

Who's at the Helm?

When party organization matters for party strategy

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Abstract

Why do parties change their policy positions? A recent study has suggested that the internal balance of power between party leaders and activists might be the driving force behind whether a party responds to shifts in the *mean voter* position or the *party voter* position, respectively. Extending a cross-sectional time series analysis of 55 parties in 10 European democracies between 1977 and 2003, this paper seeks to test this finding by accounting for several additional party (system) characteristics and environmental incentives that could challenge the underlying assumptions of the party organization literature. The results show that, while the original explanation holds up under certain circumstances, some qualifications are in order, particularly with regard to a party's electoral performance and party system polarization. This study's findings have important implications for our understanding of party strategy, the forces that shape it, and democratic representation.

Does party organization matter for party strategy? Extant theoretical and empirical research on party politics constitutes an impressive body of work, but only recently scholars have begun to look into the importance of *intra*-party characteristics for *inter*-party competition. Building on insights from some of the earliest works on party organization (Duverger 1954, Michels 1962 [1911], Panebianco 1988), there is a growing understanding that we need to study the internal workings of parties to fully understand their behavior (e.g. Greene and Haber 2016, Kölln and Polk 2017, Schumacher and Giger 2017*a*). In an influential paper, Schumacher, De Vries and Vis (2013) find that parties dominated by the party leadership are typically more responsive to (changes in) the position of the *mean voter*, whereas activist-dominated parties tend to follow the *party voter*.

Although this is a valuable and novel contribution to a quickly expanding literature, we do not know precisely under what conditions party organization matters for party strategy. Do the goals and interests of party leaders and activists ever align, and are all parties equally affected by this internal divide? This paper dissects the theoretical argument about the significance of party organization, and examines when and how the balance of power between the leadership and activists shapes a party's strategic behavior. I hypothesize that certain party- and system-level characteristics need to be taken into account, as they could challenge the validity of the underlying assumptions of party organization theory and, subsequently, its empirical predictions. Specifically, I theorize that a party's electoral performance, ideological extremism, and degree of party system polarization condition the effect of the internal divide between the two factions on party strategy.

First, I argue that the central finding of Schumacher, De Vries and Vis (2013) should crystallize especially in times of electoral defeat, as this will trigger party leaders and activists alike to abandon the status quo—albeit in distinctly different ways. Positional changes are risky and their consequences uncertain, so parties should have less of an incentive to make such shifts when performing well in elections, regardless of which faction is at the helm. When facing losses, however, altering the party's electoral appeal and strategy becomes

more likely, and the internal balance of power will shape the type of voter it decides to track. Second, I expect more extremist parties to be less responsive to the median voter, whether dominated by activists or not, as their sheer distance from the ideological center should provide an impetus to follow the more proximate party voter. Third, I develop a theoretical argument about the crucial, moderating role of party system polarization on party strategy. Not only should a party's maneuverability be limited when polarization is low, as parties try to maintain their ideological distinctiveness and avoid "making leaps over the heads of its neighbors" (Downs 1957, 122), the number of exit options for disgruntled party members is higher in a system where competitors are positioned relatively close by. Consequently, given this possibility of party switching to any of the available alternatives, the leadership will be more prone to cater to the demands of activists in order to appease them and prevent them from defecting. When the risk of party switching is low, i.e. when a system is more polarized and competitors are further removed, party leaders can pursue the course of action they ultimately prefer, the median voter strategy.

After setting out these arguments in more detail, I use a combination of manifesto and mass survey data to test when and how party organization matters.¹ 55 parties in ten established European democracies from 1977-2003 are analyzed here.² My results largely confirm the above hypotheses and suggest that the internal divide between party leaders and activists is important for party strategy, but that this relationship is conditioned by party and system-level characteristics. In particular, (1) leadership-dominated parties' responsiveness to the mean voter *decreases* as their electoral fortunes improve, (2) it *increases* as the party system they are in becomes more polarized, and (3) activist-dominated parties rather unremittingly represent the policy shifts of their supporters. This paper has important implications for both our collective understanding of party competition in advanced liberal democracies, as well as for our normative view of party-voter linkages and the responsiveness

¹I build in large part on Schumacher et al.'s (2013) dataset to aid in the comparison and interpretation of my results.

²The included countries are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

of democratically elected political actors.

Why do parties change position?

The dominant approach to the study of party competition is based on spatial theory. Such models, building on the work by Downs (1957), view political contestation as a struggle over positional issues. Parties and voters are assumed to be located on an ideological continuum, with the opposing ends representing contrasting policy solutions, or worldviews. Although ideological proximity is generally assumed—and often confirmed (e.g. Tomz and Houweling 2008)—to be the crucial determinant of vote choice, competing theories have been developed, with the most prominent alternatives being discounting (Adams, Merrill and Grofman 2005, Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012, Grofman 1985) and directional voting (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989).

Changing one's ideological platform in an attempt to maximize electoral support is risky, however, and its outcome unpredictable. A party could, for example, alienate supporters or compromise future coalition negotiations (Budge 1994). Yet, party competition is by no means a static endeavor, either. The responsiveness of political actors to the changing input of their constituents and environment is of paramount importance to the mass-elite linkages so pivotal to democratic representation. As such, a dynamic relationship exists between political supply and demand, in which both the positions of parties and voters can fluctuate.

The main question then becomes, what leads parties to abandon, or alter, the status quo? First and foremost, and in line with our normative understanding of democratic representation (Stimson, Mackuen and Erikson 1995), parties have been found to respond to changes in the policy preferences of the median voter (Adams et al. 2006, Adams, Merrill and Grofman 2005).³ As the electorate, on the whole, moves to the left or right, parties respond appropriately to this positional change by moving in the same direction. This mechanism ought to produce the intimate connection between public opinion and policy change on which

³The mean and median voter position are used interchangeably here. For their measurement, see below.

democratic governance rests.

But additional mechanisms are at play. Parties' policy positions have also been found to be shaped by a range of environmental conditions, such as the strategic moves of competing parties (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009, Laver 2005) and macroeconomic fluctuations (Adams, Haupt and Stoll 2008, Haupt 2010). Yet, above all, and of particular interest to this study, a party's fortunes at the ballot box constitute a crucial feedback mechanism that informs party strategy (Budge 1994, Budge, Ezrow and McDonald 2010, Somer-Topcu 2009).⁴

The intra-party balance of power

Although a multitude of stimuli exist that may prompt a party to strategically alter its ideological position, the type and degree of change is certainly not uniform across the party system. Schumacher, De Vries and Vis (2013) identify party organizational characteristics as a strong predictor of the variation in parties' responses to environmental incentives. Their argument—as well as that of most of the party organization literature—consists of two related theoretical premises, namely that (1) parties are made up of leaders and activists, and these two groups have different orientations and goals, and (2) this internal divide matters for party strategy. I will go into each of these assumptions in more detail.

First, the aforementioned dichotomy in group interests is assumed to be a product of the different kinds of members that are brought together within a party. People get involved in politics for different reasons. Party leaders are seen as career politicians, primarily interested in the spoils that come with being in office. As a result, they demonstrate office-seeking behavior by trying to maximize a party's vote share. Party activists, on the other hand, are more than anything else policy-seeking, “as they commit their time, money, and effort with the aim of voicing a specific ideological view” (Schumacher, De Vries and Vis 2013, 465). In other words, the internal politics of a party are best described as a struggle between its opportunistic leadership and activist ideologues (see also Schumacher and Giger 2017*a*,

⁴By contrast, several studies found little empirical evidence for the notion that parties respond to past election results (see Adams et al. 2004, Ezrow et al. 2011).

Schumacher and Giger 2017b).⁵

The second assumption, which states that party organization matters for party strategy, is a logical product of the first. Parties that are dominated by the leadership are typically more hierarchical and show fewer ways in which the rank-and-file can influence party policy, leaving the few actors at the top of the organization in charge of its strategy (Schumacher, De Vries and Vis 2013, 465). In line with Downsian tradition, it follows that these leadership-dominated parties are responsive to (changes in) the position of the median voter. Adopting a centrist strategy and tracking public opinion, i.e. the average national voter, is taken to be the optimal way to maximize one's vote share and, consequently, to produce the highest likelihood of getting into office. For activists, however, holding office is only a secondary concern. Viewing the party as a vehicle to express the opinions of like-minded ideologues, activist-dominated parties will first and foremost be responsive to changes in the preferences of their supporters, i.e. the average party voter position. Because many actors at different levels are involved in setting the party's goals and agenda, such as local and regional branches or other types of delegates, party leaders lack independence and are heavily constrained come decision time.

Taken together, different strategic incentives are important for leadership-dominated and activist-dominated parties. Depending on how the internal balance of power is tipped, a party will either pursue a median voter strategy or stay true to its ideological base.

The conditional effect of party organization

There is reason to believe, however, that the importance of intra-party politics for party strategy is itself moderated, too. Just as the internal balance of power between leaders and

⁵It is important to distinguish between this conceptualization of factionalism and the way in which it has been defined by Budge, Ezrow and McDonald (2010), among others. While both accounts depart from the assumption that parties are unitary actors, rid of internal division, the latter perspective views parties as caucuses of ideological factions competing for dominance. Based on that assumption, the authors explain why, after suffering electoral losses, it may lead a party to reverse its policy platform. That is, an opposing faction could seize control of the party and implement a strategy in line with its own, alternative ideological goals. While equally valid, the focus in this paper is on the alleged divide between party leaders and activists, not the internal competition between different ideological camps.

activists influences the party's response to various environmental incentives, as described by Schumacher, De Vries and Vis (2013), so too is the effect of party organization dynamic and context-specific. In particular, I argue that a series of tests can be developed pertaining to each of the assumptions, or building blocks, of party organization theory discussed above.

Yet, before challenging its constitutive assumptions, one can theorize about when the overall effect of a party's organizational characteristics on party strategy should be most salient. I hypothesize that electoral defeat, in particular—a condition that every party ultimately has to deal with—polarizes the internal factions and challenges party unity (Greene and Haber 2016). Not only is a change of strategy more likely when a party's electoral tides turn (Budge 1994, Somer-Topcu 2009), party leaders and activists are expected to respond differently. Faced with electoral losses, both factions will conclude that the status quo no longer works for the party, but their proposed course of action will vary. While the party leadership will be even more convinced that a median voter strategy needs to be adopted to turn the party's electoral fortunes around, activists will deem it critical to listen to the party's base and converge on its position. Taken together, I formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: When faced with electoral defeat, leadership-dominated parties are more responsive to the positional changes of the mean voter, while activist-dominated parties are more responsive to the positional changes of the party voter.

Moving on to the theoretical underpinnings of party organization theory, one of its principal assumptions is that party leaders and activists are expected to have divergent goals and preferences, leading to an ongoing internal struggle for power. I posit that the veracity of this claim strongly depends on a party's respective ideological position in the political landscape, however. As parties with more extremist ideological platforms operate on the fringes of the policy space, they are further removed from the median voter and, thus, have less of an incentive to be responsive to its positional changes. Conversely, as a party's distance to the ideological center, and typically also the median voter, increases, the more important the position of its main supporters will become, regardless of leadership-dominance. From a

demand-side perspective this assumption makes sense, too, as extremist voters can logically be expected to be more policy-oriented than centrist voters (Grofman 2004). As such, a party's responsiveness to the median voter is expected to depend on a party's ideological centrism, thus undermining the assumed, universal salience of intra-party politics for party strategy. This leads to my second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: As its ideological extremism increases, a party becomes more responsive to the positional changes of the party voter than the mean voter.

Finally, the most elemental assumption of party organization theory assumes that parties are made up of leaders and activists with different preferences and goals (see also Kölln and Polk 2017). But can a situation emerge in which such an alleged internal division does not exist? Put differently, can circumstances arise under which a party is the unified actor it is frequently pertained to be in the party competition literature? I argue that the answer to that question is yes, namely when party system polarization is low. As polarization decreases and parties converge on each other's position, the importance of party organization for party strategy should decrease as well. Not only is a party's ideological room to maneuver—and, thus, its ability to respond to voter shifts—limited in a more condensed policy space, as acknowledged by Downs (1957), reduced polarization should also benefit internal unity. As more ideologically proximate alternatives become available for disaffected members, party switching becomes a viable possibility if preference disparities with the leadership present themselves. Consequently, party leaders will have a compelling incentive to appease the activists, primarily by tailoring policy positions to the activists' demands and pledging not to compromise the party's ideological roots in an attempt to get into office. On the other hand, when party system polarization is high, the risk of alienating a faction of the party is smaller, because fewer exit options exist, thus allowing the leadership to adopt a median voter strategy. Ultimately, parties are inevitably going to be more unified when the system they are operating in is less polarized, potentially washing away the explanatory power of party organization when predicting party strategy. Thus, my final hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 3: As party system polarization increases, a party becomes more responsive to the positional changes of the mean voter than the party voter.

Data & Measurement

To test the hypotheses of this study and to be able to meaningfully compare my findings, I follow the operationalization employed by Schumacher, De Vries and Vis (2013). My analysis focuses on the same ten Western European countries from 1977-2003, namely Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The selected time period is similar to that of other relevant studies (e.g. Ezrow et al. 2011, Schumacher, De Vries and Vis 2013), due to party and voter data availability. A combined total of more than fifty parties and three hundred party-year observations are analyzed here.

To measure my dependent variable, *party position change*, I use the comparative manifesto project's (MARPOR) "rile-index" (Budge et al. 2001, Volkens et al. 2015). An extensive debate exists on the measurement of party positions (e.g. Marks et al. 2007). While I acknowledge the criticisms of this data (Benoit and Laver 2007, Gabel and Huber 2000), the lack of alternative, historical party data and a desire for comparison with existing research necessitate relying on manifesto data. While not perfect, this measure has been shown to correlate substantially with alternative party placements, e.g. expert evaluations (Dalton and McAllister 2015). I focus exclusively on the economic left-right dimension of party competition in order to ensure that voter positions are available on this dimension, too (see below). The methodology of the MARPOR project is discussed at length elsewhere, but, briefly put, it uses 56 issue categories to hand-code entire party platforms. By calculating what share of the manifesto is devoted to left and right issues, respectively, an overall ideological position can be mapped for each party. The variable runs from -100 (left) to +100 (right). My dependent variable captures a party's change in position compared to the

previous national election.

The two key independent variables, *mean voter change* and *party voter change*, are taken from the Mannheim Eurobarometer trend file (Schmitt et al. 2008). Using an item which asks respondents to position themselves on a left-right scale, I calculate the average voter position by country and party for each election year. Then, respective voter shifts are found by subtracting the score at t_{-1} from the current mean position.⁶ For those election years for which no survey data is available, I use data from at most one year earlier or, in a few cases, up to one year later.

Party organization is measured by combining two items from the Laver and Hunt (1992) expert survey. The respective items gauge the degree of influence that leaders and activists have over party policy (see also Schumacher, De Vries and Vis 2013). The measure runs from 0-30, with higher scores indicating leadership dominance. A downside of this particular operationalization is its time-invariance. However, given that institutional characteristics are often remarkably stable (Bille 2001) and that the used observation falls right in the middle of the time period studied here—which has the added advantage of increasing the number of parties for which organizational data are available—this strengthens my confidence in the validity of this variable.⁷

With regard to the remaining variables, *electoral performance* is captured by the lagged percentage point change in a party's vote share compared to the last national election (i.e. from t_{-2} to t_{-1}). I use a party's lagged electoral performance, as I hypothesize that leaders

⁶The decision to use the 'mean' instead of the 'median' voter position is a methodological one; the Eurobarometer indicator employed here is a discrete variable, which results in a lack of variation in the position of the median voter.

⁷To test the assumption that a party's organizational structure is, indeed, relatively stable, I compare the information from Laver and Hunt (1992) to a more recent measure by Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012). Not only is the correlation between these two indicators fairly strong (0.7), a party's internal balance of power in the early 1990s is also a statistically significant predictor of its score in the 2000s. Furthermore, three of the five parties with the highest *and* lowest party organization scores are the same across both surveys—VB, PLP (both Belgium), and the Conservative Party (United Kingdom) are among the most leadership-dominated parties; Agalev, Ecolo (both Belgium), and Grüne (Germany) are among the most activist-dominated parties. Finally, the results presented below are largely confirmed when employing this alternative party organization measure. For additional robustness checks, see Schumacher, De Vries and Vis 2013).

and activists set out a strategy based on the most recent election result. *Ideological extremism* is measured as the absolute distance from the mean ideological party position in a party system in a given year.⁸ Finally, *party system polarization* is a contentious concept that has been measured in a variety of ways (see Dalton 2008). Because I am interested in the characteristics of the party system as a whole, specifically the degree of ideological convergence (or divergence) among parties, I opt not to use indicators that focus on the number of, or distance between, extreme parties. Rather, I employ a variance-based measure to map the degree of polarization in a given election and country, the standard deviation in party positions, which analyzes the distribution of all parties in a system.⁹

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
<i>Dependent variable</i>				
Party position change	-0.61	14.84	-61.30	44.01
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Mean voter change	-0.06	0.18	-0.49	0.42
Party voter change	-0.03	0.38	-1.42	1.17
Party organization	18.56	5.46	4.08	27.43
Electoral performance	-0.05	3.96	-17.30	13.20
Ideological extremism	15.33	11.74	0.02	61.94
Party system polarization	19.61	8.05	5.40	34.19

Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1. The dependent variable, party position change, has a substantial range (-61.30, 44.01), but its average is close to zero (-0.61). Similarly, the primary independent variables that measure voter change are equally centered on zero. As one might expect, the position of the party voter is relatively more flexible than that of the mean voter. As said, my measure of party organization has

⁸I compare this operationalization to its most straightforward alternative, which calculates a party's ideological extremism as the distance from the midpoint of the scale (i.e. zero). While commonly used, this measure does not account for the possibility that party systems are not necessarily centered on zero. Nevertheless, the two operationalizations produce similar findings (see Appendix II).

⁹I use multiple alternative operationalizations to check the robustness of my findings. Appendix III shows that both Dalton's polarization index and the degree of party system fragmentation yield largely similar results.

a maximum range of 30, but its empirical range is truncated (4.08, 27.43). Next, change in electoral performance varies greatly (-17.30, 13.20), but its overall distribution across all included parties is relatively evenly distributed around an average of zero. The party with the most extreme ideological position has a distance of 61.94 from the center, but the average across all parties is 15.33. Finally, the mean level of party system polarization in the studied countries is 19.61, although the range differs substantially, from 5.40 in Belgium (1991) to 34.19 in the United Kingdom (1983).¹⁰

In order to test the formulated hypotheses, I run a cross-sectional time series analysis. The unit of observation is party-election year. I correct for heteroskedasticity and a first-order autoregressive (AR1) structure in the panel residuals by means of robust standard errors. Differencing often takes care of these errors, because both problems (especially heteroskedasticity) are typically caused by differences in intercepts, but tests show that some degree of group-wise heteroskedasticity remains. The specification of my regression model is as follows:

$$\Delta \textit{ party position} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \Delta \textit{ mean voter} + \beta_2 \Delta \textit{ party voter} + \beta_3 \textit{ party org.} + \quad (1)$$

$$\beta_4 (\Delta \textit{ mean voter} \times \textit{ party org.}) + \beta_5 (\Delta \textit{ party voter} \times \textit{ party org.}) + \quad (2)$$

$$\beta_6 \textit{ moderator} + \beta_7 (\Delta \textit{ mean voter} \times \textit{ moderator}) + \quad (3)$$

$$\beta_8 (\Delta \textit{ party voter} \times \textit{ moderator}) + \beta_9 \textit{ country} + \epsilon \quad (4)$$

where the moderating variable is either a party's electoral performance, ideological extremism, or party system polarization. The hypotheses are tested separately in order to assess the importance of party organization for party strategy under each condition.

¹⁰Note that the included variables *do* gauge different phenomena, as can be seen from the correlations matrix presented in Table 3 (see Appendix).

Results

The output of the regression models is presented in Table 2. Model 1 provides a baseline for the subsequent analyses and closely resembles Schumacher et al.'s (2013) study. Of specific interest are the interaction terms between party organization and mean and party voter change, because I am not concerned with the isolated effects of the included variables. Although their sign and statistical significance are to some extent immediately interpretable, the best way to make sense of the aforementioned interaction is by using marginal effects plots, as it allows us to investigate the coefficient estimates and their respective statistical significance at different values of the interacting variable. In line with Schumacher et al.'s (2013) main finding, Figure 1 convincingly shows that, in general, only leadership-dominated parties respond to changes in the position of the mean voter, indicated by the positive and statistically significant effect at higher values for party organization. In fact, the marginal effect of mean voter change is negative at the lower end of the x-axis, which indicates that parties led by activists are not tracking the median voter. Party voter change, on the other hand, is met with similar policy changes of activist-dominated parties, whereas this marginal effect loses strength, and eventually statistical significance, as a party becomes more leadership-dominated. These results lend credence to the pivotal assumption of the party competition literature, i.e. that party leaders are mostly interested in making it into office and therefore pursue a median voter strategy—which is taken to be the preferred way to achieve that goal.

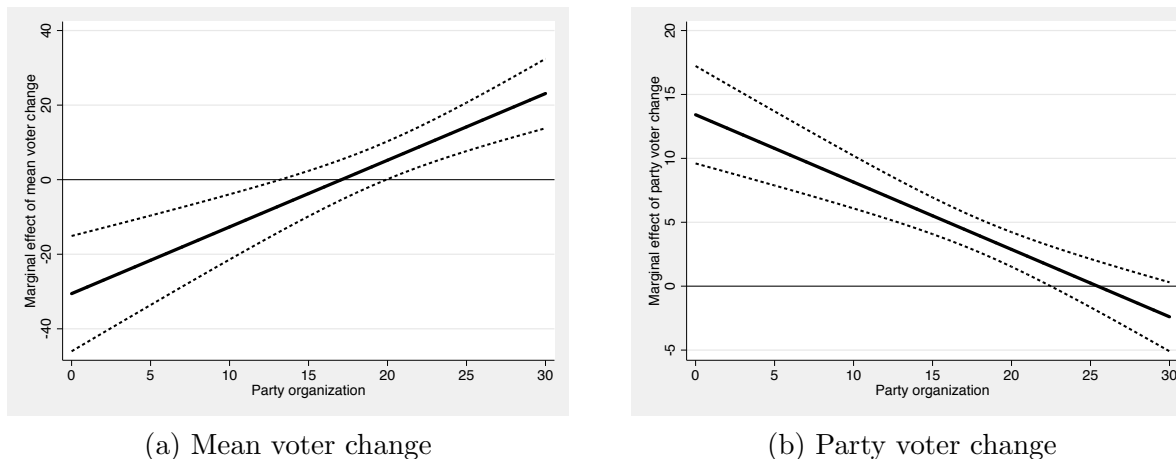
Table 2: Regression analysis of party position changes, 1977-2003

	Model 1 (baseline)	Model 2 (performance)	Model 3 (extremism)	Model 4 (polarization)
Mean voter change	-30.56*	-30.04*	-42.61*	-66.28*
	(7.89)	(9.35)	(7.01)	(11.75)
Party voter change	13.41*	13.69*	14.73*	17.88*
	(1.94)	(2.07)	(2.23)	(2.71)
Party organization	0.10	0.11	0.14*	0.10
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Mean voter change × party organization	1.79*	1.79*	1.98*	2.02*
	(0.38)	(0.44)	(0.34)	(0.38)
Party voter change × party organization	-0.53*	-0.56*	-0.60*	-0.63*
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.09)
Electoral performance		-0.03		
		(0.08)		
Mean voter change × electoral performance		-1.10		
		(0.85)		
Party voter change × electoral performance		0.37		
		(0.28)		
Ideological extremism			0.23*	
			(0.02)	
Mean voter change × ideological extremism			0.56*	
			(0.21)	
Party voter change × ideological extremism			0.06	
			(0.12)	
Party system polarization				0.44*
				(0.08)
Mean voter change × party system polarization				1.33*
				(0.23)
Party voter change × party system polarization				-0.09
				(0.08)
Constant	-22.75*	-23.03*	-26.68*	-31.82*
	(1.30)	(1.58)	(1.19)	(2.08)
<i>N</i>	307	298	307	307
Wald	7988.04	13457.01	4223.65	14311.24

Table entries are Prais-Winsten regression coefficients corrected for panel-level heteroskedasticity with country dummies (not shown in table) and standard errors (in parentheses).

* indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

Figure 1: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions
by *party organization*



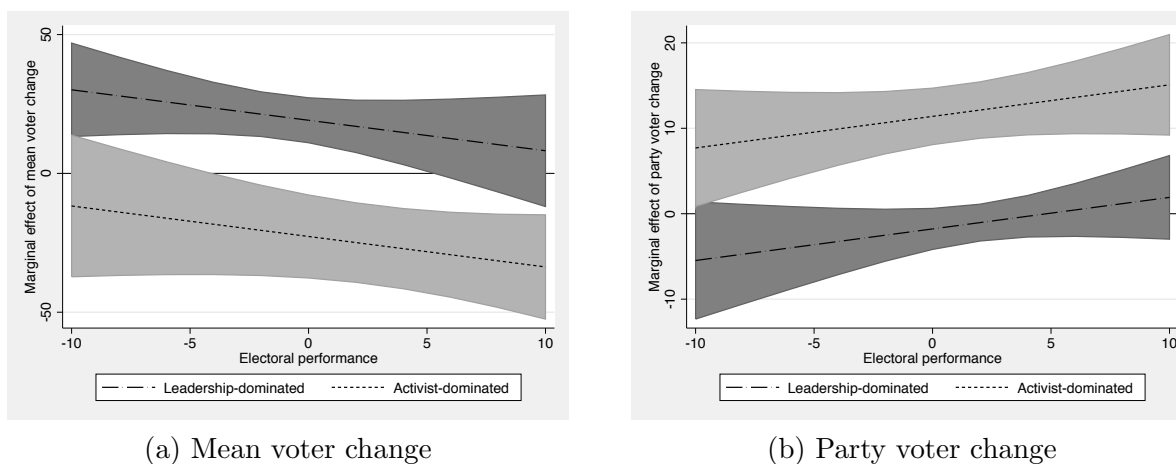
Having corroborated the expected, generic effect of party organization on party strategy, I now turn to testing my hypotheses about the conditions under which this relationship matters. First, I hypothesized that the internal balance of power should be particularly important when a party experiences electoral defeat. Abandoning the status quo is a risky and potentially harmful path to follow, and I therefore expect that parties need a compelling incentive—such as a loss of votes in the most recent national election—to pursue this strategy. Yet, this is also the time when the different ambitions and goals of party leaders and activist should become most apparent. Figure 2, at least in part, confirms this expectation.¹¹

Although the variables of the baseline model have by and large retained their original coefficient estimates and standard errors, the newly added interaction terms do not appear to be statistically significant on their own. Again, however, the best way to interpret these results is by means of marginal effects plots (see figure 2). Starting with parties dominated by the leadership, the marginal effect of mean voter change is positive and statistically significant in times of defeat, but decreases in strength as its electoral fortunes improve. In the case of sizable gains in the last election (at around 5%), the effect is actually no longer statistically significant, as the confidence interval now encompasses zero, which could

¹¹Activist and leadership-dominated parties are defined by the minimum and maximum of the empirical range of the party organization variable, respectively.

indicate a reluctance to change position at all. By contrast, the marginal effect of mean voter change for activist-dominated parties is not statistically significant in the case of lost votes, but actually becomes negative after a successful election. A possible interpretation of this finding is that a party is so confident about its current strategy that it feels encouraged to continue to distance itself from its competitors and, to some extent, the median voter. Indeed, the marginal effect of party voter change only strengthens as an activist-dominated party's electoral success increases (see panel (b)), whereas such party voter shifts are never statistically significant for leadership-dominated parties, regardless of their results in the last election. Thus, while activist-dominated parties are reliably following the positional shifts of their supporters, the median voter strategy of leadership-dominated parties is observed particularly in times of electoral defeat.

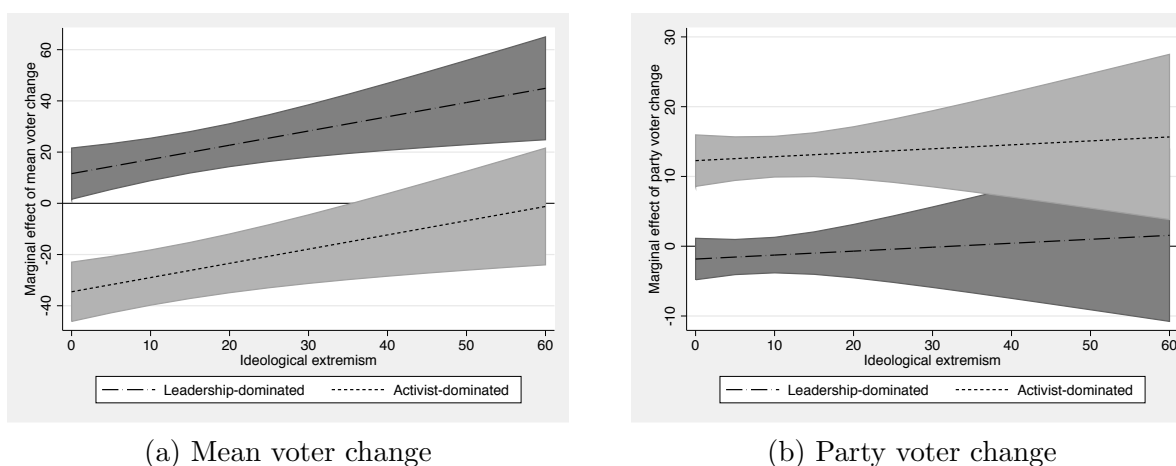
Figure 2: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions
by *electoral performance*



Next, I test the second hypothesis regarding the distinct strategies of party leaders and activists. To reiterate, the assumption is that the position changes of party supporters will become more important as a party's distance to the median voter grows, thus challenging one of the main assumptions of the party organization literature, i.e. that parties are internally divided about what strategic course of action to take. Ideological extremism as well as its interaction with mean voter change are both statistically significant, and most of the

coefficient estimates for most of the baseline variables have increased in size. Surprisingly, while ideological extremism does little to affect an activist-dominated party's responsiveness to the party voter, and a leadership-dominated party's lack thereof (see panel (b)), Figure 3 shows that a party dominated by the leadership actually becomes *more* responsive as it is further removed from the ideological center (see panel (a)).¹² A possible explanation for this is that some established parties, which could logically be expected to respond to the mean voter, could also be further removed from the center, e.g. conservative parties. Nevertheless, this finding is unexpected and demands further exploration in future research.

Figure 3: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions
by *ideological extremism*

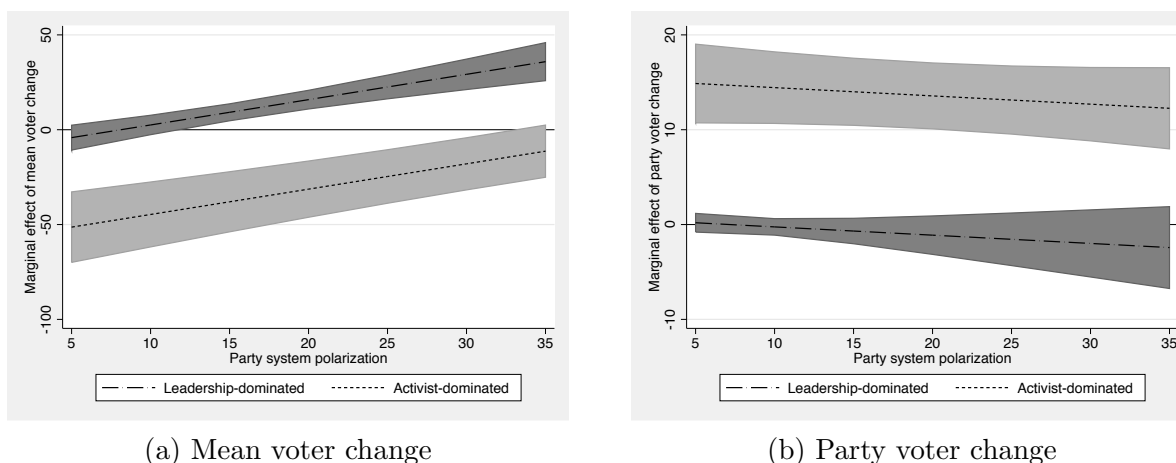


Finally, in order to test my third hypothesis, measures of party system polarization are added to the original model. Here, we see that the coefficient estimates for mean and party voter change are substantively the largest. Looking at Figure 4, it is clear that, in line with Hypothesis 3, the marginal effect of mean voter change increases as a party system becomes more polarized. With fewer proximate exit options available to activists, particularly those who are unsatisfied with the party's current agenda, the party leadership can risk following

¹²Although these findings should hold regardless of a party's organizational characteristics, as ideological extremism is expected to undermine the assumption about divergent party goals, I do separate between leadership and activist-dominated parties here. Appendix IV presents the marginal effects plots at the average level of party organization and corroborate the findings discussed below.

a median voter strategy to get into office. Conversely, the marginal effect of party voter change decreases as party system polarization increases, albeit weakly, indicating that a party becomes less responsive to changes in the position of its supporters as the distance to its rivals grows.

Figure 4: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions
by *party system polarization*



In my discussion of the third hypothesis, I also hinted that the overall importance of party organization should decrease as a party system becomes less polarized. Parties are relatively more unified when party system polarization is low, because the possibility of defecting is real and should produce parties that consist of more like-minded members. In turn, this should reduce the degree to which internal party politics matters for party strategy. Although I cannot test this directly, the provided evidence seems to suggest that this is indeed the case. When polarization is low, the marginal effect of party voter change is positive, but substantively considerably lower than that of mean voter change in more polarized party systems. Furthermore, because the generic marginal effect of mean voter change is actually negative when polarization is low, and not statistically significant mid-range (see Appendix IV), it seems fair to say that the hypothesized effects of party organization are stronger, or perhaps even observed primarily, in party systems that are more polarized.

Discussion

This paper set out to test under what conditions the internal balance of power between leaders and activists affects a party's responsiveness to changes in voter positions. Specifically, it examined the expectation that leadership-dominated parties follow the mean voter, while activist-dominated parties respond to shifts in the position of their own supporters (Schumacher, De Vries and Vis 2013). In particular, I studied three conditions that could potentially moderate or challenge this relationship, namely electoral performance, ideological extremism, and party system polarization.

My results largely confirm Schumacher et al.'s (2013) valuable and innovative contribution to the party competition literature, showing that leadership and activist-dominated parties are distinct actors with different goals, ambitions, and strategies. However, my analyses also show that circumstances can arise under which this assumed relationship is more nuanced, thus requiring careful consideration. First, the leadership-activist divide is particularly salient in times of electoral defeat, as a loss of votes in the most recent national election can polarize the internal party factions. Second, the constellation of competing political parties and their respective ideological positions need to be accounted for. Not only do the adopted party strategies vary depending on the level of party system polarization, the overall effect of party organization is limited in systems where more proximate alternatives are available for disgruntled members. Third, independent of these party (system) characteristics, activist-dominated parties are consistently responsive to their supporters, whereas leadership-dominated parties appear to be relatively more calculating.

This paper contributes to a growing literature that tests the fundamental, underlying assumptions of party competition theories, and confirms that the internal politics of a party is an important component to consider. Additional research is needed to further explore the determinants of party unity, as well as the relationship between party organization and party strategy, particularly their interaction with salience in a context of multidimensionality.

Given the critical, mediating role of political parties in a representative democracy,

this paper has important implications for our understanding of party strategy and political decision-making. Responsiveness is pivotal for democratic representation and the strength of mass-elite linkages, and the results presented in this study confirm that part of this relationship is played out *within*, rather than between, political parties. Furthermore, as parties have been found to be increasingly dominated by their leadership (Schumacher and Giger 2017*a*), and current measures to curtail their influence in favor of activists have proven unsuccessful (Schumacher and Giger 2017*b*), the internal struggle is likely to persist.

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Appendices

I. Correlation matrix for all included variables

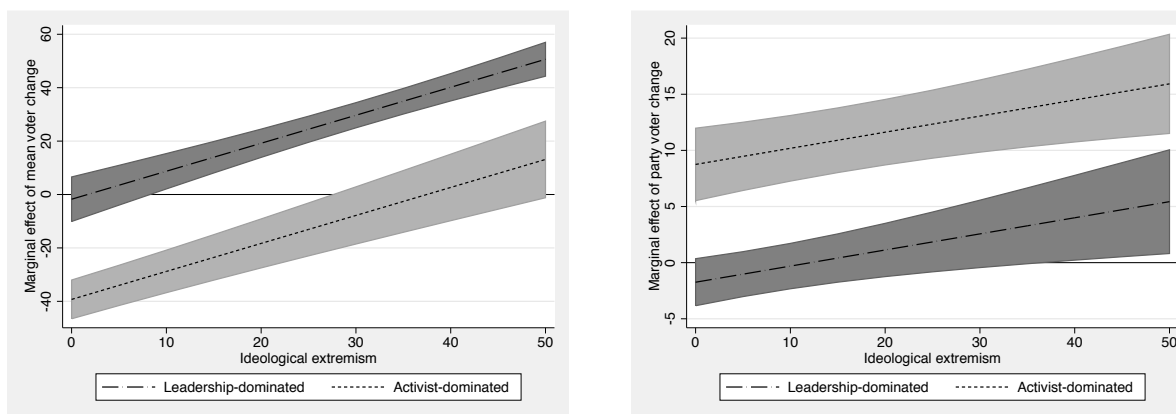
Table 3: Correlation matrix

	Δ Party position	Δ Mean voter	Δ Party voter	Party org.	Elec. perform.	Ideol. extrem.	Party sys. polariz.
Δ Party position	1.00						
Δ Mean voter	0.10	1.00					
Δ Party voter	0.06	0.34	1.00				
Party organization	0.01	0.01	-0.02	1.00			
Electoral performance	-0.01	0.03	-0.02	-0.05	1.00		
Ideological extremism	0.13	0.14	0.07	-0.08	0.04	1.00	
Party sys. polarization	0.06	0.25	0.05	-0.09	0.04	0.54	1.00

II. Alternative operationalization ideological extremism

The main analysis of this paper uses the average party position in a system to explore the conditional effect of ideological extremism on party responsiveness. An alternative, however, is to simply use the midpoint of the ideological scale to calculate a party's distance to the center. Figure 5 presents the marginal effects plots based on this alternative operationalization and largely confirm the findings discussed in the main text.

Figure 5: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions by *ideological extremism (from midpoint)*



(a) Mean voter change

(b) Party voter change

III. Measuring party system characteristics

In order to check the robustness of my findings about the moderating effect of party system polarization, I conduct multiple additional analyses using alternative operationalizations of this key variable. First, one could argue that a measure of polarization should take into account the relative size of the parties in a system, as larger parties are more likely to shape the political discourse and agenda in a given country. Much like the standard deviation in party positions used in my original analysis, Dalton's polarization index is also a variance-based measurement, but it weights parties by their respective vote shares. It can be calculated using the following formula:

$$Polarization = \sqrt{\sum (v_i) \times \left(\frac{p_i - \bar{p}}{5}\right)^2} \quad (5)$$

where i represents an individual party, v and p its vote share and ideological position, respectively, and \bar{p} the average left-right position in a party system. Polarization scores for each election in every country are taken from the ParlGov database (Döring and Manow 2016). The variable ranges from 0-1, with higher values indicating that the party system is more polarized. Second, as an alternative to polarization, one could study the degree of fragmentation of a polity's party system. Simply counting the number of parties represented in the legislature is a common exercise, and should give us an indication of the number of available exit options that disaffected members can defect to. Typically, the Effective Number of Parties (ENP) is employed (Laakso and Taagepera 1979), which weights the number of parties in a system by their respective strength (based on seat shares). The relevant information is collected from Gallagher and Mitchell (2005). Although some have dichotomized this variable by differentiating between two- versus multiparty systems (e.g. Lehrer 2012), a continuous party system variable is used here to allow for more variation. The results of the two models which use these alternative operationalizations are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Regression analysis of party position changes, 1977-2003

	Polarization (Dalton)	Fragmentation (ENP)
Mean voter change	-150.28*	-40.58*
	(18.92)	(9.44)
Party voter change	25.10*	11.80*
	(7.65)	(3.10)
Party organization	0.05	0.03
	(0.03)	(0.05)
Mean voter change \times party organization	1.25*	1.20*
	(0.33)	(0.33)
Party voter change \times party organization	-0.53*	-0.48*
	(0.13)	(0.15)
Party system polarization	23.54*	-0.23
	(11.74)	(0.89)
Mean voter change \times party system polarization	334.57*	4.79*
	(43.73)	(1.80)
Party voter change \times party system polarization	-27.61	0.04
	(16.75)	(0.48)
Constant	-31.05*	-21.73*
	(5.01)	(3.23)
N	307	307
Wald	53209.09	6247.00

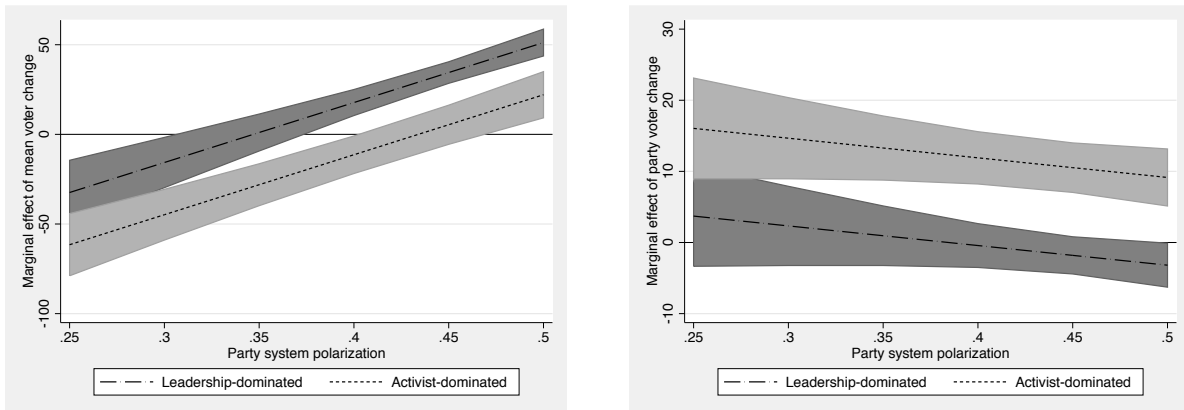
Table entries are Prais-Winsten regression coefficients corrected for panel-level heteroskedasticity with country dummies (not shown in table) and standard errors (in parentheses).

* indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

Virtually all of the included variables have an identical sign and statistical significance as in the original output (Table 2, Model 4). Because Dalton's index is measured on a smaller scale, with a narrow empirical range (0.28, 0.50), it makes sense that the coefficient estimates for this model are substantially larger. More importantly, however, the marginal effects plots produce a very similar picture (see Figures 6 and 7). The marginal effect of mean voter change for leadership-dominated parties becomes positive at higher levels of party system polarization *and* fragmentation, while the estimate for party voter change either decreases or is not statistically significant. It is possible that the country indicator variables absorb

most of the variation in these statistics, but the results nevertheless by and large confirm my earlier conclusion that party system characteristics moderate the effect of party organization on party change.

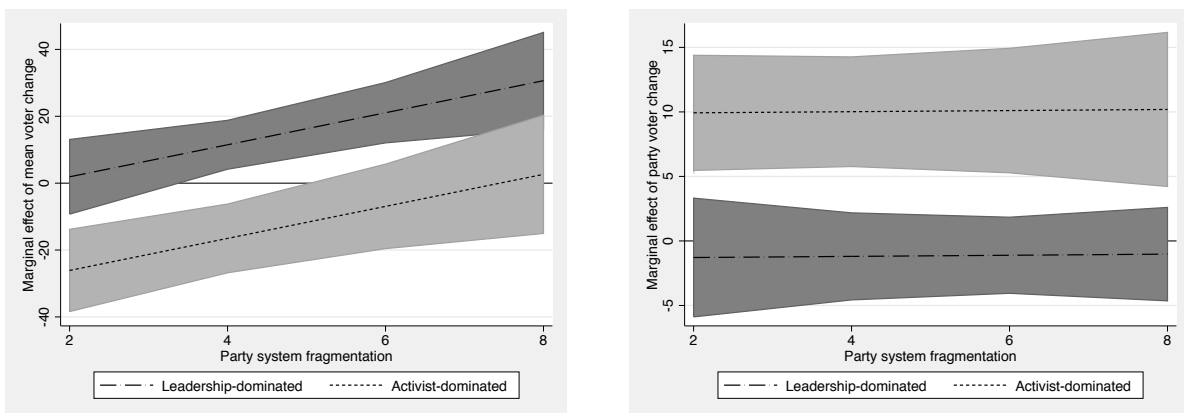
Figure 6: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions by polarization (Dalton)



(a) Mean voter change

(b) Party voter change

Figure 7: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions by party system fragmentation



(a) Mean voter change

(b) Party voter change

IV. Generic marginal effects plots

Figures 8 and 9 show the generic marginal effect of mean and party voter change on positional shifts when party organization is set at its average value (18.56), thus not separating between leadership and activist-dominated parties. The results are similar to those presented in Figures 3 and 4, however.

Figure 8: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions by *ideological extremism* (overall)

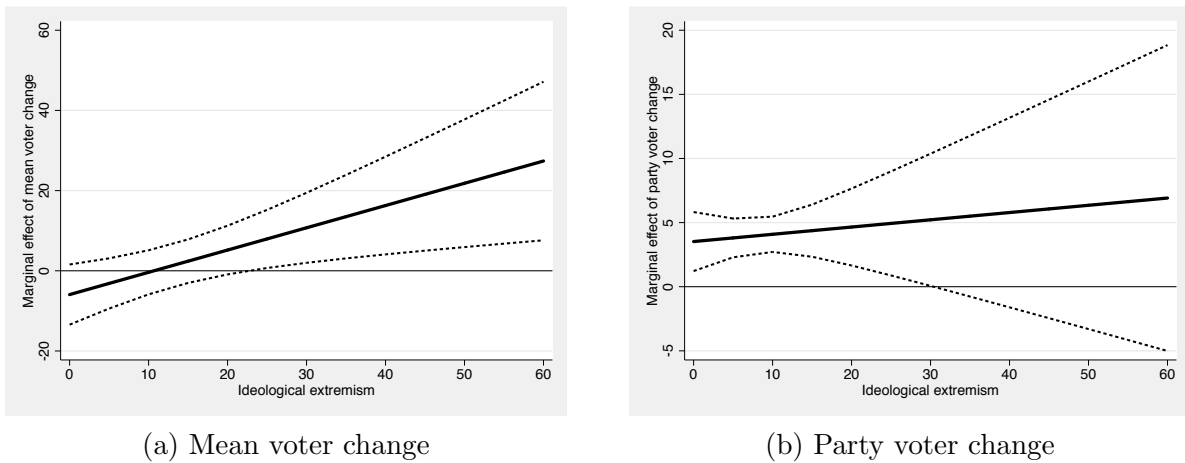


Figure 9: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions by *party system polarization* (overall)

