

# Jelle Koedam | Research Statement

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My research focuses broadly on democratic representation and the relationship between citizens and elites in advanced industrial democracies. In particular, my interests encompass political parties and party systems, public opinion, regional politics, and the European Union. My research has primarily concentrated on the politics of Europe, but the applicability of my work extends to democracies with a history of programmatic politics.

Representative democracy requires a dynamic relationship between governments and their citizens, and political parties play a pivotal role in relaying and aggregating the preferences of voters into policy. In my research, I develop a more accurate understanding of mass-elite linkages by challenging and testing the predictions of existing studies. My dissertation contests a notion widely held in the party competition literature that political parties continuously change their policy positions, arguing instead that parties are ideologically quite constrained. I build on insights from a variety of literatures, including spatial modeling and sociology, and employ a mixed methods research design that combines multiple datasets on party and voter behavior. I aim to enhance our models of party strategy and democratic representation in developed democracies, especially in a time when scholars raise increased concern over the rise of populism, the weakening of party-voter relations, and a public disaffection with politics.

## Dissertation

My dissertation brings together a series of papers on multidimensional party competition in Europe. It develops a unified framework for studying how parties compete for, and reach out to, the public's vote. The dominant view of party competition has long been that political parties continuously and strategically alter their policy positions at a dimensional level. At the same time, however, scholars have stressed the historical stability of European party systems, as they reflect deeply-rooted socio-economic divisions in society. The first paper of my dissertation, entitled "A Change of Heart?," deals with this apparent contradiction head on, and provides one of the first attempts to reconcile these two perspectives.

I argue that we need to understand how political parties compete on multiple ideological dimensions that are not all equally important to them, and how this may affect their behavior. Specifically, by distinguishing between a party's *primary* and *secondary* dimension, we can analyze both the short-term strategic behavior of parties in their effort to win elections and the constraints they face from long-term ideological commitments. I develop a theory of positional stability and change that relies on issue salience to predict whether a party is likely to change its appeals. Using cross-sectional time series analysis of party positions and a novel measure of the relative salience of an ideological dimension, I show that a party's reputation and durable ties with its supporters on its more salient dimension limit positional flexibility, while strategic policy shifts are possible on issues outside of its core agenda.

This finding not only has important implications for our general understanding of democratic representation, it also predicts why new challenger parties face fewer ideological constraints than mainstream parties when altering their appeals in response to the changing preferences of the electorate. It explains, for instance, why radical right and regionalist parties are unlikely to moderate their demands on immigration and regional autonomy, respectively, given that these are the issues most salient to them and their supporters. By contrast, established parties do experience relative immobility, making it more likely that they will change their stances on issues secondary to them, e.g. immigration and nationalism, in an attempt to curtail the electoral successes of these political entrepreneurs. This paper was awarded the 2017 James W. Prothro Award for Outstanding Research for best paper by a graduate student in the Department of Political Science at UNC Chapel Hill. It is currently under review at the *American Journal of Political Science*.

In a second paper, “Disentangling Blurring,” I explore the interplay between multidimensionality and salience by arguing that parties may, at times, have a strategic incentive to avoid taking clear policy positions at all. Although scholars typically assume that position avoidance is costly, I argue that it could be a viable strategy for a party looking to alleviate potential disagreement among internal party factions or with supporters, especially on issues outside of its main agenda. Building on a growing literature on *position blurring*, I propose that parties can obfuscate their positions either by avoiding an issue altogether or by taking up conflicting positions. I map a party’s strategy by analyzing the content of its manifesto. Results across 14 Western European countries from 1999 to 2014 show that position blurring is neither uniform across parties nor ideological dimensions. Older, larger, and governing parties have more established reputations, and this limits the extent to which they can mute their policy positions. This paper has fundamental implications for our understanding of party strategy. In particular, it sheds light on how parties try to manipulate the dimensional structure of party competition. This paper will be sent out for review in Spring 2019.

A third paper, “United in Diversity,” explores parties’ behavior on their less salient, secondary dimension in more detail by studying European regionalist parties. Despite their recent successes in Catalonia and Scotland, among others, our understanding of these actors is limited. Existing theories do not explain how a regionalist party develops an economic platform that falls outside of its autonomist agenda. As political authority is increasingly relocated to the subnational level, away from national governments, it is vital to analyze the ideological positions of the main political drivers behind this push for increased regional autonomy. I formulate the following hypotheses: (1) regionalist parties will initially avoid the economic left-right dimension, (2) their eventual positions will reflect the ideological complexion of their regions, but (3) they will be more ideologically flexible than those policy positions related to the center-periphery divide. I use both public opinion and expert-level data on voter and party positions to test these theoretical predictions. I find that the relative economic left-right position of the regional voter as compared to the nationwide electorate is an important predictor of regionalist parties’ economic positions. This study breaks new ground by evaluating the quality of democratic representation at a time when regional identity continues to inform the preferences of voters and parties alike, especially as regionalist parties will play a pivotal role in shaping the economic policies of the regions they represent. This paper has been presented in multiple specialized panels and workshops, and will be submitted in Spring 2019.

## Ongoing research

In my other research, I continue to challenge key assumptions and findings of the mainstream party politics literature. For example, in a stand-alone paper entitled “Who’s at the Helm?,” I explore the common assumption that the internal balance of power between party leaders and activists might influence whether a party responds to shifts in the position of the *mean national voter* or the *mean party voter*, respectively. Extending a cross-sectional time series analysis of 55 parties in ten European democracies between 1977 and 2003, I test this finding by accounting for several additional party (system) characteristics that should undermine the underlying assumptions of the party organization literature. The results show that important qualifications are in order, because a party’s electoral performance and party system polarization, in particular, affect the relationship between intra-party politics and party change. This paper has received a “revise and resubmit” from the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties*.

Since 2014, I have been a primary contributor to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). This dataset collects and aggregates expert evaluations of political parties’ positions in more than thirty European democracies, and is one of the most widely used and cited datasets in the field of party politics. As a member of the CHES team, I collect and analyze trend file data, compile and maintain lists of country experts, and code political parties by ideological party family, among others. I am a co-author on the latest publication of this research group, entitled “Explaining the Saliency of Anti-Elitism and Reducing Political Corruption for Political Parties in Europe with the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey Data,” which was published in *Research & Politics* in 2017.

Furthermore, as part of my interest in how political institutions condition the relationship between citizens and elites, I have co-authored a book chapter with André Krouwel (VU University Amsterdam) on government formation and executive-legislative relationships in the Netherlands. It explores the largely informal process of government investiture and the way in which parliament has taken an increasingly dominant role in guiding cabinet formation. The chapter appeared in the edited volume *Parliaments and Government Formation: Unpacking Investiture Rules*, published by Oxford University Press in 2015.

I am currently working on a co-authored paper with Ida Hjermitsev (Duke University) on the conceptualization and operationalization of niche parties. Despite a rapidly growing literature on this particular group of European political parties, little consensus exists among scholars about their definition and classification. We analyze existing operationalizations and unpack their consequences for the validity of the findings about the appeal and strategic behavior of these parties. We replicate one of the most cited articles in the field, which argues that niche parties are more responsive to their supporters than mainstream parties, and show that this key finding is sensitively dependent on the employed definition. This paper will be completed and sent out for review in the summer of 2019.

## Future research

I wish to continue and extend my prior research in two directions. First, I want to expand my research on multidimensional party competition in democratic settings. Despite the dramatic changes to contemporary politics, exemplified by cleavage decline, electoral volatility, and the

emergence of new parties, some observers have argued that this process is alleviated, albeit only partially, through realignment. I believe that my research can contribute to this debate by highlighting the interaction between political choice, salience, and ideological constraint for both voters and parties in a multidimensional environment.

I also want to further unpack the main finding of my dissertation by analyzing not only the magnitude of positional change but also its direction. We typically expect parties to exhibit centrist tendencies, except for non-mainstream parties like the radical right, but this prediction is strongly dependent on the assumed unidimensionality of political contestation. Whether parties employ uniform policy shifts across both their primary and secondary dimension needs to be tested empirically. Moreover, I intend to analyze the relationship between party change and salience beyond Western Europe, with particular attention to Central and Eastern Europe. Scholars have identified striking differences between East and West, which begs the question whether ideological flexibility is equally constrained on parties core dimension. I am currently working to frame a theory of party strategy in Central and Eastern Europe.

Second, I aspire to develop a more active research agenda related to the field of political behavior. Despite the centrality of mass-elite linkages for democratic representation, there is much we do not know about how citizens perceive and respond to party strategy. Extant studies on party competition are often limited by public opinion data and assumptions about the median voter. Political behavior research, on the other hand, has produced important insights about voter attitudes, for instance with regard to mobilization and partisanship, but typically does not account for how parties' strategic appeals shape the preferences of citizens.

I see an opportunity to unite these two strands of research by analyzing the essential mechanisms of electoral competition directly. Through survey experiments, such as conjoint analysis, I want to assess how respondents evaluate party strategy in a controlled environment. How do voters respond to a position blurring strategy on the issue of immigration, for example, and does it affect a party's appeal and trustworthiness? When given two distinct political choices, are voters more inclined to support a party with unambiguous positions, or can it be advantageous to tailor a more pointed message that purposively mutes a party's positions on secondary issues? The proposed research naturally follows from my ongoing research, which includes large-N cross-sectional time series analyses of voter and party positions, but complements and tests it by means of micro-level experimental work on the multidimensional preferences of voters. In line with my existing work, I expect a party's strategic behavior to be an effective tool for reaching out to new voter groups and for mitigating internal dissent, but only on less salient issues that are outside of its core agenda.