Cohesion and availability of party positions in the 2009 and 2013 German election campaigns, differentiated by economic and societal policy dimensions, by party*

	2009				2013			
	Rice score (economic policy)	Number of economic policy statements	Rice score (societal policy)	Number of societal policy statements	Rice score (economic policy)	Number of economic policy statements	Rice score (societal policy)	Number of societal policy statements
CDU/CSU	.81	21	1	13	1	4	1	11
SPD	1	5	1	1	1	4	1	8
FDP	1	3	1	1	1	5	.6	10
Greens	1	4	1	1	1	4	.82	11
The Left	1	1	.	.	1	1	.71	7

Data source: Debus et al. (2016).

Because we are interested in the effects of education and political sophistication in combination with party-specific programmatic cohesion on proximity voting, I estimate simple logit models with the voting intention for the respective five parties under study for the 2009 and 2013 election as the dependent variable. The dependent variable is thus coded '1' if a respondent stated that they will vote for the CDU (in Bavaria: the CSU), the SPD, the FDP, the Greens and The Left, and is coded '0' otherwise. The main independent

variables are the ideological and policy-area specific distances between voters and parties. I refer to the squared distance between the self-placement of a voter and the position of the parties as perceived by the voter.[2] I interact the distance variable with dummy variables that provide information on whether a respondent has a university entrance degree or not (as an indicator for formal education) and if the respondent was able to correctly answer the question whether the first vote or the second vote on the ballot for *Bundestag* elections is decisive for the distribution of seats in the German parliament. If the respondent came up with the correct answer – the second vote (*Zweits-timme*) is crucial for the seat distribution in the *Bundestag* –, then I consider them as politically sophisticated. In 2009, 46 percent of the respondents came up with the correct answer according to GLES data; the share increased to 52 percent in 2013.

I control for a large set of theoretically relevant variables that help to explain voting behaviour in modern democracies. Voting behaviour is, of course, not only determined by the perceived proximity to the parties on several policy dimensions. The well-established 'Michigan school' model, summarized by the 'funnel of causality' (Campbell et al. 1960; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008), combines valence issues and candidate preferences of voters with the interests of voters that result from their position in a country's social structure (see also Stokes 1963; Stinchcombe 1975; Evans 1999; Abney et al. 2013). Furthermore, Campbell et al. (1960) developed the concept of 'party identification'. Accordingly, voters develop a close attachment to a political party which should not change significantly over time (see, however, Schmitt-Beck et al. 2006). Based on this vast body of literature, I include further explanatory variables in our models: party identification, the perceived problem-solving capacity of a party (as a proxy for the valence issue concept developed by Stokes (1963)), the economic situation as perceived by voters, and the belonging of a voter to a social group that has a special relation to a political party (Lewis-Beck/ Stegmaier 2000; Dassonneville/Lewis-Beck 2013, 2014). In doing so, I generated a dummy variable that takes a value of '1' if a party represents the interests of the social group to which the voter belongs to on the basis of the Lipset and

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2 For instance, the left-right dimension is measured on the basis of an eleven-point-scale in German election studies, ranging from '1' ('left') to 11 ('right'). Each respondent places themself and the parties on that dimension. On that basis, I measure the individual distances between each respondent and the main parties competing for votes. The greater the distance between the respondent and the party, the less likely should the respondent select this party.
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Rokkan (1967) cleavage approach. I take the following relationships between social groups and parties into account: (1) Voters who regularly attend church, which leads to a close attachment to the Christian Democrats, and (2) trade union members as traditional supporters of the Social Democrats (e.g., Elff/ Roßteutscher 2011). If, for instance, voters belong to a labour union, then they should be more likely to vote for the Social Democrats since they are traditionally the 'ally' of labour unions and represent the interests of their members at the level of parliamentary decision-making in Germany. Furthermore, I include a variable that informs us which party a voter perceives as being able to solve the most important problem. If voters name a party which is, in their view, able to solve the most salient problem, then they should be more likely to vote for this party. Moreover, I cover retrospective voting theory (Lewis-Beck/Stegmaier 2000) and include a variable that is coded '1' if a voter considers the economy to be in good shape and '0' otherwise. Voters should be more likely to vote for a government party if they think that the economic situation has become better. Finally, I include variables that provide information on the gender, age and region (Western vs. Eastern Germany) in the regression models.

I expect that an increasing distance between the voter's position and the one of the respective party – as perceived by the voter – should make voting for this party less likely. According to hypothesis 1a, I expect that this effect is weaker in case of less educated and/or less politically sophisticated voters. The effect should decrease even more if the focus is on policy-area specific dimensions and not on an overall left-right conflict axis according to hypothesis 1b. In line with the consistency argument in hypothesis H2a, I expect that voters should not base their decisions on the proximity model if parties came up with only few and less consistent messages during the election campaign. This refers to the CDU/CSU in the 2009 election campaign, and to the FDP, the Greens and the Left in the 2013 campaign. In relation to the argument on education and political sophistication of voters, I expect – as formulated in hypothesis 2b – the effect of missing consistency to be stronger for less educated and/or less politically sophisticated voters. The next section presents the findings of our analysis and evaluates the main hypotheses.

4. Results

Because of the large number of regression models which are presented in detail in the appendix (see Tables A1, A2 and A3), I restrict the presentation of

the results to an overview for which party in which election proximity-based voting had the expected statistically significant negative effect on the 90% level.[3] In addition, I interact the proximity-voting variables with a dummy variable providing information on the formal education degree and, in separate regression models, with the indicator for political sophistication. To evaluate the hypotheses, I test whether the indicators for proximity voting – i.e., the individually perceived distance between respondents and parties on a general left-right dimension, an economic left-right dimension and a societal dimension have the expected statistically significant and negative effects. The larger the distance towards a party is, the less likely should a respondent vote for the respective party. In case of voters with a lower degree of education or lower political sophistication, I expect that the distance variables do not have any effect, in particular in the case of policy area-specific dimensions and when parties did not come up with clear policy positions. By taking into account that an interpretation of interaction terms and their substantive effects on the basis of the respective coefficients' significance levels can be misleading (see, e.g., Brambor et al. 2006; Mitchell 2012), I evaluate the hypotheses of the basis of marginal effect plots (see Figures A1, A2, A3 and A4 in the appendix).

Table 2 provides an overview of the effects for the 2009 *Bundestag* election. The perceived distance between a respondent and all five parties has the expected statistically significant and negative impact if the distance is measured on the basis of the overall left-right dimension. There is neither a difference between highly and less highly educated voters nor between politically sophisticated and non-sophisticated voters. However, there is evidence that distances between voters and parties do matter less once they are calculated on the basis of more specific policy dimensions, in particular if voters do not have a university entrance degree or if they are not politically sophisticated.

In case of politically more sophisticated voters, the individually perceived distance on the economic policy dimension had the expected negative effect on the chance to vote for SPD, FDP, Greens and The Left, whereas the distance on this policy dimension mattered only for the chance to vote for the socialists. The patterns look similar in case of the societal policy dimension: in four of the five cases under study, an increasing distance towards the respective

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3 This is, of course, a very simplistic way of presenting and interpreting the results, which does not take into account that statistically significant effects do not necessarily mean strong substantive effects.

parties decreased significantly the chances to vote for them. In addition, the proximity voting model seems to work better in case of highly sophisticated voters, whereas the differences between respondents with a high degree and a lower degree of education are less pronounced. For instance, respondents with a high degree of political knowledge had a chance of about 10 percent voting for FDP if they adopted the same position as the Liberals on the three dimensions under study. This chance decreased significantly the more the individually perceived distance towards the Liberals increased (see Figure 1). Therefore, I find – at least for the case of the 2009 *Bundestag* election – support for hypothesis 1b: political sophistication matters for proximity voting, but only in the case of more specific policy dimensions. There is also evidence for hypothesis 2a: the perceived economic policy distance towards the Christian Democrats, which did not appear united on economic issues during the 2009 election campaign, did not matter for the chances to vote for the CDU/CSU.

Table 2: *The effect of proximity by policy dimension, education and political sophistication in case of the major German parties for the 2009 federal election*

	Left-right dimension		Economic policy dimension		Societal policy dimension	
	No high school degree	High school degree	No high school degree	High school degree	No high school degree	High school degree
CDU/CSU	✓	✓				
SPD	✓	✓			✓	
FDP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greens	✓	✓		✓		✓
The Left	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Not politically sophisticated	Politically sophisticated	Not politically sophisticated	Politically sophisticated	Not politically sophisticated	Politically sophisticated
CDU/CSU	✓	✓			✓	
SPD	✓	✓		✓		✓
FDP	✓	✓		✓		✓
Greens	✓	✓		✓		✓
The Left	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Comment: A checkmark indicates that the marginal effect plots indicated a negative and on the 90% level statistically significant effect of the respective distance variables. Grey highlighted entries indicate parties that showed a lower degree of cohesion in their election campaign statements.

Figure 1: *Marginal effect of the perceived ideological/policy area-specific distances on the chances to vote for the FDP in 2009, by political sophistication*
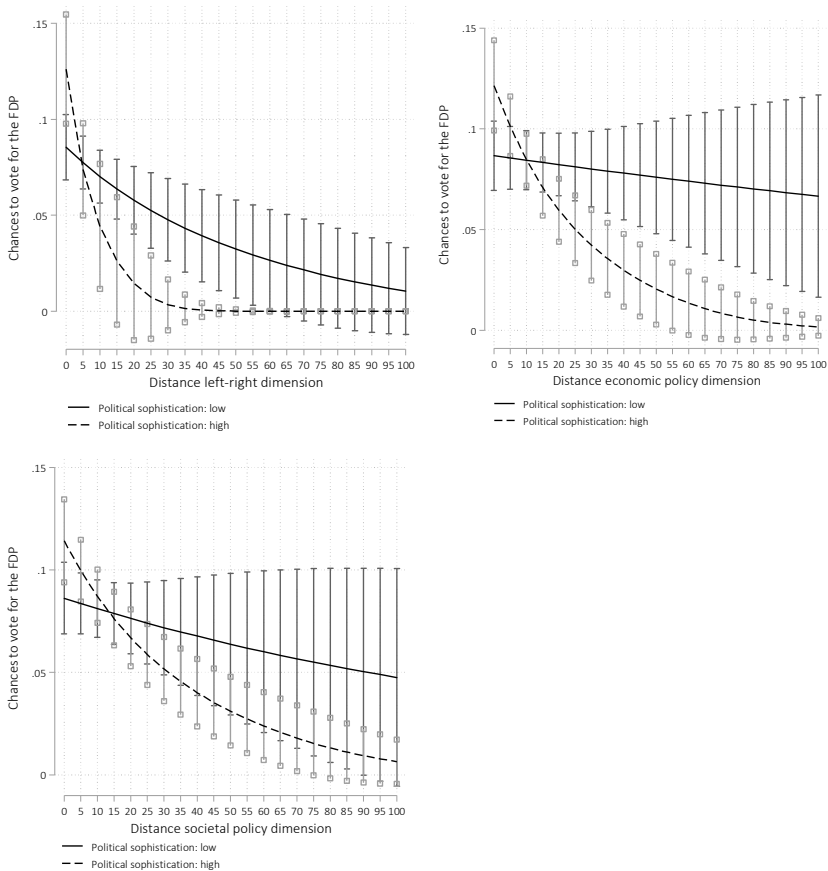
Comment: Estimates based on the models presented in Table A2.

When shifting the perspective to the 2013 *Bundestag* election, I find that the proximity model seems to have fewer effects on voting behaviour in general when comparing it to the 2009 election (see Table 3). Even in case of the distance measures based on the general left-right dimension, for some parties – FDP and Greens – the ideological distance did not matter for the chances to cast a ballot in favour of the respective parties. In even more cases, the proximity model did not work when focussing on the economic

and societal policy dimension. With the exception of the economic policy dimension, more educated and politically sophisticated voters did, however, base their decision on the perceived policy distances in more cases than less educated or politically sophisticated voters. Figure 2 shows, for example, that respondents with a high degree of political sophistication, measured by political knowledge, have – in contrast to lower sophisticated voters – a lower chance to choose the Christian Democrats, the larger the distance on the ideological left-right axis as well as on an economic and societal policy dimension is. This again supports hypothesis H1b. Also, H2a finds support: only the chances to vote for the Left Party, which did – besides the Greens and the FDP – not appear unified in societal issues during the 2013 election campaign, were negatively affected by an increasing policy distance as perceived by the voters. This was, however, only the case for more educated and politically sophisticated voters, which speaks in favour of hypothesis 2b.

Table 3: *The effect of proximity by policy dimension, education and political sophistication in case of the major German parties for the 2013 federal election*

	Left-right dimension		Economic policy dimension		Societal policy dimension	
	No high school degree	High school degree	No high school degree	High school degree	No high school degree	High school degree
CDU/CSU	✓	✓	✓			✓
SPD	✓	✓		✓		
FDP		✓				
Greens						
The Left	✓	✓	✓			✓
	Not politically sophisticated	Politically sophisticated	Not politically sophisticated	Politically sophisticated	Not politically sophisticated	Politically sophisticated
CDU/CSU	✓	✓		✓		✓
SPD	✓	✓				
FDP						
Greens					✓	
The Left	✓	✓		✓		✓

Comment: A checkmark indicates that the marginal effect plots indicated a negative and on the 90% level statistically significant effect of the respective distance variables. Grey highlighted entries indicate parties that showed a lower degree of cohesion in their election campaign statements.

Figure 2: Marginal effect of the perceived ideological/policy area-specific distances on the chances to vote for CDU/CSU in 2013, by political sophistication
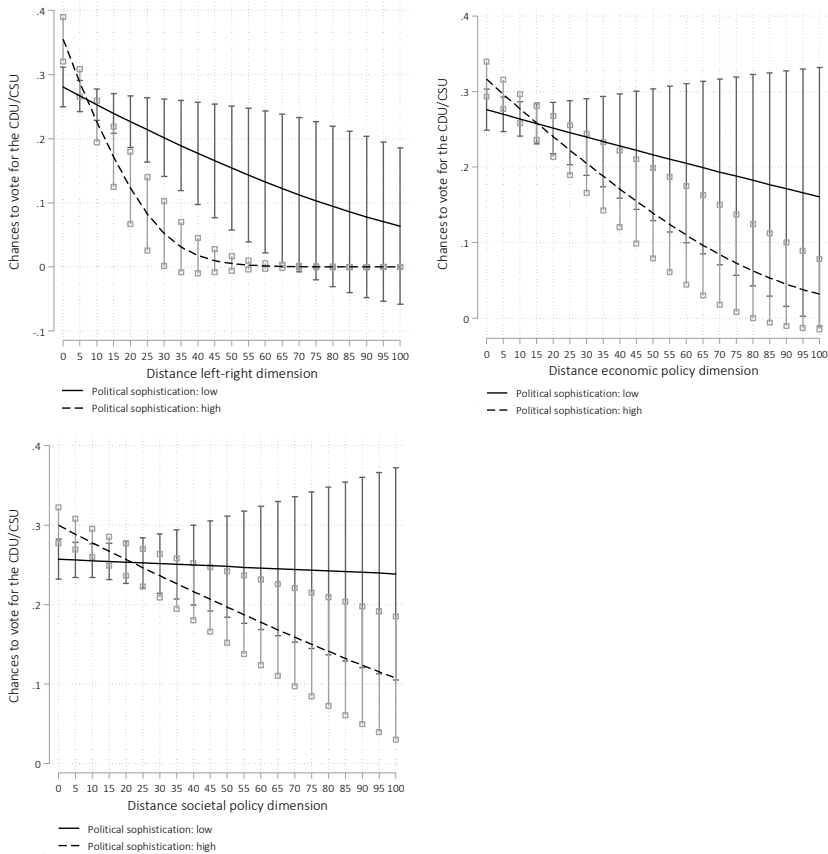
5. Conclusions

The proximity model of vote choice is one of the major theories in political decision-making. However, several scholars claim that it is far from being a realistic scenario that voters are able to 'calculate' the distances between their own position and the ones of the parties and their representatives competing for votes. The aim of this paper was to contribute to this discus-

sion and to evaluate if voters decide on the basis of individually perceived ideological and policy-area specific distances, even if, first, voters are not politically sophisticated or do not have a high degree of education and, second, party representatives did not appear united in programmatic terms in the final weeks of an election campaign. The results, based on the analysis of survey data of the 2009 and 2013 national election study and media reports on party policy messages, provided evidence that the chances to vote for a party increase if the individually perceived ideological distance decreases. This pattern exists in the case of highly educated voters and less educated voters as well as for politically sophisticated voters and voters who have less political sophistication. While these findings are stronger in the case of the 2009 election in contrast to the 2013 Bundestag election, I do not find evidence for these patterns with regard to distances based on more concrete policy areas which are less easy to estimate for voters compared to the well-known left-right heuristic. The proximity model works here for more educated and politically sophisticated voters, whereas there is no evidence that an increasing distance between voters and parties on economic and societal issues matters significantly for party choice in 2009 and 2013. Furthermore, there is – albeit in a few cases – evidence that proximity voting cannot be observed if parties send less clear policy messages during the final weeks of an election campaign, indicating that proximity voting needs clear and cohesive statements by party representatives, so that voters can base their choices on clearly perceived policy positions. However, this conclusion is here drawn on the basis of very few cases only, so that we cannot generalize these effects. In addition, the – very conservative – empirical model covers several theoretically relevant independent variables which might correlate with the proximity measures, which, in turn, might affect the results. Furthermore, there is very limited variation in the degree of cohesiveness in the positional signals parties and their representatives send out during the election campaign. We therefore need comparative data that allows for a large N research design, so that we can draw more solid conclusions.

These findings have important implications for political representation and should also matter for the overall satisfaction with the institutions and the policy outputs of a democratic political systems. If an increasing share of voters decide late during an election campaign (see, e.g., Nadeau et al. 2010, 2019; Schmitt-Beck/Partheymüller 2012; Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2015; Dassonneville et al. 2017; Johann et al. 2018), then less clear and less consistent policy signals sent by the representatives of political parties in

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the final weeks of an election campaign could result in the risk that voters do not choose the party which represents their policy views. This misfit in the selection of an agent (i.e., parties and their candidates) by the principals (i.e., voters) is likely to decrease the policy responsiveness and, therefore, the satisfaction with and the trust in democratic political institutions (e.g., Lefkofridi et al. 2014; Thomassen 2016). To test these implications of the findings presented here, more research is needed which should adopt a comparative perspective, so that more cases over time and across countries are covered.

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