Election Pledge Rhetoric: Selling Policy With Words

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This article investigates the possibilities that political parties have to sell specific policies to a broad electorate by use of persuasive words in election pledges. Prior research has shown that parties can increase their electoral support by targeting different groups of voters with different policies or by moderating policy platforms to the center. We investigate whether voters' appreciation of specific policy pledges increases when rhetoric is used to appeal broadly. Inspired by literature on philosophy of language and linguistic semantics, we designed a survey experiment in which 1,960 Swedish citizens evaluated election pledges. We randomized whether the policy was described using universal persuasive words. Results showed that universal persuasive words increase the appreciation of specific policy pledges, particularly among individuals oriented close to and at the center of the ideological left–right scale (the median voters). The effects decrease with ideological (left and right) extremity. In times when center voters become increasingly important for election outcomes, indications that they are susceptible to universal, but left–right ideology-neutral, rhetoric are interesting both for parties and scholars of the same.

Keywords: persuasive words, political rhetoric across ideological divides, election pledges, political communication, linguistic semantic

Voters' attraction to policy pledges seems dependent on what policy is actually pledged, but citizens also have been shown to be attracted to policies depending on how political elites choose to present them (see overview in Schaffner & Sellers, 2010). Rhetoric involving values is particularly important when parties reach out to voters with policies. However, scholars have repeatedly found that such effects are limited by ideological predispositions: Different values appeal to voters on either one side or the other of the ideological left–right divide (see overview in Druckman, 2001). Mainstream parties therefore have incentives to use campaign rhetoric that appeals broadly across ideological divides. As of

yet, there is little scholarly knowledge on rhetoric that is, or can be, used for this purpose. This article contributes by theoretically identifying, and empirically testing, a rhetorical strategy that "sells" policy pledges among voters of diverse ideological preferences without moderating the actual policies.

To construct a theoretical framework, we used literature on philosophy of language and linguistic semantics on *persuasive words* (e.g., Macagno & Walton, 2014; Stevenson, 1944; Walton, 2006), that is, words with characteristics that make them universally appreciated and thereby appealing to "everyone." We asked two empirical questions: Can parties increase voters' appreciation of election pledges to voters of center, left, and right predispositions at the same time using universal persuasive words? Do effects apply to everyone, or are they limited by ideological left and right extremity?

A sample of 1,960 Swedish citizens participated in a Web-based survey experiment in which policy proposals were presented using universal persuasive words; a control group saw the same pledges, but without persuasive rhetoric. We presented the respondents one—for the Swedish context—"new case" and one previously proposed policy with which citizens were likely familiar. Results showed that individuals exposed to universal persuasive words were more positive toward both of the pledges compared with a control group. The effects were most notably seen among individuals around the center, and less so for individuals leaning to the left and right. For both pledges, the effects disappeared when individuals placed themselves closer to the extremes on the left–right scale. Implications of the results are discussed in a concluding section.

Theoretical Points of Departure

Studies of political rhetoric and its effects are not always conceptually clear, with terms such as *framing*, *priming*, and *agenda setting* used to denote theoretical and empirical phenomena that are close, but not the same (for discussion on this matter, see, e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007b; de Vreese, 2005; Scheufele, 1999). Recent decades have seen "dramatic growth" (Weaver, 2007, pp. 143–144) in these types of studies, and theoretical clarity on what is meant by crucial notions is often called for (see, e.g., Scheufele & Nisbeth, 2007). In this study, we tried to be theoretically clear by using concepts from the literature on philosophy of language and linguistic semantics (henceforth *linguistic semantics*).

Studies in that field (further described below) identify specific mechanisms that make words generally persuasive and appealing to "everyone." This is useful for a study such as ours that focuses on universal values not constrained by ideological priors. More specifically, studies in the field of linguistic semantics tend to make a difference between values that are subjectively appreciated by people of similar culture or value orientation, on the one hand, and values that are "universal," that is, appreciated by people independent of, for example, ideological priors, on the other (e.g., Macagno, 2014; Walton, 2003).

Values are often perceived of as crucial to how individuals evaluate political objects and form political attitudes (e.g., Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001; Fleming & Petty, 2000; Rokeach, 1973; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004), and are thus important for studies on political persuasion. Some scholars focus specifically on value framing, which refers to the framing of an issue by calling on social values (see, e.g., Schemer, Wirth, & Matthes, 2012, for an overview). This part of the framing literature teaches us

that value-laden rhetoric can influence attitudes without the object of discussion being changed. A classic example is Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997), who showed that public tolerance toward political extreme groups increases when news coverage on violent rallies (the object of discussion) highlights "civil liberties" over "safety risks," and vice versa.

Given that political attitudes are often rooted in ideological predispositions (e.g., Lakoff, 2002), and political issues often are divided on an ideological *left–right dimension*,[2] individual predispositions on a left–right scale have been emphasized by scholars of value framing as crucial for understanding why rhetoric works on some individuals, but not on others. Value frames and individuals' value preferences are, in other words, often discussed in terms of being either a match between evoked value and ideological (e.g., left or right) orientation or a mismatch.[3] Schemer et al. (2012), for example, showed that "individualism" attracts right-oriented individuals, whereas "fairness" attracts people on the left; Nelson and Garst (2005) found that "personal motivation" attracts individuals to the right, whereas "equality" attracts individuals of a left orientation.

As the aim of this article is to study rhetoric that appeals broadly to voters of diverse preferences, we need to make a clear distinction between rhetoric that appeals to individuals of a certain ideology and rhetoric that appeals to everyone. In other words, we need a literature that particularly defines a persuasive and universal rhetorical tool not constrained by ideological overtones. The literature on linguistic semantics helps us find a theoretical account of rhetoric that appeals broadly. More specifically, the literature helps us define what we here call *universal persuasive words* because it suggests characteristics of words that are objectively appreciated by many (Bench-Capon, 2003) and hence appeal to diverse or "mass" audiences (Walton, 2003).

Universal Persuasive Words

In the literature on linguistic semantics, an important distinction is made between reason-driven and emotion-driven persuasive argumentation (e.g., Schacter, Gilbert, Wegner, & Nock, 2014; Stevenson, 1944; Walton, 2006). *Reason-driven persuasion* refers to processes through which attitudes or beliefs are changed by appeals to logic and reason, and *emotion-driven persuasion* is the process through which attitudes or beliefs are changed by appeals to emotions and values (for a thorough discussion, see Walton, 2006).[4] For our purposes, the theory surrounding emotion-driven persuasion is the most interesting.

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[2] Parties compete mainly along the left–right dimension in Europe (e.g., Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, & Tannenbaum, 2001), and the vast majority of voters base their vote choice on parties they perceive as being closest to themselves on a left–right scale (e.g., van der Eijk, Franklin, & van der Brug, 1999).

[3] This "conflict of values" is a starting point for many studies, and values are often seen as mutually exclusive. Sniderman and Theriault (2004, pp. 140–141), for example, speak about "individual freedom" (liberal value) as competing with "social order" (authoritarian value). The point is that you cherish individual freedom or social order, not both, and which one depends on your (ideological) value priors.

[4] Walton (2006) compares the process when words influence attitudes by appealing to emotions and values with that when individuals are "emotionally influenced by the words of a song" (pp. 222–223). The

The causal relationship between evoked values, individuals' value predispositions, emotions, and their subsequent decisions is also thoroughly discussed in political psychology under the label *heuristic decision making* (see, e.g., Igartua & Cheng, 2009; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). This kind of emotion-driven reasoning has been thought of as particularly compelling for ordinary citizens, as emotions and values serve as shortcuts to process complex information such as political appeals (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Zaller, 1992). This makes emotion-driven rhetoric relevant for a study such as this that investigates effects of election pledge rhetoric on citizens' policy support.

We used three characteristics of words from the discussion on emotion-driven persuasion in the literature on linguistic semantics to define our notion of universal persuasive words.

First, the words are associated with universally appreciated values. Universal persuasive words capture values that are cherished by people of different ideological groups (to be compared with ideological persuasive words that are appreciated only by some). These include morals, ethics, preferences, belief systems, and worldviews used to identify societal norms (e.g., Bench-Capon, 2003; Schacter et al., 2014); an example often put forward in the literature is *democracy*. Other examples are *responsibility*, *human rights*, and *knowledge*. Words that denote universal values increase people's support for objects because supporting the objects will be viewed as supporting the value (e.g., Hare, 1952; Stevenson, 1963; Walton, 2003).

Second, the words have a strong emotive meaning. In the literature on linguistic semantics, a distinction is made between words' emotive meaning and their descriptive meaning. *Emotive meaning* refers to the emotional reactions a word evokes, and *descriptive meaning* is the factual content of the word (e.g., Macagno & Walton, 2014; Stevenson, 1944; Walton, 2006). The word *democracy*, for example, typically evokes positive emotions, but it also has factual substantial meaning, such as "government by the people; *especially*: rule of the majority" ("Democracy," n.d., para. 1). Universal persuasive words have a strong emotive meaning. This means that they invoke automatic emotional reactions such as happiness and fear (e.g., Macagno & Walton, 2010; Stevenson, 1944; Walton, 2003). In addition, the emotive meaning is usually stronger than the factual meaning, and the emotional associations people get from the words remain even if persuaders use different descriptive meanings (e.g., Stevenson, 1944, 1963). Examples of words with strong emotive meaning that are mentioned in the literature are *culture* and *courage*. Other examples are *beauty*, *health*, and *opportunity*.

Third, the words have a vague and flexible descriptive meaning. That words have a vague and flexible descriptive meaning means that they can refer to diverse content (Stevenson, 1944; Walton, 2006; Zarefsky, 2006). Consider again the word *democracy*: It has a number of stipulated (subjective) meanings. One person may, for example, say that democracy occurs only when all collective decisions are made directly through voting. Another person may say that democracy is a political system in which

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words (or songs) can change attitudes implicitly by inducing a feeling that something is good or bad, without the listener reflecting on how the word relates to this something or there being a factual reason given for why it should be.

everyone is treated equally and has equal rights. Given that persuasive words have substantial meanings for individuals, they appear to be informative: They "make it look like a simple statement of fact is being made" (Walton, 2006, p. 218). Because they can mean different things, however, this is not the case. Persuasive words do not provide factual information to an audience unless the speakers define what they, descriptively, mean by the word (Stevenson, 1944; Walton, 2006).

The fact that words trigger strong emotions and appeal to values that are shared by many makes them universally persuasive. The fact that they are linguistically flexible also makes them applicable to diverse issues and contexts (Stevenson, 1944; Zarefsky, 2006). If associated with an object (e.g., a policy), effects are expected to transmit from the word to the object so that reactions to the object become similar. If the persuasive word is also repeated, followed or preceded by words with similar meaning, and words with an enhancing effect such as *unavoidable* or *true*, the transmitted effects increase because the object that is described by the word will be seen as "necessary" to gain the qualities of the persuasive word. Therefore, a fourth characteristic involved in persuasion through words is to use enforcing strategies.

In enforcing strategies, persuasive words are enforced in some or all of the following three ways: (1) Words of same or similar meaning are repeated in the same message to enhance the importance of the words (Stevenson, 1944); (2) persuasive words are preceded or followed by punctuation or words (e.g., adjectives and adverbs such as *powerful* and *great*) that can enhance the strength of the persuasive words as well as the link between the word and the object of discussion (Macagno & Walton, 2010); (3) objects associated with the persuasive words are described in "deterministic" terms, that is, indicating that to gain the qualities associated with the word, the object of discussion is "unavoidable" (Stevenson, 1944).

In real-life election campaigns, election pledges can be formulated both in neutral terms and with persuasive words and enforcing strategies, and both types exist in real parties' election manifestos (see overview in Håkansson & Naurin, 2014). For an illustrative example, consider the following policy pledge about cutting taxes for small businesses made by the Social Democratic Party in Sweden in its 1994 and 2010 election manifestos. In 1994, the party stated, "Businesses need to grow and multiply. The conditions for small businesses have to become better, not least through larger access to venture capital. Business taxation should be cut. . . . A Social Democratic government will work for" (Svensk Nationell Datatjänst [SND], 1994, para. 14).

In 2010, the same party presented the same policy pledge, but this time it included universal persuasive words and enforcing strategies (italized in the quotation by the authors):

> *Faith* in the *future* for businesses. We want to take *advantage* of Swedish *successes* and *stimulate* new ones. We want to pursue a *strategic* policy for *future* jobs and growth. It is *high time* for *dialogue* and *teamwork* for Sweden to be at *the top*. . . . We want to cut taxes for small businesses with. (SND, 2010, para. 5.emphasis by authors).

Expectations

We expected that universal persuasive words would "sell" policies broadly to diverse electorates. Because we used election campaign scenarios, in which *ideological predispositions* are likely particularly polarized (see, e.g., Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, & Tannenbaum, 2001; van der Eijk, Franklin, & van der Brug, 1999), we defined diverse electorates as electorates including voters with different ideological predispositions. We operationalized this to denote individuals of different predispositions on the ideological left–right dimension. The reason for this is that we investigated universal persuasive words in the contemporary Western political context, in which the ideological left–right dimension constitutes the main dimension for political controversy (van der Eijk et al., 1999). When we say that universal persuasive words sell policies to diverse electorates, we mean that they sell policies to voters in and around the center (i.e., the median voters), and that they are not constrained to individuals on either one or the other side of the ideological left–right divide.

We expected that universal persuasive words would sell policies to diverse electorates because they (1) make individuals perceive objects (here, policies) as intertwined with values appreciated beyond the ideological left–right divide, and (2) trigger strong emotional reactions to the objects. Also crucial is that the words (3) are pictured as essential for the evaluation of objects when highlighted by enforcing strategies (see Stevenson, 1944). The first hypothesis was therefore

H1:   Universal persuasive words increase citizens' appreciation of election pledges and effects are seen across the left–right divide.

H1 makes clear that effects of universal persuasive words should be seen independently of which side of the left–right divide individuals place themselves. However, even if universal persuasive words are appealing to diverse electorates and not limited to individuals of certain ideological left–right predispositions, it is likely that effects decrease with ideological left and right extremity. We based this expectation on the following argument. Existing studies convincingly argue that individuals give different priorities to different values[5] (e.g., Jacoby, 2006; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997), and that this can matter for the impact of value-laden rhetoric on attitudes even when values are generally cherished (Barker, 2005). According to Brewer (2001), for example, individuals who assign very high priority to certain values (e.g., ideological left or right values) make less use of other values that they appreciate when they evaluate political issues (even when these other values are not in conflict with their strongly prioritized ones). Assuming that individuals who are leaning toward the extremes on the left–right scale also assign very strong priority to ideological left or right values, universal values will likely be overrun by left and right values in their value hierarchies.[6] We therefore expected that universal persuasive words,

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[5] Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997) refer to this as "different weights to different values" (pp. 236–237), and Jacoby (2006) refers to this as "hierarchical structures of values" (p. 706).

[6] These effects should be particularly visible around elections. Election campaigns tend to emphasize the political left–right dimension (van der Eijk et al., 1999), which should trigger the ideological left–right values of ideological extreme individuals.

which per definition are not associated with left or right ideological views, would be less effective in influencing appreciation of the policies among these individuals.[7]

In sum, assuming that the priority individuals assign to ideological left or right values increases as they place themselves farther to the extremes of the left–right scale, effects of universal persuasive words should decrease simultaneously because individuals of extreme ideological priors will find such left and right neutral words less important for evaluation of political objects. On the same token, voters in the center and close to the center, who presumably have less extreme ideological value preferences on the left–right dimension that can dampen their susceptibility to universal persuasive words,[8] should be more strongly affected by such words in election pledges. We therefore formulated a second hypothesis:

H2:   Effects of universal persuasive words are strongest for citizens closer to the center and decrease with ideological left–right extremity.

Data and Method

Hypotheses were tested in a survey experiment with 1,960 respondents from the Swedish Citizen Panel, an online survey panel administered by the Laboratory of Opinion Research at the University of Gothenburg. Participation in the panel is granted scholars after a peer review process, and our experiment was performed between November 27 and December 21, 2014. The sample was opt-in with an overrepresentation of men, politically interested, and highly educated individuals (see online Appendix A, https://goo.gl/yjbepW). Our treatment and control groups were well balanced on these variables (see results from randomization checks in online Appendix B, https://goo.gl/Hdloaq). However, the fact that the sample had an overrepresentation of politically interested individuals could have had some implications for our results. Political interest tends to correlate with political sophistication (see Highton, 2009, for a review), which, in turn, can moderate effects of political rhetoric (see, e.g., Lecheler, de Vreese, & Slothuus, 2009; Slothuus, 2008, for overviews). Also, research on motivated political reasoning indicates that individuals with strong invested interest in political positions are harder to change with any type of argument (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Kunda, 1990; Redlawsk, 2002). This implies that universal persuasive words will have less effect on politically interested individuals. Therefore, we employed control analyses of the effects of universal persuasive words for individuals with different degrees of political interest.

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[7] We note here that this does not mean that individuals of extreme left–right predispositions do not share universal values, or that universal values are conflicting with their left–right views. The assumption is solely that left–right extreme individuals place universal values lower on their value hierarchies, and therefore make less use of them when they evaluate policy pledges.

[8] We note that center-oriented voters are not necessarily nonideological. A self-placement around the middle of a left–right scale can mean a deliberate choice of a centrist ideology (see, e.g., Knutsen, 1998) but also that other values are prioritized, such as immigration issues. However, because the left–right dimension constitutes the main ideological dimension for political controversy in Western democracies (van der Eijk et al., 1999), ideological left and right values are reasonable candidates for values that notably decrease voters' prioritization of universal persuasive words in election pledges. We therefore think that the endpoints on the left–right dimension are useful proxies for ideological extremity in this study.

We designed our treatment taking into account the characteristics of universal persuasive words described in linguistic theory. Hence, the words were emotively charged; value-laden, but neutral to left–right ideology; and linguistically flexible (e.g., Stevenson, 1944; Walton, 2006). Given that we studied universal persuasive words in a Swedish context, we searched for emotive and value-laden words cherished by voters and parties from both sides of the left–right divide in Sweden. We used results from a survey pilot with 80 Swedes recruited at a central train station, who were asked whether they liked a number of value words common in the Swedish political debate, as well as where they placed themselves on a left–right scale. We also calculated the use of these and similar words in the 2006 and 2010 election manifestoes for the Swedish parliamentary parties. Words that were strongly liked by individuals and used in the manifestos for parties on both sides as well as in the center of the left–right divide were designated universally emotive and value-laden.[9] The words we used in the treatment were also chosen taking into account that they were linguistically flexible, that is, they were applicable on diverse contents and issues (Stevenson, 1944; Zarefsky, 2006).

We note that persuasive words are identified as a universal strategy applicable across contexts (e.g., Stevenson, 1944; Walton, 2003; Zarefsky, 2006), and the tendency to rely on values in attitude formation processes has been described as a "universal human trait" (e.g., Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001; Lakoff, 2002). The results of this study therefore were expected to be applicable to broader contexts (at least in terms of other Western democracies) and not limited to the Swedish case.

Treatments

We presented the respondents with two different fictive election pledges, with or without universal persuasive words. By using two pledges, we can discuss whether main effects were dependent on what type of pledge was made. More specifically, we took into account that effects of rhetoric may decrease when individuals already are likely to have attitudes on an issue. According to Chong and Druckman (2007b), citizens are likely to be more susceptible to rhetoric when it comes to "new issues" on the agenda. This has also been pointed out by Sniderman and Theriault (2004), who write that the effects of value-laden rhetoric may be higher when it is used for issues that are "so remote from peoples' ordinary focus of attention that they have not worked through their connections with their deeper values and political principles" (p. 155).

We designed one policy pledge to serve as a new case on the Swedish political agenda: camera surveillance of public parks to protect the local environment. Here, effects of universal persuasive words were assumed to be larger and effects of ideological extremity to be smaller. A second pledge was designed to resemble real policy proposals in Sweden: increased demands on students in the form of longer school days and summer school. School issues are salient in Sweden, and debates have concentrated on the sinking results of students during recent years. Different ways of raising demands on students (e.g., by introducing mandatory summer school and longer school days) have been proposed by

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[9] Words that were used frequently by either left or right parties and/or appreciated by individuals of either left or right predispositions were excluded. Examples in kind were *equality*, which was identified as left-leaning, and *economic growth*, which was identified as right-leaning.

parties on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum.[10] We expected that the school pledges would be harder to sell using rhetoric given that the question was already well integrated in the current political debate.

Each respondent was exposed to both policy proposals and saw either pledges with or without universal persuasive words. The order in which the two pledges appeared was randomized.

In the control version of the treatment, policies were described in neutral terms (i.e., without persuasive words), whereas the persuasive condition included universal persuasive words. More specifically, in the persuasive version of the environment treatment, we added the following universal persuasive words (adjusted to fit the policy and the surrounding formulations): *rights*, *responsibility*, *sustainability*, and *improvements*. In the persuasive version of the school treatment, we included the universal persuasive words *knowledge*, *development*, *quality*, *opportunities*, *improvements*, and *stability*. The persuasive versions of the treatments also included enforcing strategies. The same persuasive words were repeated in the same pledge (e.g., *knowledge* in the school pledge and *rights* in the environment pledge), and we included several similar persuasive words (e.g., *healthy* and *vibrant* to be compared with *sustainable* in the environment pledge and *well functioning* to be compared with *quality* in the school pledge).

Words with enhancing effects were used, such as *high* quality and *powerful* improvements, as well as deterministic words such as "Powerful improvements are *necessary* for." English translations of the treatments are presented in Table 1 (for original Swedish versions, see online Appendix C, https://goo.gl/6odvq9).

To test external validity of the treatments, we asked respondents how realistic the pledges were as well as where on a left–right scale the pledges should be placed (results are reported in online Appendix D, https://goo.gl/2FbX8s). In short, the school pledge was perceived as more realistic than the environment pledge (which was expected given that the school issue was an "old issue" in the Swedish political debate). The school pledge was also placed slightly more to the right than the environment pledge.[11]

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[10] To ensure that respondents would not associate the policies with a specific party or certain ideological viewpoint, which would make it difficult to isolate effects of the manipulations, we used policies that were fairly neutral in ideological left–right terms.

[11] Subjects exposed to universal persuasive words placed the school pledge somewhat farther to the right compared with the control group, $M_{control}$ = 4.42, SE = 0.04; $M_{persuasive}$ = 4.56, SE = 0.05; $t(1,841)$ = −2.23, p = .026. We therefore controlled for the subjects' placement of the school pledge on a left–right scale when we analyzed the main treatment effects.

Table 1. Treatments.

Introduction
"Imagine that a political party prior to a parliamentary election gives the following policy pledges about nature preservation in the cities/the school. Please read the text carefully and answer the questions that follow."

Environment	
Persuasive rhetoric	Control treatment
Improvements in environmental protection in the cities!	Measures for environmental protection in the cities.
In Sweden we have good access to green areas around our cities. However, there is criticism that the environment in these areas is deteriorating. We can reverse this development through **effective improvements.**	In Sweden we have good access to green areas around our cities. However, there is criticism that the environment in these areas is deteriorating. We can influence this situation through political measures.
We think that everyone has the **right** to **healthy** and **beautiful** nature in their local surroundings. Not only does this **require powerful** and **concrete improvements** but also that politicians and citizens take **responsibility** for the situation. To ensure that existing laws are followed, we want to introduce surveillance cameras and increase fines for those who break the rules. **Powerful improvements** are **necessary** if citizens' **rights** to **vibrant** and **sustainable** local surroundings are to be realized in the cities.	We think it is good that people have access to nature in their local surroundings. This can be achieved through political measures, and also, by politicians and citizens drawing attention to the situation. To ensure that existing laws are followed, we want to introduce surveillance cameras and increase fines for those who break the rules. Policy measures and political inputs can lead to changes in the situation of citizens' local surroundings in the cities.

School	
Persuasive rhetoric	Control treatment
Knowledge-oriented **improvements** in the school system!	Political measures in the school system.
Traditionally Swedish education has been regarded as good, but in recent years many have criticized it. To reverse this development **powerful improvements** are **required**.	Traditionally Swedish education has been regarded as good, but in recent years many have criticized it. To change this situation political measures are needed.

We want to have a **well-functioning** and **stable** school, where students are provided with the **best** conditions for **development**. This **requires concrete** and **knowledge**-oriented **improvements**. To create **high quality** and increase students' **opportunities** we want to extend the school day, increase the number of teacher-led hours in school, and introduce summer school for students who need it.	We want to have a school where students can do what is needed to pass their education. Such a school will be realized through political inputs. To influence the state of the school system and to change students' situation we want to extend the school day, increase the number of teacher-led hours in school, and introduce summer school for students who need it.

Note. Universal persuasive words and enforcing strategies are in bold type. No words were highlighted for participants.

Variables

The dependent variable in the study was *appreciation of election pledge*. We asked the question "How do you like the election pledge about the school/environment?" Respondents answered on a 7-point scale, where 1 = *strongly dislike* and 7 = *strongly like*.

To test whether effects applied across the left–right divide, as well as whether they decreased with left–right extremity, we used self-estimated left–right predispositions. Our items were part of a larger survey that included the question "Political parties are sometimes placed on a political left–right scale. Where would you place yourself on such scale?" Subjects answered on an 11-point scale, where 0 = *far to the left* and 10 = *far to the right*.[12] To test our first hypothesis, whether universal persuasive words appeal broadly and across the left–right divide, we used 3-point coding of this variable: *left* = 0, 1, 2, 3; *center* = 4, 5, 6; *right* = 7, 8, 9, 10.

To see whether the effects of universal persuasive words decreased with ideological left–right extremity, we collapsed the variable into an "extremity scale" with four values, starting with 1 = *center* and ending with 4 = *extreme left or right*. More specifically, the coding was *center* (1) = 4, 5, 6; *moderately left or right* (2) = 3, 7; *strongly left or right* (3) = 2, 8; and *extreme left or ri*ght (4) = 0, 1, 9, 10.[13]

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[12] The variable built on a question asked at the end of the same survey (i.e., after our treatment), and it was therefore not completely exogenous. We correlated our measure with a left–right measure from a previous panel wave in which 1, 232 of our respondents answered the same question. The test showed a strong positive correlation (Pearson's *r* = .91, *p* = .000).

[13] Individuals answering values 4, 5, or 6 on the 11-point left–right scale were coded as center-oriented. This coding was the one that most clearly illustrated our point that effects were strongest for individuals' closer to center and decreased with ideological left–right extremity. With three groups, the coding allowed significance tests of treatment effects on the different subgroups with decent power and approximately equal subsample sizes. Moreover, electorates were generally forming normally distributed curves on the left–right dimension that peaked around the center (e.g., Ezrow, 2005). Thus, voters who place

Results

We started by testing H1: Universal persuasive words increase citizens' appreciation of election pledges and effects are seen across the left–right divide. For both investigated pledges, there was a positive main effect of universal persuasive words on respondents' appreciation of the policies. Increase of appreciation was larger for the environment pledge—$M_{control}$ = 3.17, SE = 0.06; $M_{persuasive}$ = 3.42, SE = 0.06; $t(1, 832)$ = 3.07, p = .002—than for the school pledge—$M_{control}$ = 4.36, SE = 0.05; $M_{persuasive}$ = 4.49, SE = 0.06; $t(1, 842)$ = 1.72, p = .086. This was in accordance with our expectation that an "old" policy case with which citizens are likely familiar should be harder to sell by rhetoric than a policy case that is new on the political agenda. Results are illustrated in Figure 1.
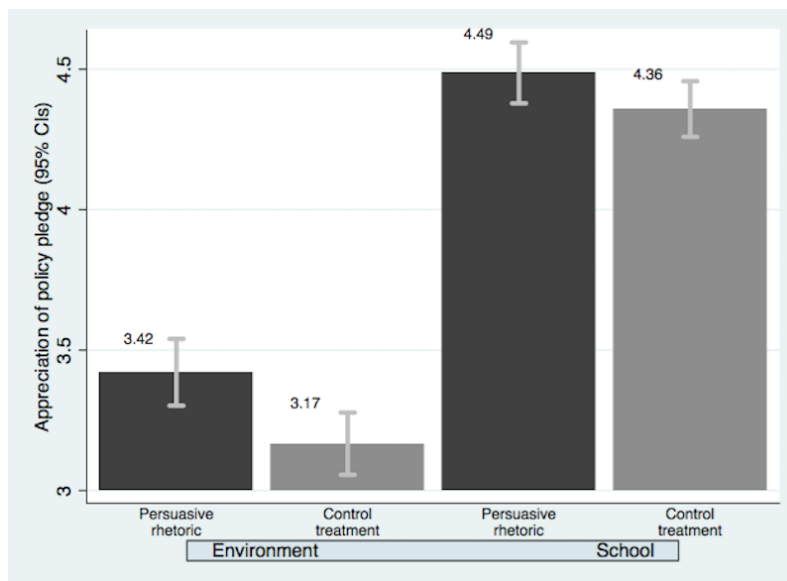
Figure 1. Appreciation of policy pledges when exposed to universal persuasive words and control treatment. Mean scores on the y-axis range from 1 = strongly dislike to 7 = strongly like, with 95% confidence intervals.

Given that respondents exposed to universal persuasive words placed the school pledge farther to right than the control group (see Footnote 11), we also ran an ordinary least squares regression analysis in which we controlled for left–right placement of the school pledge. The analysis confirmed that the positive effects remained and significance increased from a 90 to 95% confidence level (b = .15, SE = .07, p = .043). Hence, in both the softer test using a new policy case and in the harder test using policies that resemble real ones, universal persuasive words increased respondents' appreciation of the policy pledges.

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themselves in the center (5) and next to the center (4 and 6) are the group of voters we want to target when we study whether parties can appeal to individuals in and around the center. Analyses have been employed using the full variation of the extremity scale, with value of 5 for center-oriented individuals (see reference to online Appendix E, https://goo.gl/wXtjgK, in the Results section).

To test whether effects applied to a broad audience and across the left–right divide, we employed two-way analyses of variance including individuals' left–right predispositions as the interaction variable. For the environment pledge, the main effect of universal persuasive words remained when individual left–right orientation was included, $F(1, 1814) = 9.19$, $p = .003$. As expected, there was no significant main effect of subjects' left–right predispositions on appreciation of the policy, $F(4, 1813) = 0.50$, $p = .608$, nor was there an interaction between the two variables, $F(4, 1813) = 0.07$, $p = .928$.

When we look at the effects for individuals to the left, right, and in the center of the left–right spectrum, we found that the positive effects of persuasive words were larger for individuals in the center, and they were significant at the 95% confidence level only for those respondents (difference for individuals of left orientation = .25 units, $p < .1$; center orientation = .30 units, $p < .05$; right orientation = .22 units, $p > .1$).

Also in the school pledge case, the effects of universal persuasive words remained significant when individuals' left–right predispositions were included, $F(1, 1817) = 4.10$, $p = .043$. Individuals' left–right predispositions had a significant main effect on appreciation of the policy, $F(2, 1816) = 6.59$, $p = .001$, but there was no significant interaction between the two variables, $F(2, 1816) = 1.32$, $p = .266$. As was the case for the environment pledge, the effects of universal persuasive words were larger for individuals in the center of the left–right divide, and they were significant only for those individuals (difference for individuals of left orientation = −.01 units, $p > .1$; center orientation = .29 units, $p < .05$; right orientation = .18 units, $p > .1$). We conclude that, although effects seemed fairly balanced on the two sides of the left–right divide, they were notable only for individuals in and around the center. Given that we expected that effects would be smaller for individuals of extreme left–right predispositions (H2), the findings seem reasonable as the left and right groups included individuals with varying degrees of extremity of ideological positions.

The main treatment effects were small rather than large in substantial terms; on the 7-point scale, the main difference was 0.25 unit in the environment pledge case and 0.13 unit in the school pledge case (0.15 unit when controlling for left–right placement of the pledge). However, given that our sample had an overrepresentation of highly politically interested individuals, we note that the effect sizes were considerably larger among the less politically interested respondents. Among those with low or rather low political interest ($n = 124$), differences were 0.47 unit (although the effects were not significant when tested on this small group of individuals, $p > .1$) in the environment pledge and 0.58 unit in the school pledge ($p < .05$). The same numbers for those with high political interest ($n = 825$) were 0.11 unit ($p > .1$) in the environment pledge and 0.12 unit in the school pledge ($p > .1$).[14] Results are presented in online Appendix F, https://goo.gl/RCLEZC.

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[14] Our sample also had an overrepresentation of highly educated men. We therefore tested effects of universal persuasive words for individuals with low, medium, and high education, and for women and men. We found that effects did not change notably if the sample was less skewed toward highly educated individuals, but they were larger if the sample was less skewed toward men (see online Appendix A, https://goo.gl/yjbepW).

Because we expected that the effects would decrease with ideological left–right extremity (H2), it was also likely that the main effects, which included respondents over the full left–right spectrum, would be smaller than effects on respondents who were closer to the center of the left–right scale. Next, we present analyses of effects of universal persuasive words at different levels of ideological left–right extremity.

To test H2, we used two-way analyses of variance. Starting with the environment pledge, we found that the main effect of the treatment on appreciation of the policy remained when the model included ideological left–right extremity, $F(1, 1814) = 8.79$, $p = .003$, but there was no significant main effect of ideological extremity, $F(3, 1812) = 1.77$, $p = .150$. The analyses did not show a significant main interaction between the two variables, $F(3, 1812) = 0.41$, $p = .743$.

However, if we look at the effects at different levels of ideological extremity in Table 2, we see that they were larger for individuals in the center and for those that were moderately left or right ($p <$ .05). The effects decreased and were insignificant for individuals who were strongly left or right and extreme left or right. These findings were in line with our expectations in H2. The marginal effects of universal persuasive words at different levels of ideological left/right extremity are illustrated in Figure 2.
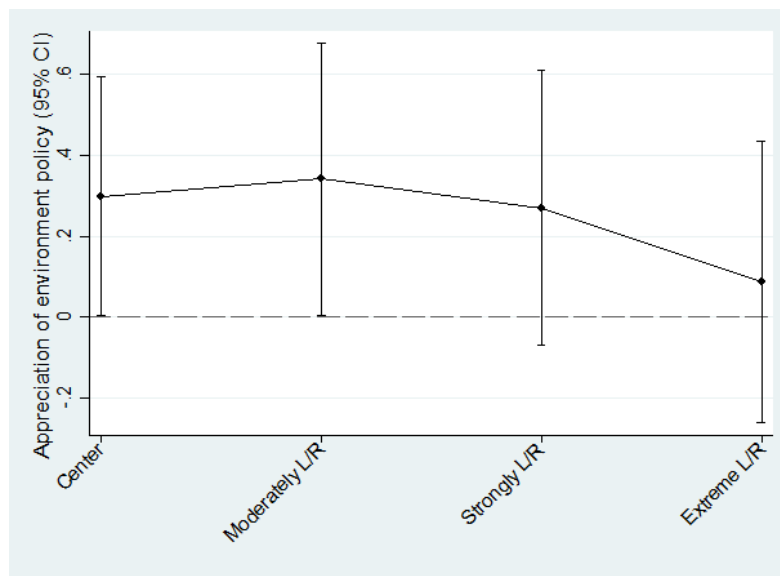
Figure 2. Appreciation of environment policy: Marginal effects of universal persuasive words at different levels of ideological left–right (L/R) extremity. Reference line at 0 equals zero effects.

Table 2. Appreciation of Policy Pledges:
Effects of Universal Persuasive Words at Different Levels of Ideological Left–Right Extremity.

Policy pledge	Ideological left–right extremity	Group mean		Mean difference	HSD test
		Persuasive rhetoric	Control treatment		
Environment					
	Center	3.50	3.20	0.30	2.81*
	Moderately left–right	3.55	3.21	0.34	2.82*
	Strongly left–right	3.41	3.14	0.27	2.21
	Extreme left–right	3.17	3.08	0.09	0.70
School					
	Center	4.59	4.30	0.29	3.00*
	Moderately left–right	4.56	4.47	0.09	0.82
	Strongly left–right	4.52	4.44	0.08	0.74
	Extreme left–right	4.28	4.25	0.04	0.32

Note. Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) test for pairwise comparisons. Mean scores on appreciation of policy ranges from 1 = *strongly dislike* to 7 = *strongly like*.
*$p <$ .05.

Moving on to the school pledge, we found that the main effect of the treatment became insignificant when ideological extremity was included in the model, $F(1, 1817) =$ 2.65, $p =$ .104. In this case, there were neither any significant main effects of ideological extremity on the respondents' appreciation of the policy, $F(3, 1815) =$ 1.98, $p =$ .114, nor an interaction between the two variables, $F(3, 1815) =$ 0.61, $p =$ .607.

In Table 2, however, we see that, same as for the environment pledge, universal persuasive words had an effect on individuals in and around the center ($p <$ .05). But in this case, the effects were seen only among those individuals. The marginal effects of universal persuasive words at different levels of ideological left–right extremity are illustrated in Figure 3.

In sum, the analyses showed that, for both pledges, universal persuasive words had the largest effects on individuals who placed themselves in and around the political center. For the "new" pledge on the environment, there also was support for the expectation that having extreme ideological left–right predispositions make individuals less susceptible to universal persuasive words.[15]

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[15] Analyses using the full variation of the extremity scale were employed. The analyses showed less significant effects for the different subgroups when these were smaller, but the substantive implications of the results were the same (see online Appendix E, https://goo.gl/wXtjgK).
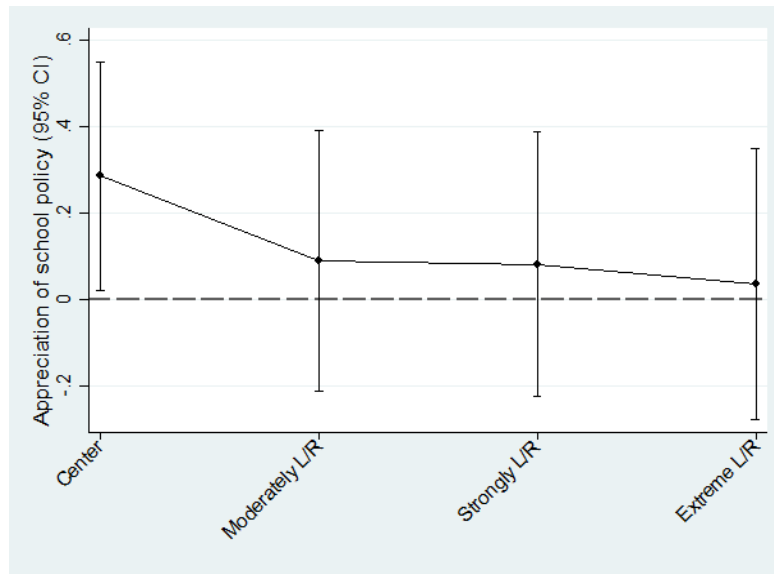
***Figure 3. Appreciation of school policy: Marginal effects of universal persuasive
words at different levels of ideological left–right (L/R) extremity. Reference
line at 0 equals zero effects.***

Conclusion

The article shows that universal persuasive words in the formulation of election pledges increase appreciation of pledged policies. Universal persuasive words appeal notably to individuals in and around the ideological center and less so for individuals with strong left and right predispositions. In the new environment pledge, the words had effects on individuals in and around the center, and the effects diminished with ideological left–right extremity. In the school pledge, the effects were seen only among individuals in and around the center. The findings thus indicate that universal persuasive words can help parties sell policies to the median voters (individuals oriented in and around the center of the left–right scale; e.g., Ezrow, 2005), but they are less effective in attracting individuals of pronounced left and right predispositions.

When evaluating the larger implications of the findings, we must take into account that the treatment effects are somewhat small in substantial terms, and that our design excluded variables that can moderate and limit effects of rhetoric, such as party label (e.g., Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010) and competing messages (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007a; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). The absence of these factors increases the internal validity of the experiment, but at the same time decreases the external validity as political messages in real life have a sender and are often contrasted to other information. Still, we believe that the effects we found are interesting. First, electoral volatility is on the rise, as the alignment between parties and voters weakens (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2013; Mair, 2002), and the number of voters who decide which party to vote for late during the election campaign is increasing (Dassonneville, 2012; Oscarsson, 2013). Election campaigns do, in

other words, play an increasing role for electoral outcomes. This speaks to the importance of smaller effects of election pledge rhetoric.

Second, studies have shown that political sophistication and awareness can limit the effects of different rhetorical framing of political issues (e.g., Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001; Zaller, 1992), and that lowly sophisticated and less politically interested voters are more volatile and open to switch their vote choice during campaigns (Dassonneville, 2012). This indicates that our sample, which had an overrepresentation of politically interested individuals, presented a hard case for testing effects of universal persuasive words. It also indicates that effects of election pledge rhetoric will matter more for actual electoral outcomes when these are found for individuals of lower political interest, which was the case in our study.

Third, beside the factors that can weaken the effects of rhetoric in real-life election campaigns, such as party label, there are factors that can strengthen the effects. Parties often use the same or similar rhetoric repeatedly, and therefore there will be multiple exposures to the persuasive words. At least under certain circumstances, this can help to sustain and strengthen the effects of rhetoric (see, e.g., Lecheler & de Vreese, 2013; Lecheler, Keer, Schuck, & Hänggli, 2015).

Given that voters in most contexts seem to move toward a political center and are becoming more open to switching parties between elections (Dassonneville, 2012; Mair, 2002; Oscarsson, 2013), parties' center rhetoric is an interesting tool to study, and this article has provided first steps in that direction. Mainstream parties will have incentives to find ways to attract broad electorates rather than only ideological left and right core voters, and this will likely be done not only via different policies but also through how policies are presented. This is interesting for the growing field of how parties make and break election pledges in real-life representation (for overviews, see Håkansson & Naurin, 2014; Mansergh & Thomson, 2007) in which studies of voters' perceptions of election pledges are repeatedly called for (Elinder, Jordahl, & Poutvaara, 2015; Naurin, 2011; Thomson, 2011).

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