



From Text to Political Positions on Foreign Aid: Analysis of Aid Mentions in Party Manifestos from 1960 to 2015

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Looking at texts of election manifestos, this paper examines systematic differences among political parties within and across countries in how they position themselves on foreign aid and in how these manifesto pledges translate into commitments to disburse aid. Conventional wisdom suggests that left-leaning parties may be more supportive of foreign aid than rightwing parties, but also that foreign aid may not be sufficiently electorally salient for parties to stake out positions in campaign materials, such as manifestos. We leverage a new data set that codes party positions on foreign aid in election manifestos for 13 donors from 1960 to 2015. We find that parties differ systematically in how they engage with foreign aid. Left-leaning governments are more likely to express positive sentiment vis-à-vis aid than right-leaning governments. We evaluate the effects of positions on aid outcomes and find that positive aid views expressed by the party in government translate into higher aid commitments, though only for left-leaning parties.

Introduction

Since the end of World War II, governments have justified foreign aid as a response to development needs in poor countries. As ample research has shown, however, donors use foreign aid to further non-developmental interests (e.g., Baldwin 1985; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2009). Yet, other studies have shown that foreign aid depends on political and economic conditions in donor countries (Milner 2006; Dietrich 2016, 2020; Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Bryant 2016). What we know less about is how political parties and governments discuss aid within the context of domestic electoral politics, or how these discussions relate to aid outcomes. Some have argued that little partisan debate exists in foreign policy and this is why foreign policy is often so consistent (e.g., Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007). However, preferences about foreign policy instruments, including foreign aid, trade, military intervention, and sanctions, seem to differ by partisanship and to vary across the left–right ide-

ological spectrum (Mintz 1988; Fordham 2002; Milner and Judkins 2004; Milner and Tingley 2015).

Because aid commitments vary over time and across countries, a growing number of scholars have begun to examine these differences in aid policy by looking into variation in political institutions across donor countries as well as the role of ideology within donor countries over time (e.g., Noel and Therien 1995; Fleck and Kilby 2006; Milner 2006; Prather 2014; Dreher, Minasyan, and Nunnenkamp 2015; Mawdsley 2017; Allen and Flynn 2018; Greene and Licht 2018; Dietrich, Hyde, and Winters 2019; Dietrich, Reinsberg, and Steinwand 2020). Tingley (2010) finds that as governments become more conservative, their aid effort falls, but primarily for the poorest recipient countries, while foreign aid to middle income countries is unaffected. Brech and Potrafke (2014) show that left-leaning political parties, when in government, increase foreign aid spending, while right parties advocate foreign aid cuts. According to Noel and Therien (1995, 2000) domestic political preferences for higher social spending result in higher spending on the poor abroad.

At the same time, we learn that conservative parties embrace foreign aid as an important driver of international development and advocate increases in foreign aid commitments to match the global norm of 0.7 percent of gross national income on foreign aid. This positive stance toward foreign aid becomes manifest in parliamentary speeches (e.g., Crines, Jeffrey, and Heppell 2018) and political party manifestos. A positive relationship between conservative ideology and support for aid would, at its face, be at odds with expectations derived from the literature.¹ A closer look reveals, however, that only a handful of conservative

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¹Recent studies of the connection of government ideology and foreign aid in the United States and Germany indicate that the link between the two variables is

governments actually follow through with their proclaimed support by increasing foreign aid once arriving in office. These include, for example, conservative parties in the UK in 2009 and Sweden in 2005 (OECD 2015).

In this paper, we seek to resolve this observed tension between party rhetoric and actual aid spending among conservative parties, and thus contribute to a better understanding of the role of ideology and foreign aid. Do parties of different ideological stripes differ in their discussion of foreign aid during electoral party campaigns? If so, how? And, do the differences filter through into policy? We answer these questions by systematically examining how political parties discuss foreign aid in their election party platforms during campaigns and whether they ultimately stick to their policy pledges when their party wins and holds office. Understanding why some parties may be more likely to fulfill their aid pledges than others is important for key actors in international development. It matters to beneficiary countries because volatility and unpredictability of aid have been associated with aid failure. Knowing whether parties are likely to follow through with their promises can help recipient governments better anticipate future aid flows. The results of our study also matter to donor governments because unexpected cuts in aid spending from peers may undermine the efficacy of their own aid pledge or increase pressures on them to compensate for these cuts.

Comparative elections researchers generally find that electoral platforms reveal preferences about what parties would like to do if elected to office and that these policy positions, conditioned by the electoral system, impact voters' behavior and electoral outcomes (Powell 2000; McDonald and Budge 2005; Ezrow 2010). And there is recent empirical evidence that parties actually do tend to fulfill their electoral pledges (Mansergh and Thomson 2007; Thomson et al. 2017). However, less evidence exists specifically with respect to foreign policy, or indeed, with respect to individual policy areas, at all (c.f., Budge and Hofferbert 1990).² We want to uncover the relationship between campaign rhetoric regarding foreign aid found in manifestos and actual foreign aid policy. We examine the interaction between ideology and foreign aid commitments. Theoretically, we expect that parties on the left and the right to differ in their discussion of foreign aid with respect to content, sentiment and how this content translates into action. We expect parties of the left to engage more with foreign aid and to discuss it more positively than right parties. We expect support of foreign aid to be driven more by moral considerations for parties of the left than parties of the right. At the same time, parties of the right recognize that proclaimed support of foreign aid can help them attract moderates and avoid the image of a "nasty party" in a world where poverty reduction has become a global norm. It is in the decision to follow through with promises where we expect systematic differences between parties, with those of the right being less likely to feel beholden to it, or to walk-the-talk than their counterparts on the left. After all, foreign aid as an issue is of greater importance to voters on the left.

Election manifestos offer the best source of data on cross-national party positions on specific issues across countries and time. Virtually all parties across the democratic world issue detailed manifestos outlining the policy positions that will form the basis of their campaign. Policy pledges made in

these documents are often viewed as policy commitments. And should the party win office, parties are expected to give priority to policies written into their manifesto. Because parties all write manifestos for the same purpose—to make a comprehensive statement of the party's policy priorities in the context of election campaigns aimed at their electorate—they offer better data on policy priorities than other elections statements, such as speeches, which may be tailored to particular audiences and do not come with the same level of commitment from the party leadership.

On the basis of a novel coding scheme that accounts for political party sentiment and preferences vis-à-vis foreign aid, we systematically code hundreds of party platforms in their original languages for thirteen of the largest foreign aid donors, including the United States, the UK, Germany, France, Spain, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland from 1960 to 2015.³ These donors account for a vast share of foreign aid. Annually, they hold a share of at least 80 percent of all aid given out by the OECD DAC donors.

Using these data, we examine differences over time and across countries in the way that parties discuss aid. In particular, we examine whether parties view foreign aid in a positive or negative light and whether their ideological affinities correlate with how their discussion of aid in an electoral context carries over to the amount they commit to recipient countries. We find that, over time, the amount of space in electoral manifestos dedicated to foreign aid has varied across countries and parties of all political stripes. Left-leaning parties are more likely to positively engage with foreign aid. Right-leaning parties, in contrast, are more likely to discuss aid in a negative way. Parties are also not equally likely to follow through with their expressed sentiment when in government: a positive relationship between foreign aid commitments and mentions of aid in manifestos only holds for left-leaning governments. Right-leaning parties that mention aid positively are less likely to follow through with higher aid commitments. We suggest that right-wing voters are less likely to care about aid and hold parties accountable on this dimension. In doing so, we contribute not only to literature on foreign aid, but also to recent findings on electoral manifestos, regarding both the fulfillment of election pledges (Thomson et al. 2017) and the sentiment of those statements (Crabtree et al. 2020). Moreover, we demonstrate the importance of focusing on specific policies—something less commonly done in the literature examining election manifesto content.

Ideology, Party Aid Mentions, and Aid Spending: A Two-Part Argument

Parties draft manifestos to express their positions and goals in the context of an election campaign. Making specific mentions of aid policy in election manifestos differs from off-hand remarks on the campaign trail, both because manifesto statements represent a carefully considered electoral strategy drafted by the party elites and because specific statements in election manifestos are viewed, by politicians and voters alike, as election pledges to be carried out upon winning office. Indeed, governing parties do tend to carry out these pledges (Thomson et al. 2017). However, we expect the extent to which parties carry out pledges varies

more fragile (Gibler and Miller 2012; Dreher, Nunnenkamp, and Schmaljohann 2015), thus warranting further research.

²Budge and Hofferbert (1990) look specifically at pledges with respect to foreign and defense policy in the US context.

³Among the five largest aid donors, we are only missing Japan, but Japanese parties did not have a history of writing manifestos prior to 2000, meaning that comparable data are not available for much of our sample (see Proksch, Slapin, and Thies 2011).

depending on how voters (and in particular, partisans) view particular issues. The literature on party pledges has not, to date, examined the interaction between ideology and particular issues when examining pledge fulfillment, but that is precisely what we do here.

We theorize that statements in manifestos represent not only a sincere reflection of party desires, but also what the party leaders feel that voters want to hear from them in the context of an election (e.g., [Spoon and Klüver 2014](#)). Similarly, should a party join government following an election and find itself capable of shaping policy, the policies that it crafts are also both a function of the party's sincere desires as well as electoral considerations. By having previously emphasized a policy position in a manifesto as part of an electoral campaign, a party raises the costs associated with not following through on policy implementation in that particular area, especially if their core voters care about the policy in question. Thus, both mentions of policy in manifestos and actual policy outcomes when in government are reflections of the underlying sincere desires of the party leaders and party supporters. However, party leaders may also include items in manifestos that are of less concern to their core voters, either because manifestos are meant to be comprehensive documents or because the statements are aimed at attracting the attention of other audiences beyond the party's core supporters. In these instances, the party's costs associated with deviating from the manifesto once in office may be lower. As such, the relationship between the content of the manifesto and a party's actions taken when in government may be attenuated.

Because foreign policy and, for that matter, foreign aid policy may be the least salient dimension in the political battle for votes, one might expect parties to underspecify their positions on foreign aid, or for there to be a weaker relationship between manifesto positions and actual policy outcomes. However, party rhetoric about the importance of foreign aid and its future use can become heated around election day, especially during times of economic hardship ([Brech and Potrafke 2014](#); [Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Bryant 2016](#)). A quick glance at party manifestos across donor countries reveals that foreign aid policy is a consistent policy theme, exhibiting interesting temporal, cross-donor, and cross-party variation in terms of space devoted to foreign aid, expressed support for aid, and corresponding delivery preferences.

In line with our view of how positions get drafted into manifestos, we argue that the nature of aid mentions in manifestos ought to vary with party ideology, both because of the nature of the aid issue itself, and because of differing attention that voters on the left and the right pay to it. First, we expect some variation in foreign aid mentions at election time attributable to ideology. Despite right-wing parties' occasional discussion of foreign aid, in general, the literature suggests that left-wing parties are more likely to engage and engage positively with aid (e.g., [Chong and Gradstein 2008](#); [Paxton and Knack 2012](#)). We theorize that the influence of ideology on foreign aid mentions has its origins in domestic ideological cleavages. Specifically, individuals hold different beliefs about the appropriate role of the state in goods and services delivery and these beliefs motivate people to support or oppose foreign aid. Left-leaning individuals value (more) involvement of the state in goods and services delivery. Because foreign aid represents a specific type of international goods and services delivery, left-leaning individuals are likely to hold more favorable views toward foreign aid. On the other hand, right-leaning individuals who champion market efficiency and individual decision-making favor

less state involvement. They are more likely to be skeptical about the merits of the state as an international donor, favoring instead individual contributions to charities. They are thus more likely to express negative views of publicly funded foreign aid. Political parties of the right and the left know the beliefs of their voters and take them into account when drafting political party manifestos.

However, the literature also suggests that foreign aid policy has become a policy around which a norm has developed to speak positively, regardless of ideological stripe. [Lumsdaine \(1993\)](#), for example, notes that there has been a steady acceptance among Western donor governments to promote international development. The Millennium Development Goals and their successors, the Sustainable Development Goals, are manifestations of this global norm. To [Fukuda-Parr and Hulme \(2011\)](#), poverty reduction has become institutionalized as a norm that instills global responsibility. Positive mentions of aid may result, in part, from the acceptance of poverty reduction as an increasingly powerful international norm. Yet, as critics have pointed out, in many cases, governments have pledged support for poverty reduction but have failed to act on them, suggesting that poverty reduction may be institutionalized but not implemented equally across the board ([Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2011](#)).

As parties compete over votes, we expect them to recognize that poverty reduction has become a global norm, and that foreign aid is the most obvious foreign policy mechanism for promoting it. While some parties, primarily on the left, think that offering aid is the moral thing to do, others simply acknowledge that it has become a global standard that requires them to talk-the-talk to avoid the image of a "nasty" party ([Hulme 2015](#)) and strengthen their appeal vis-à-vis moderates. Whether the talk gets implemented once parties govern is, however, a different question. Indeed, it may be that support for foreign aid at times merely serves the purpose of a PR trick, to inject one's image with morality, without a realistic prospect of matching cheap talk with costly action. Because foreign aid goes to distant places, donor publics, even if they cared, cannot easily verify whether promises were fulfilled.

While some work on party manifestos has begun to look at sentiment in campaign statements, it has not done so with respect to specific policy areas or policy implementation ([Crabtree et al. 2020](#)). We suggest that relative to parties on the left, conservative parties are less likely to walk-the-walk and implement the foreign aid pledges made in their manifestos when in government. In other words, left-leaning governments are more likely to increase their aid commitments in line with the (relatively positive) statements they make regarding aid in their manifestos.

There are several reasons why conservatives might be less likely than their left-leaning counterparts to turn positive foreign aid sentiment into higher aid commitments. First, we know that, on average, conservative voters are less supportive of aid increases than their left-leaning counterparts ([Chong and Gradstein 2008](#); [Paxton and Knack 2012](#); [Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Bryant 2016](#); [Bodenstein and Faust 2017](#)). More importantly though, we suggest that, compared to their left-leaning counterparts, conservative voters are less likely to consider foreign aid policy to be a priority. If foreign aid is not a priority, the costs associated with cheap talk are lower. We also posit that for left-leaning members of the public, policy positions on foreign aid may be more consequential for making decisions about whom to support in upcoming elections than for their right-leaning voters. If foreign aid is more consequential for left-leaning

than right-leaning voters in the ballot box, we would expect parties of the left to be more concerned about following through with their pledges about foreign aid. Although parties on the right care about their global appearance due to international development norms, the fact that aid is not a consequential issue for their voters makes them less concerned about following through with pledges once in government. While our primary empirical analysis of the conditional effect focuses on manifesto text and aggregate aid commitment data, we probe the plausibility of this mechanism that explains the effect with originally collected public opinion data. Thus, we hypothesize

H1: *Left-leaning parties to be relatively more likely to engage with foreign aid than right-leaning parties in their manifestos*

H2: *Left-leaning parties to be more likely to mention aid in a positive light than right-leaning parties*

And finally,

H3: *Aid commitments of left-leaning governments to be more likely to increase with the number of (positive) mentions of foreign aid in their election manifestos, compared with right-leaning governments.*

Before we proceed to testing our hypotheses, it is important to state what it is that we are not arguing. We are not arguing that (positive) aid mentions in political party manifestos cause (more) aid commitments. In fact, we perceive variation in how political parties talk about aid to result from similar processes as what makes parties commit to more or less aid once in government office. We believe that the authors of party manifestos think about aid in ways that is similar to how the party-turned-government will think when deciding about foreign aid commitments. As a result, our empirical strategy does not try to uncover a causal relationship between the mentions of foreign aid in manifestos and the level of aid commitments. Instead, we are interested in how much aid mentions and aid commitments overlap, controlling for variables associated with aid commitments. This informs us of the degree to which parties' actions correspond to their official election statements, which is the central question of this research paper.

Data

To examine these hypotheses, we have coded parties' foreign aid positions over time across thirteen countries, including the United States, the UK, Germany, France, Spain, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland from 1960 to 2015.⁴ For party positions on foreign aid, we require humans to carefully code the text because we want to capture the sentiment—positive or negative—behind the position.⁵ We also want to under-

⁴Text files of election manifestos were downloaded from the MARPOR website: <https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>. It is worth noting that the manifesto project has categories that consider foreign aid (categories 107 and 109: *Internationalism: Positive* and *Internationalism: Negative*), however these categories also consider statements on a wide variety of other topics such as international courts, global governance, statements about the UN, and statements about global resource planning. The coding of these variables is, thus, not appropriate for our purposes as we cannot know what proportion of statements in these categories relate to aid.

⁵While there are sentiment dictionaries suited to measuring negativity and positivity in political texts (e.g., Soroka 2014) it is unclear how these would work on texts specifically about foreign aid. Off-the-shelf sentiment dictionaries are generally not well-suited to specific, technical policies (Loughran and McDonald 2011) where human coders are often more accurate. To give one example, the word "eradicate" is listed as a negative word in the commonly used Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary, but a sentence suggesting that "increasing aid would help eradicate global poverty and disease" presents aid in a positive light.

stand whether parties discuss conditions applied to aid, or what the objectives are associated with foreign aid. Only human coding allows us to get at nuance regarding preferences and ultimately, a better understanding of the foreign aid decision-making process.

The majority of studies that investigate the relationship between ideology and aid commitments rely on the conventional right-left ideology scale from the MARPOR project⁶ suggesting that more left-leaning parties advocate for more aid. However, this aggregate measure subsumes numerous domestic and foreign policy dimensions and does not explicitly consider political party positions on foreign aid.⁷ We believe that isolating party preferences on foreign aid enables us to not only understand the extent to which positions in favor of or against foreign aid correspond with existing aggregate right-left measures, but also understand how they relate to actual giving of aid. The coding of party positions on foreign aid allows us to provide a better test of hypotheses linking ideologically driven positions on foreign aid to outcomes.

We undertook the coding of manifestos in several steps. First, we parsed the original party manifestos into domestic and international/foreign policy-related sentences. To isolate these international sentences, we employed undergraduate students from the University of Essex to identify and record all sentences engaging with an international policy issue. We required student coders to either be native speakers or speak the language fluently. At the end of this process, we were able to extract every sentence from a manifesto that involved international policy. With this information we can examine the extent to which parties differ on the amount of text devoted to foreign issues. In a subsequent step, we asked two students to separately identify all sentences devoted to foreign issues that touched the topic of foreign aid in a given manifesto. With this information we can examine the extent to which parties differ on the amount of text devoted to foreign aid policy across all foreign policy. Finally, we asked the two students to independently code all foreign aid related sentences as either positive, negative, or neutral in sentiment. In the appendix (Appendix A), we present a series of examples of positive, negative, and neutral mentions of foreign aid. After each coder has coded all of the relevant statements, we calculate the number of aid statements (total, positive, and negative) and the number of words in these statements for each coder by country. The variables we employ use the mean of the two coders. However, to determine whether the coders are able to accurately code manifesto content, we present the correlation between our variables, calculated separately for each coder and within each country—the mean correlation is 0.86 with the highest values for the variable capturing overall amount of discussion related to aid. Correlations are also very high for positive aid statements and somewhat lower for negative aid statements, which is understandable as there are fewer of them. Indeed, both coders agree that no British manifestos mention aid negatively. Overall, we are confident that our coders were able to code the statements. We include the coder correlation matrix in the appendix (Table B1).

⁶Formally known as the Manifesto Research Group (MRG) and Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP).

⁷Alternatively, the MARPOR project provides two "internationalism" categories, one positive and one negative. These categories cover mentions of foreign aid, but also many other items such as references to international institutions, global governance, and need for international courts. Our measure only correlates with their *internationalism (Pos-Neg)* variable at $R = 0.54$. While related, the coding of our variable clearly differs from the less precise measure available in the existing data.

Manifesto space devoted to foreign aid does not change much over time, ranging between 1 and 2 percent (or approximately seven sentences) on average. If we look only at manifesto text devoted to international issues, foreign aid content ranges between 7 and 15 percent. To assess how statements regarding foreign aid vary with party ideology across countries and over time, we estimate a series of OLS regressions. Specifically, we take manifestos as our unit of analysis and calculate our dependent variable as the number of sentences about foreign aid per 1,000 words. We regress this dependent variable on a measure of government ideology, country fixed-effects and time period fixed-effects (as well as party fixed-effects in robustness tests), clustering our standard errors on parties. Our primary ideology measure is a trichotomous recoding of the standard MARPOR left-right (rile) scale for ease of interpretation—left, center, and right. In total, we estimate four models using four dependent variables—total aid sentences, positive aid sentences, negative aid sentences, and positive minus negative aid sentences. Figure 1 depicts the effects (with 95 percent CIs) of shifting ideology from left to right on foreign aid mentions in manifestos across our four models. The x -axis depicts the change in the number of statements mentioning foreign per 1,000 words of text. Each horizontal line presents the effects from a separate model using a different operationalization of the dependent variable, *foreign aid mentions*, and the y -axis has no meaning. The depictions of these model effects are stacked to facilitate comparison of these ideology coefficients for the different measures of our dependent variable across the models. The specific operationalizations are labeled above the line. We report the regression tables in the appendix.^{8,9}

We find no overall statistically significant effect of ideology on the number of aid mentions, *Number Total Aid*, and therefore little support for H1. Right parties are slightly less likely to mention aid than left parties, but not significantly so, as indicated by the 95 percent confidence interval crossing the vertical line at zero. The average manifesto is roughly 14,000 words, meaning that right parties, on average, have less than one fewer sentence about aid than left parties in their manifestos.¹⁰ The effect on the number of positive mentions of aid, *Positive Aid*, is statistically significant and substantively much stronger, providing strong support for H2. Right parties, on average, make 1.4 fewer positive statements about aid than left parties. Interestingly, they also make more negative statements, *Negative Aid*, as indicated by the third line on the graph, and their negative statements outweigh their positive statements. Right parties make, on average 1.8 more negative statements than pos-

⁸See Tables C1–C3 in the appendix along with more detailed descriptions of the models including regression equations. We also run the same set of models using the original “rile” scale and find the similar results, which we report in the appendix. We lose statistical significance on foreign aid mentions using the *Num Positive Statements* dependent variable with the continuous measure of ideology, but the effects remain statistically significant when using the number of negative mentions, as well as positive minus negative mentions. Some may argue that we are losing information by using a trichotomous rather than a continuous measure, but this assumes that movements in the continuous measure are real and not an artifact of the measurement process. Given the difficult nature of measuring ideology, we are not convinced that this is the case. We favor presenting the trichotomous measure both because it is less susceptible to measurement error and because it eases interpretation, but we are comforted that our substantive results hold when using the continuous measure.

⁹In Figure E2 in the appendix, we show the distribution of positive and negative aid mentions over time.

¹⁰The coefficient on *Ideology* in this model is -0.028 and a move from left to right is a change of two units, meaning the point estimate of the effect is calculated as $-0.028 \times 2 \times 14 = -0.784$. This is the point estimate displayed graphically in the top line.

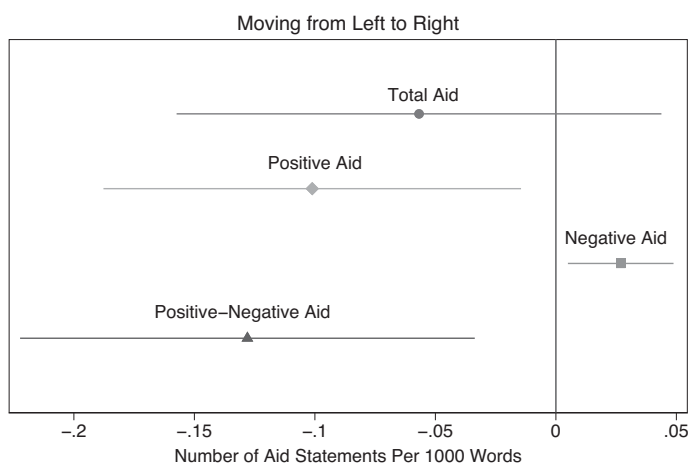


Figure 1. Effect of ideology on aid mentions

itive statements compared with leftwing parties. The coefficient on *Positive-Negative Aid* represents the effect of positive statements after subtracting negative statements. Again, the right-left effect is negative and statistically significant. Overall, there is variation in how parties discuss aid in their manifestos as a function of ideology, with leftist parties slightly more likely to mention aid and significantly more likely to mention aid positively. Right parties, on the other hand, are more likely to discuss aid in a negative light.¹¹

Foreign Aid Outcome Data and Analysis

To evaluate H3, we measure what parties actually do when in power compared to what they said that they would do. If parties’ electoral programs reflect their plans for governing, we would expect parties to implement policies that are in line with their preferences as stated in their manifestos. Thus, our primary independent variable is the number of mentions of foreign aid in the texts of manifestos per 1,000 words.¹² And we seek to determine whether these mentions are correlated with actual aid commitments. Since decisions to allocate aid are made annually by governments as a whole, and not necessarily by individual parties, we need to ensure that our analyses are conducted at the country-year level. We convert our manifesto and party ideology variables, which are measured at the party-election level, to the country-year level. Additionally, to measure ideology, we take advantage of the left-right estimates provided by ParlGov (www.parl.gov.org), which is also our source for cabinet composition data and parliamentary seat shares. ParlGov constructs its ideology measures by rescaling existing expert survey data on party positions. When constructing our manifesto and ideology variables, we focus on the parties in government. We report our findings for the main left-right dimension here, but we also use the state-market

¹¹In the appendix (Figures C1 and C2), we offer descriptive visualizations of two of our main dependent variables—Aid Mentions and Positive Aid Mentions. We see substantial variation across countries in how often parties mention aid. Parties in Norway, Sweden, Canada, the United States, and Germany tend to mention aid more and tend to mention it more positively. Parties in Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, France, and Spain make fewer mentions, and therefore also fewer positive mentions. The time trends are not overly strong, but there does seem to be quite a number of mentions in the early period, a large drop, followed by a significant increase again from the mid-1960s through the early 1990s. The late 1990s experience a drop again, followed by relatively high numbers of mentions in the most recent years.

¹²We have also estimated models without weighting by manifesto length and weighting by number of sentences and the results hold regardless of weighting.

economy dimension and the liberty-authority dimensions, with results reported in the appendix. The results are the same regardless of what dimension we used.¹³

We must also take into consideration which governing parties are important when considering cases of coalition government. One might assume that the party of the prime minister is best placed to convert its stated manifesto positions into policy. But in coalition governments, parties may first-and-foremost control the ministries in which they and their constituencies are more interested (Laver and Shepsle 1996). The party in charge of the ministry responsible for aid, then, might have a greater interest in aid than other government parties and greater ability to translate promises into action. But, of course, coalition oversight mechanisms mean that no one party is likely to fully implement its policy program (Martin and Vanberg 2011).

We take three different approaches to measuring aid positions in government—we use the aid mentions of the prime minister's party, the aid mentions of the party holding the aid ministry, and the average aid mentions of all parties in government weighted by their legislative seat share. Moreover, we look at all mentions of aid as well as only positive aid mentions. For the ideology measures, we weight each government party's ideology by its share of legislative seats controlled by all government parties. Empirically, the aid mentions of the prime minister's party seem to correlate the strongest with aid commitments, however, the seat share-weighted mentions and the aid ministry mentions also work in a similar manner. In Table 1, we report models that use the prime minister's aid mentions, both total mentions and positive mentions, and we report models using the other measures in Appendix D.

Each aid measure in the model is based on the election manifesto from the previous election. Finally, there can be multiple cabinets in a year. Sometimes a government resigns and parties are expected to agree upon a new cabinet in the absence of an election. In most cases, the parties in government do not change significantly. Still, the potential of multiple governments in a year complicates the construction of our measures based on a government. We average our measures across any governments in office during a year.

Dependent Variable

For our dependent variable we use total aid commitments, given in millions of US Dollars. The data are from the OECD's Creditor Reporting System (CRS), which lists aid commitments by project from 1990 until the present. The projects are either of bilateral character or channeled through international organizations. We sum up the aid commitments by donor to get a total of all commitments by year. The benefit of using the OECD CRS data, though only available from 1990 onwards, is that it represents the most complete data in terms of donor reporting. The longer OECD DAC foreign aid time series is subject to considerable levels of underreporting during the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁴ We

opt for coverage quality at the expense of time coverage. Of course, using these data mean that we are only looking at commitments rather than actual aid disbursements, and these two figures could differ. The disbursement data is of higher quality after 2001, and since 2001 the correlation between aid commitment and disbursement is $R = 0.91$. Figure E1 in the appendix plots the relationship between commitments and disbursement during this period.

In addition to using simple aid commitments, we also consider commitments as a percentage of GDP (models 5 and 6) and as a percentage of population (models 7 and 8).¹⁵ Models 3 and 4 include a lagged dependent variable to account for within country autocorrelation in aid commitments. The results are very similar across all of these different model specifications and operationalizations of the dependent variable.

Control Variables

We control for other economic and political variables that might affect a donor's aid commitment decisions. We include a variable for GDP as large countries tend to contribute more aid than small countries (but we drop this variable in models 5 and 6 that use commitments as a percentage of GDP as the dependent variable). Next, we include GDP growth, as aid might increase with economic growth. As a measure of a country's wealth, we include the log of GDP per capita in constant 2010 US dollars. Wealth should have a positive association with aid commitments—donor countries with higher GDP per capita should give more foreign aid, controlling for their size. As another measure of donor economic conditions, we include the unemployment rate as a percentage of the total labor force. If a donor is facing their own economic problems in terms of out of work populace, the government might shift spending from foreign aid to domestic problems. These variables all come from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators*.

We also control for the number of terrorist attacks in a donor country. Attacks, especially foreign ones, might convince politicians to divert money away from foreign efforts and again to focus on domestic ones. These data are drawn from the *Global Terrorism Database*. We sum up the total number of attacks in a donor country in each year. Likewise, migration into a donor country might affect their giving of foreign aid (Bermeo and Leblang 2015). Donors with larger inflows of immigrants might be more willing to give more foreign aid than donors with smaller inflows. We take this variable from the OECD's *International Migration Database*, logging the total inflow of migrants.

We include two variables meant to capture other possible omitted factors in the global environment that may both drive mentions of aid in manifestos and the level of aid commitments. The first variable is the number of deaths resulting from natural disasters, lagged and logged. More disasters may lead parties everywhere to talk more about aid in their manifestos and commit more, as well. We also include

¹³The United States is dropped from models that use a ParlGov measures of ideology as they are not in the ParlGov data. Dropping the United States in these models is also prudent for substantive reasons. It is the only pure presidential democracy in our sample. Party platforms, issued at presidential nominating conventions, are not necessarily viewed as policy commitments in the same way that electoral manifestos in most European countries are. Budgeting generally, and specifically regarding foreign aid, operated differently in the United States than in European parliamentary democracies. For all of these reasons, we exclude the United States from our models.

¹⁴As a percentage of GDP, aid is never very large. In our sample, it ranges from 0.05 percent to just about 1 percent. Aid does show a bit of an increase over

time. In the 1990s, aid as a percentage of GDP averaged between 0.20 percent and 0.30 percent. Since 2009, it has consistently averaged 0.40 percent or more. There are also some differences across types of countries. Scandinavian countries in our sample (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) average between 0.50 percent and 0.63 percent over the sample. The Anglo-American countries (the United States, Canada, and the UK) average around 0.20 percent with other countries (France, Germany, and Finland) all around 0.28 percent.

¹⁵In further model specifications, we include an additional measure to account for societal "aid mood," in addition to global "aid mood," as measured by mean total aid mentions as and mean total positive aid mentions, as expressed by parties that are in the opposition. The findings do not change.

Table 1. Prime Minister's party: the effects of manifesto measures on aid commitments

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
|--|---|---|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| | <i>Commitments</i> <i>all mentions</i> | <i>Commitments</i> <i>pro mentions</i> | <i>Lagged dep var</i> <i>all mentions</i> | <i>Lagged dep var</i> <i>pro mentions</i> | <i>Commitments/</i> <i>GDP all</i> <i>mentions</i> | <i>Commitments</i> <i>GDP pro</i> <i>mentions</i> | <i>Commitments/</i> <i>pop all</i> <i>mentions</i> | <i>Commitments/</i> <i>pop all</i> <i>mentions</i> |
| Commitment, lagged | | | 0.421*** (0.086) | 0.425*** (0.090) | | | | |
| Average aid words/all words by PM party | 1,297.077** (585.447) | | 827.458*** (264.764) | | 0.188*** (0.044) | | 0.000** (0.000) | |
| Average alt. right-left score by gov weighted by seats | 72.918 (60.364) | 42.060 (40.787) | 26.206 (35.578) | 9.134 (27.236) | 0.007 (0.007) | 0.004 (0.004) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) |
| Average aid words/all words by PM party X average alt. right-left score by gov weighted by seats | -378.680* (175.233) | | -239.638** (80.560) | | -0.049*** (0.013) | | -0.000* (0.000) | |
| Mean Pro Aid_tot pm | | 1,466.440** (637.848) | | 992.053*** (284.818) | | 0.235*** (0.043) | | 0.000** (0.000) |
| Mean Pro Aid_tot pm X average alt. right-left score by gov weighted by seats | | -422.054** (189.030) | | -281.689*** (85.566) | | -0.061*** (0.013) | | -0.000* (0.000) |
| Unemployment, total | -115.937** (49.778) | -127.217** (51.119) | -94.341** (39.476) | -102.534** (40.385) | -0.012*** (0.002) | -0.013*** (0.001) | -0.000* (0.000) | -0.000** (0.000) |
| GDP | 4.260*** (0.345) | 4.241*** (0.361) | 2.580*** (0.345) | 2.552*** (0.368) | | | -0.000 (0.000) | -0.000 (0.000) |
| GDP growth | 14.087 (31.802) | 13.640 (31.275) | 16.404 (32.865) | 16.838 (32.484) | -0.009*** (0.002) | -0.009*** (0.002) | -0.000 (0.000) | -0.000 (0.000) |
| Log GDP per capita | -4,005.930 (2,282.236) | -4,245.606* (2,184.227) | -3,815.216 (2,190.839) | -4,027.265* (2,129.538) | -0.107 (0.178) | -0.128 (0.168) | -0.000 (0.000) | -0.000 (0.000) |
| # Terrorist incidents | -1.447 (1.294) | -1.317 (1.344) | 0.936 (1.018) | 1.027 (1.063) | -0.000 (0.000) | -0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) |
| Logged Immigration | -504.678** (201.401) | -530.552** (197.653) | -391.651** (152.583) | -409.020** (151.312) | -0.008 (0.010) | -0.011 (0.010) | -0.000 (0.000) | -0.000 (0.000) |
| Average aid total | 197.183 (300.914) | 182.200 (290.941) | -206.205 (325.616) | -226.222 (315.707) | 0.035 (0.038) | 0.034 (0.038) | -0.000 (0.000) | -0.000 (0.000) |
| Logged disaster deaths | -34.638 (40.920) | -28.205 (41.919) | 5.953 (49.354) | 10.359 (49.932) | 0.004 (0.003) | 0.004 (0.003) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) |
| Number party cabinet | 120.868 (73.726) | 123.396 (74.719) | 73.496 (52.950) | 69.273 (52.836) | -0.002 (0.004) | -0.003 (0.003) | -0.000 (0.000) | -0.000 (0.000) |
| Constant | 46,925.942* (24,244.343) | 49,903.614* (23,159.978) | 44,023.673* (23,785.801) | 46,576.769* (23,161.517) | 1.506 (1.857) | 1.785 (1.734) | 0.001 (0.003) | 0.001 (0.003) |
| N | 237 | 237 | 226 | 226 | 237 | 237 | 237 | 237 |
| Clusters | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 |
| R ² | 0.811 | 0.810 | 0.840 | 0.840 | 0.559 | 0.556 | 0.651 | 0.638 |

Note: Models include country fixed effects and half-decade dummies (not shown to conserve space). Standard errors are clustered by country.

the lagged total number of aid mentions across all parties in a given year. With this variable, we attempt to measure the overall trend of foreign aid salience. Taken together, these two variables capture otherwise unmeasured global trends that may covary with both average aid mentions in manifestos (unrelated to ideology) and aid commitments.

Lastly, we control for the number of parties in government. It may be that the presence and size of coalition governments affects aid commitments beyond how we count mentions of foreign aid when measuring our primary independent variable. On the one hand, more parties in government could mean more veto players (Tsebelis 2002), which would make it harder for the prime minister, or any actor, to commit aid or follow through on manifesto promises. On the other hand, Bawn and Rosenbluth (2006) find that coalitions lead to higher government spending because parties engage in compromise to appease coalition members.

While the veto players argument predicts large coalitions to make fewer commitments or be less likely to convert manifesto promises into policy, the Bawn and Rosenbluth argument points in the opposite direction. It suggests that coalition governments might commit more aid, or make commitments so long as at least one party in government makes aid a priority. In addition to simply controlling for the number of coalition partners, we therefore also estimate a model (reported in the Appendix D) for which we subset the data to include only coalition governments. Our results for the interaction stay the same in this particular subset of the data.

Models

Our primary variables of interest are those capturing aid mentions, ideology, and the interaction of the two. Beyond

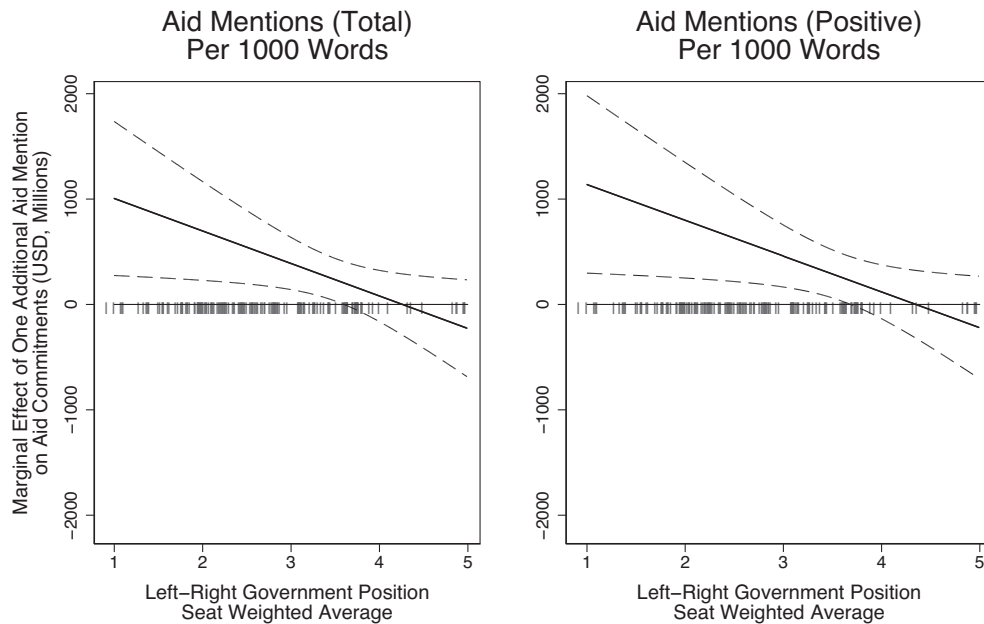


Figure 2. Marginal effects of aid mentions on aid commitments by government ideology

the controls mentioned above, all our models include country level fixed effects to control for any country-specific factor that is not included. We also cluster the standard errors at the country level. We include dummy variables for each 5-year period to control for any time effects. Because of data availability, the models cover the years 1990–2015.

Results

In [Table 1](#), we determine whether our manifesto variables, *Total Aid Mentions (per 1000 words)* and *Positive Aid Mentions (per 1000 words)*, are correlated with foreign aid commitments in our sample for different operationalizations of our dependent variable—aid commitments (models 1 and 2), aid commitments with a lagged dependent variable (models 3 and 4), aid commitments as a percentage of GDP (models 5 and 6), and aid commitments as a percentage of donor country population (models 7 and 8). In these models, we specifically look at mentions by the prime minister’s party, but [Appendix D](#) reports models using government seat share weighted mentions and aid ministry party mentions. Our argument suggests that we should not expect to see an average effect of our manifesto variables but rather a conditional effect with leftist parties “walking-the-walk” while conservative parties simply “talking-the-talk,” but not translating their support of foreign aid into higher aid commitments while in office. The argument therefore implies an interaction effect between aid mentions and ideology.

We observe that aid mentions (both total and positive) by the prime minister’s party are statistically associated with aid commitments. While the ideology variable is not statistically significant, the interactions between ideology and aid mentions are negative and statistically significant across the models, as predicted by our argument. These relationships are very similar when we look at mentions by the party holding the development ministry and the weighted mentions by all parties in government.¹⁶ Because it is easier to

interpret interactive effects by plotting the effects, [Figure 2](#) presents the marginal effects of *Total Aid Mentions* and *Positive Aid Mentions* at different levels of ideology on aid commitment.

The left panel of [Figure 2](#) plots the marginal effect of an additional standard deviation in aid mention conditional on government ideology, while the right panel of [Figure 2](#) shows the marginal effect of *Positive Aid Mentions*. The graphs show that predicted aid commitments increase with aid mentions by parties in left governments, but not with aid mentions by parties in right governments, where there is even possibly a weakly negative relationship. We find statistically significant differences for left-wing governments, but not for center-right governments, indicated by the lower bound of the confidence interval crossing zero. Moreover, additional difference-of-means tests reveal that the mean average effect of an additional standard deviation in aid mentions for left-wing governments is statistically significantly different from the average marginal effect for right-wing governments for both aid mentions and positive aid mentions ($p = 0.018$ for aid mentions and $p = 0.014$ for positive aid mentions), something we cannot determine from looking at the figure alone.

As expected, the effects are even stronger when looking at positive mentions. The rug plot at the bottom of the figure presents the density of the data across the range of government ideologies. Because there are a few data points that extend beyond 5, we truncate the scale because of the scarcity of data points at the far right. The figures suggest that, for the most left-wing governments, one additional standard deviation in positive aid mentions in a manifesto is associated with an increase of roughly 1 billion US dollars in foreign aid commitments, but a small decrease in commitments for a right-wing government.

For some, but not all, control variables, the results are in the expected direction. For example, the GDP variable, our indicator for the size of an economy, is positive and statistically significant, suggesting that larger economies contribute more aid than small countries, controlling for the size of the economy. As a measure of donor economic conditions, we had included the country’s unemployment

¹⁶ [Clarke et al. \(2017\)](#). Aid Attitudes Tracker—Wave 9 (Germany). Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

rate as a percentage of the total labor force. The results confirm this expectation, insofar as an increase in unemployment is associated with a reduction in foreign aid spending, at conventional levels of statistical significance.

Inconsistent with our initial expectations, our measure of wealth, as measured by GDP per capita, is negative and statistically significant for some but not all of the models, giving some indication that relatively wealthier economies in our sample are contributing less aid if aid commitments are weighted by donor GDP. Likewise, the migration control variable is negative and statistically significant for the same set of models, suggesting that donors with larger inflows of immigrants give less foreign aid than donors with a lower inflow. Although we did not anticipate the negative sign, it is possible that greater levels of immigration put more pressures on state budgets and require more domestic spending relative to foreign aid. The results associated with the GDP growth variable are inconsistent in terms of the coefficient sign and statistical significance across the models. The remaining controls, including the number of terrorist attacks in a donor country, the number of deaths resulting from natural disasters, and the number of parties in government do not have statistically significant coefficients.

Overall, we interpret these results to suggest that parties on the left may be more likely to follow through with their commitment on foreign aid, all else equal. Conservative parties, on the other hand, may engage with foreign aid, and may do so in a positive way, but they ultimately do not feel the need to follow-through with their electoral promises when it comes to state-run foreign aid.

PROBING PLAUSIBILITY OF THE CONDITIONAL EFFECT OF PARTY RHETORIC AND OUTCOMES

We suggest that the difference in policy implementation records between the left and right may result, in part, from the possibility that parties of the left are more likely to raise foreign aid positions in public, prior to elections, than their right-leaning counterparts; that constituents of conservative parties are less likely to consider foreign aid a policy priority than constituents of parties on the left; and that policy positions on foreign aid may be more consequential for making decisions about whom to support in upcoming elections for left-leaning voters than for their right-leaning counterparts.

To probe the plausibility of this explanation, we draw on results from relevant questions from the Aid Attitudes Tracker (AAT) survey¹⁷ administered in Germany from November 9 to December 4, 2017, following the parliamentary elections in September. The survey sample comprised 6,108 respondents and was nationally representative.¹⁸ The first question asked: “Thinking about the political party, with which you identify primarily, have you heard if this political party has adopted a position on foreign aid spending? The answer choices included “yes,” “no,” and “don’t know.” Of people who identified with parties on the left (Die Grünen, Die Linke, and SPD) an average of 32 percent said that their party had adopted a policy position on foreign aid prior to the elections.¹⁹ Of respondents who identify with the right end of the spectrum (Alternative für Deutschland,

CDU/CSU,²⁰ and FDP) only an average of 22 percent had heard their party adopt a position on foreign aid. For the FDP, the percentage of respondents is 19 percent. These data provide prima facie evidence that left-leaning voters are more likely to be aware of their party’s foreign policy positions than their right-leaning counterparts.

In addition, the survey included the following question: “Do you think that foreign aid spending is a priority for the political party with which you identify?” Of people who identified with parties on the left an average of 24 percent said that foreign aid spending was a priority for their party. Among respondents identifying with right parties, the Aid Attitudes Tracker project found fewer people stating that foreign aid was a priority issue for their party. The average across parties was 14 percent. These descriptive data from the Aid Attitudes Tracker substantiate our claim that left-leaning members of the public are more likely to think of foreign aid as a priority issue for their party than right-leaning members of the public.

Finally, the Aid Attitudes Tracker asked respondents about the importance of foreign aid for their decision to support parties: “Which of the following statements comes closest to how you feel: A political party’s position on foreign aid is (INSERT ANSWER OPTION) to whether I support the party.” The answer choices included “very important,” “important,” “neither important nor unimportant,” “unimportant,” “not at all important,” and “don’t know.” Of people who identified with parties on the left approximately 40 percent across parties said that the party position on foreign aid was either very important or important in their decision to support the party. Of respondents who identify with parties on the right, the same average percentage across parties is only approximately 25 percent of people. This difference in answers between right and left political parties suggest that for members of the public who identify with parties of the left, foreign aid positions are more important in their decision to support the party than for members of the public who support parties of the right. The implications for party leadership would be that, in light of these differences, parties of the left feel more pressure to implement their proposed policies than their conservative counterparts.

Conclusion and Future Directions

We have explored the impact of ideology on a party’s foreign aid position in its electoral manifesto and how these positions translate into action. On the basis of newly collected data on party positions on foreign aid, we find evidence that parties discuss aid differently in their manifestos. Leftist parties are more likely to discuss aid positively than rightist ones. We argue that this pattern results from ideological differences in how voters view the state in goods and services delivery: the left is more in favor of state-funded development assistance than the right. The parties, in turn, anticipate their constituents’ perceptions and formulate corresponding party positions. This lends support for existing work that associates left parties with greater aid efforts.

We also find that leftist parties are more likely to follow through with their electoral commitments regarding aid than parties of the right—that is, their positive mentions of aid are less likely to translate into action. We find evidence that as the number of pro-aid mentions in manifestos increases, left parties commit more while right parties do not

¹⁷The results focused on six major parties currently represented in the German parliament (CDU/CSU, SPD, Die Grünen, Die Linke, FDP, and Alternative für Deutschland).

¹⁸A more detailed breakdown by party is offered in the respective tables (Tables F1–F3) in Appendix F.

¹⁹The CDU/CSU has held the German Ministry for Cooperation and Development since 2013.

²⁰Although it is worth noting that we are not looking at pledges, per se, but rather mentions of aid. The differences could be less stark if we were to code pledges in the same manner as Thomson et al. (2017).

change behavior. Existing research examining party pledges in electoral manifestos conducted at the aggregate level finds no impact of ideology on parties' willingness or ability to fulfill promises (Thomson et al. 2017). Our research suggests that aggregate level analysis could mask interesting variation at the policy level when it comes to the relationship between ideology, action, and what is stated in the election platform.²¹ Lastly, we have offered evidence from German public opinion data to suggest that voters supporting left-versus right-wing parties have different views regarding the importance of aid. Left-wing voters state that they are more likely to pay attention to their party's positions on aid, believe it is a priority for their party, and find it important when considering their own support of the party. Thus, left-wing parties have a greater incentive to take seriously what they put in their electoral manifestos with respect to aid.

Overall, we hope that the new data set on aid mentions will be useful to other scholars who want to better understand whether and how parties communicate their positions on foreign aid before elections and how these positions influence policy outcomes. While scholars of party politics and elections have long used electoral manifestos as a source of data to understand ideology and political competition, they have been underutilized as a source of data in understanding foreign policy and international politics. We have demonstrated that they provide a useful source of data on policy positions with respect to foreign aid that relate to aid outcomes for at least some parties.

These hypotheses cannot be tested with the current state of the data on foreign aid commitments over time and across donors, as conventional data sets do not code foreign aid along these dimensions. To understand what the politics of foreign aid are about, it is therefore important to look beyond available commitment data to other sources that reveal what political parties are advocating in foreign aid.

Supplemental Information

Supplemental information is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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²¹ Although it is worth noting that we are not looking at pledges, per se, but rather mentions of aid. The differences could be less stark if we were to code pledges in the same manner as Thomson et al. (2017).

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