

WHO'S AT THE HELM?  
THE EFFECT OF PARTY ORGANIZATION ON PARTY POSITION CHANGE

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## **ABSTRACT**

**JELLE KOEDAM: Who's at the Helm?**  
**The Effect of Party Organization on Party Position Change**  
(Under the direction of Gary Marks.)

Parties continuously change their position in a competitive environment. Their motivations to do so, however, are highly contested. 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 mean party voter position, respectively. Extending a pooled time-series analysis of 55 parties in 10 European democracies between 1977 and 2003, this paper seeks to test these findings by accounting for several additional party characteristics and environmental incentives. The results show that while the original explanation holds up in some circumstances, some qualifications are in order.

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## Introduction

Why do parties change position? Ever since the seminal work by Downs (1957) on the median voter theorem, political scientists have been trying to understand and map how political parties locate themselves in a competitive political landscape, and what factors lead them to alter their position. It goes without saying that in the past few decades the literature on party competition has made major leaps forward, developing sophisticated models that take into account office and policy-seeking behavior of parties, the multi-dimensionality of party systems, and the salience of political issues, to name but a few examples (Adams, Merrill & Grofman 2005, Belanger & Meguid 2008, Hooghe, Marks & Wilson 2002, Kriesi et al. 2006, Meguid 2005).

Recently, however, scholars have started to connect the party competition literature to a relatively unexplored field of party politics (for classic exceptions, see Duverger 1954, Michels 1962 [1911], Panebianco 1988), namely to how the internal workings of parties affect their strategic behavior. By opening up what to most existing work is a black box, studies have been able to show that intra-party characteristics do matter for inter-party competition. Schumacher, de Vries & Vis (2013), for instance, show that parties dominated by the party leadership are generally more responsive to (changes in) the position of the mean *voter*, whereas activist-dominated parties are more inclined to reflect the mean *party voter* position.

While this is certainly a valuable and novel contribution to an already extensive literature, some qualifications to the authors' theoretical argument can be brought to the fore that call for empirical testing. Three conditions, in particular, ought to be accounted for. First, an often used qualification in the party competition literature that might be worthwhile exploring here is that between so-called mainstream and niche parties (Adams et al. 2006, Ezrow et al. 2011, Meguid 2005). While mainstream parties generally represent a large set of is-

sues (and people), niche parties are taken to be more extreme and compete above all on “second dimension” political issues, such as immigration and the environment. Does the importance of the internal power concentration still hold up when accounting for this?

Second, one might argue that a party’s position on the dimension of political contestation can greatly affect, or limit, its positional flexibility. Independent from party organizational characteristics, parties operating on the fringes of the political spectrum might approach party competition in a completely different way than more centrist parties. Are more extremist parties still responsive to the median voter or do they only care about the preferences of their own supporters?<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the level of fragmentation of a party system has been found to influence the relationship between party behavior and organization (Lehrer 2012). Specifically, as the political arena becomes more crowded, this puts constraints on the parties’ room to maneuver, and should logically lead them to be less responsive to voter shifts. Furthermore, the differences between party leaders and activists cannot be too large, or activists will have an incentive to exit the party and join any of the multitude of alternatives.

Using the original dataset by Schumacher, de Vries & Vis (2013), I will account for these qualitative and contextual factors and test whether their original findings withstand further scrutiny. As such, my analysis will focus on 55 parties in 10 established European democracies in the period 1977-2003. This paper has important implications both for our collective understanding of party competition in established democracies, as well as for our normative view of mass-elite linkages and the responsiveness of democratically elected political actors.

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<sup>1</sup>While sometimes defined as simply non-centrist, niche parties are classified in a more sophisticated manner here. For a full conceptualization of this party type, see Section 2.3.1.



## Why Do Parties Change Position?

The study of party competition has a rich and impressive tradition in the field of comparative politics. After introducing some of the pivotal spatial theories of party behavior, this section moves on to connect this literature to the relatively recent attention for the internal workings of political parties and its importance for party competition. Finally, hypotheses are presented that will guide the empirical section of this paper.

### *Spatial theories of party competition*

The study of party competition has traditionally been dominated by spatial theories. These models, in line with the work by Downs (1957), view party competition as a struggle over positional issues. Parties - *and* voters - disagree on the best response to certain problems that society faces, thus offering alternative policy proposals to the electorate. While ideological proximity is generally assumed to be the crucial determinant of vote choice, competing theories have been developed, with discounting and directional voting being the most prominent alternatives (Adams, Merrill & Grofman 2005, Bawn & Somer-Topcu 2012, Grofman 1985, Rabinowitz & Macdonald 1989).

Party competition is no static endeavor, however. Both the positions of parties and voters are continuously in flux, resulting in a dynamic interaction between political supply and demand. As the responsiveness of political parties is of paramount importance to the mass-elite linkages so central to democratic representation, it comes as no surprise that a lot of research has been done on this question of how parties change position and, arguably even more important, why? Several answers have been presented over the years, each worth discussing here.

First and foremost, and in line with our normative understanding of democratic representation, parties have been found to respond to changes in the position of the median voter (Adams, Merrill & Grofman 2005).<sup>2</sup> As the electorate, as a whole, becomes more leftist

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<sup>2</sup>The mean and median voter position are used interchangeably here. For their measurement, see “Section 3: Data & Method”.

(or rightist), parties appropriately respond to this positional change by moving in the same direction. In subsequent studies, however, this finding has been found not to apply to a certain group of parties, namely niche parties (Adams et al. 2006, Ezrow et al. 2011). Instead, this subset of parties (more on their characteristics below) responds to position changes of different sub-constituencies, in particular their own supporters. Given their specialized policy agenda, general public opinion is less of a concern to them.

In addition, parties' policy positions have also been found to be affected by a range of environmental conditions, including electoral defeat (Baekgaard & Jensen 2012, Budge 1994, Budge, Ezrow & McDonald 2010, Somer-Topcu 2009), governing status (Bawn & Somer-Topcu 2012), and changing economic conditions (Adams, Haupt & Stoll 2008, Haupt 2010). Finally, it goes without saying that political parties are also responsive to each other's policy moves (Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009, Laver 2005, Williams & Whitten 2015).

### *The intra-party balance of power*

In an attempt to contribute to an already immense literature, Schumacher, de Vries & Vis (2013) show how party organization can explain variation in the way parties respond to such environmental incentives. Specifically, the degree to which parties are dominated by either leaders or activists determines to a great extent what type of voter a party is responsive to. According to the authors, parties that are dominated by party leaders show fewer ways in which the rank-and-file can influence the internal decision-making process, leaving the few actors at the top of the organization in charge of party policy (Schumacher, de Vries & Vis 2013, 465). In activist-dominated parties, by contrast, many actors are involved in setting the party's goals and agenda, such as local and regional branches or other types of delegates, thus constraining the leadership and their preferred course of action.

This internal balance of power between party leaders and activists is important, the authors argue, because it greatly affects the behavior of the party as a whole. Party leaders are assumed to be vote and office-seeking, as they are primarily interested in the spoils that come with being in office. In true Downsian tradition, it follows that leader-dominated

parties are responsive to (changes in) the mean voter position. Positioning one's self in the center and responding to the median voter is the ultimate vote-maximizing strategy and, consequently, produces the highest chance of getting into office. 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 & Vis 2013, 465). For them, holding office is only a secondary concern. Viewing the party as a vehicle to express the opinions of like-minded activists, such parties will first and foremost be responsive to changes in the preferences of their supporters, i.e. the mean party voter position, with party leaders lacking any degree of independence. Thus, different environmental incentives are important for leader-dominated and activist-dominated parties.

On a final note, it is important to distinguish between this conceptualization of factionalism, understood here as a distinction between more office-motivated party leaders and the ideologues that are party activists, and the way in which it has been defined by Budge, Ezrow & McDonald (2010), among others. While both accounts depart from the common assumption that parties are unitary actors rid of internal division, the latter views parties as a collection of ideological factions competing for dominance. Using this assumptions, they explain why, after a party suffers from electoral defeat, it might lead to a policy shift in an opposite direction: An opposing faction might take over the party and implement a strategy in line with its own, alternative perspective. While equally interesting, the focus here will be on the alleged divide between party leaders and activists, not the internal competition between different ideological camps.

### *Alternative explanations*

There are, however, several explanations that the authors do not account for in their analysis, which might be the driving force behind at least part of the observed variation in party behavior. Before turning to these approaches, it is important to list the underlying assumptions on which their theoretical framework rests, as these can be indirectly challenged via the proposed alternative approaches.

First, building on existing studies of party competition, Schumacher, de Vries & Vis

(2013) argue that the primary and most effective vote-maximizing strategy is to be responsive to the median voter - be it either by converging on its ideological position or by moving in the same direction from one election to the next (or both). Yet, one might question to what extent a move to (or 'with') the ideological center is electorally advantageous. For instance, voters might discount policy promises made in election campaigns, simply because they are aware that politicians are unable to fully alter the status quo as they desire, leading them to vote for the more extreme candidate or party. This ensures that, even when watered down, a sufficiently outspoken ideological program remains in the end. Similarly, Duch, May & Armstrong (2010) find that voters also take the bargaining process into account that comes with coalition formation after the election, thus providing an incentive to vote for a party that is not situated in the very center of the political spectrum. Both explanations also justify controlling for the type of party system in place in a country (see Lehrer 2012). In either case, it is perhaps not as straightforward as often assumed that the median voter strategy is *the* way to go to maximize one's votes and secure office.

Second, some scholars have argued that party organizations have changed altogether, undermining the role of activists in particular. Presenting their well-known cartelization thesis, Katz and Mair (1995, 2009) state that in virtually all established democracies, parties have moved away from their supporters and are now cooperating to prevent the entrance of new parties. With party membership being on an all time low (Mair & van Biezen 2001), party leaders are increasingly shielded from activist influences in their office-seeking behavior.

Finally, the very assumption that leadership-dominated parties and activist-dominated parties are office-seeking and policy-seeking, respectively, can be challenged. Thinking of the populist radical right, for instance, these are often very hierarchical organizations, led by a strong, charismatic leader. Yet, far from being concerned with actually making it into government (if at all allowed by other parties), these parties are generally highly ideological and seek to influence policy through parliamentary channels instead - although government participation is possible, of course. Similarly, activists might very well be interested in getting into office, as they realize holding executive power is the best way to achieve their

goals. Thus, the intra-party balance of power between leaders and activists might not be the defining feature when trying to explain a party's strategic behavior.

Taken together, several concerns can be raised about the determining influence of party leaders and activist on a party's strategic behavior. The alternative approaches that follow from these concerns can be categorized into three groups, some relating more to environmental incentives other than those controlled for in the original analysis, while still others address the characteristics of the party itself. The three categories concern (1) the type of party, (2) its ideological position, and (3) the nature of party competition. All three are worthwhile discussing in more detail below.

### Types of political parties

One of the most commonly used typologies of political parties in the party competition literature is that between mainstream and niche parties (Abou-Chadi 2014, Adams et al. 2006, Ezrow 2008, Ezrow et al. 2011, Meguid 2005). While little consensus exists on what niche parties really are and how to define them, they are generally understood to be distinctly different from their mainstream rivals due to their non-centrist or extreme ideologies, and because their agenda is centered around a limited set of issues that fall outside the traditional class cleavage (Wagner 2012, 2). This distinction is important, since the niche parties' focus on "second dimension politics" greatly affects both their position *and* strategic behavior in a competitive political environment. As such, one might expect niche parties to be more policy-driven than their mainstream competitors, as their unconventional and extremist program lowers their chances of being seen as an attractive coalition partner. Indeed, Adams et al. (2006) find that mainstream parties are more responsive to public opinion than niche parties. The latter, in fact, were systematically punished for position changes. As put by Adams, "niche parties' policy stability in the face of public opinion shifts reflects the niche party elites' belief that their core supporters are more ideologically oriented than are the supporters of mainstream parties and will react badly to policy shifts in their party's election program because these supporters view such shifts - especially those that moderate the niche party's policies - as a betrayal of the party's core values" (2012,

406).

Consequently, there seems to be some resemblance between Schumacher et al.'s (2013) focus on party organization and the distinction between niche and mainstream parties; both assume a separation between office-seeking and policy-seeking behavior. It is important to stress, however, that the two categorizations ultimately lead to different clusterings of parties. Certainly, overlap may exist between the two groups, especially among mainstream parties, but whereas Green parties typically rely on a strong activist base, populist radical right parties often have a highly centralized leadership. Yet, both are consistently labeled as niche parties. As such, the central question raised here is whether it is really party organization that drives a party's responsiveness to voter shifts, as Schumacher, de Vries & Vis (2013) argue, or is niche-mainstream the defining distinction?

*Hypothesis 1: Niche parties are more likely to respond to shifts in the party voter position than to shifts in the mean voter position.*

#### Ideology matters

Next, it also seems intuitive to qualify a party's ideological position in the political landscape. After all, no matter how activist (or leader) dominated a party is, if the median voter is located far away from the party, why respond at all to its small positional changes from one election to the next? In other words, almost by definition, the further a party is removed from the ideological center, and thus the median voter, the more important the position of its core constituency will become. From a demand-side perspective, too, this assumption makes sense, as extremist voters can logically be expected to be more policy-oriented than centrist voters (Grofman 2004: 33).

*Hypothesis 2: Parties positioned further away from the center are more likely to respond to shifts in the party voter position than to shifts in the mean voter position.*

### Party system fragmentation

Last, the number of parties that competes in a political system will greatly affect their behavior, too. Two explanations, in particular, are worth discussing here. First, when the ideological space is more crowded, each party's room to maneuver will be more limited. To remain ideologically differentiable from its competitors, a party needs to keep its distance. In the words of Downs,

“political parties cannot move ideologically past each other. (...) Integrity and responsibility create relative immobility, which prevents a party from making ideological leaps over the heads of its neighbors. Thus ideological movement is restricted to horizontal progress at most up to - and never beyond - the nearest party on either side” (1957, 122).

Thus, most parties will be prone to stick to representing the preferences of their support base, rather than to make significant, and often risky, position changes in search for office.

A second reason why party system fragmentation might wash away the explanatory power of party organization, is that one would expect parties in multiparty systems to be more unitary in the first place. After all, the sheer availability of competitors provides activists with ample opportunity to exit the party and either join an existing party or form a new one, when preference disparities are brought to the fore. If the party leadership, in their desire to get into office, pursues a median voter strategy that the activists no longer identify with, the latter are free to leave. Thus, since internal party coherence must be larger in highly fragmented party systems, the effect of party organization should be smaller in these countries. Conversely, in systems with only a few parties, activists are left with fewer exit strategies and both they themselves as well as the party leadership will have an incentive to continue to work together, even in the presence of internal dispute.

Given that both explanations work in the same direction, the third and final hypothesis can be formulated as follows:

*Hypothesis 3: Parties in fragmented party systems are more likely to respond to shifts in the party voter position than to shifts in the mean voter position.*

## Data & Method

To test the hypotheses presented in the previous section of this paper, I use the original dataset by Schumacher, de Vries & Vis (2013). The dependent variable, change in party positions, is measured using the “rile-index” from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Budge et al. 2001, Klingemann et al. 2006). This measure has been extensively criticized in the past, primarily for gauging issue salience and *not* ideological position, but the lack of comparative data has led it to be the primary variable of choice.

The two crucial independent variables, mean voter change and mean party voter change, are taken from the Eurobarometer surveys. Asking respondents to position themselves on a left-right scale, the voter shift is subsequently calculated by taking the difference from one election to the next in the average either among all the voters in a country (mean voter change) or solely among the supporters of a party (party voter change) at  $t - 1$ .<sup>3</sup>

The original variable on party organization is created by combining two questions included in the expert survey by Laver & Hunt (1992), specifically on how influential party leaders and activists are in influencing party policy (see Schumacher, de Vries & Vis (2013, 468-470) for a more extensive discussion of this measure).

The niche-mainstream variable is the first of the independent variables added to the original dataset. Similar to the conceptualization of niche parties, its operationalization is no less contested. Most studies simply use a binary measure based on party family membership (Adams et al. 2006, Ezrow et al. 2011, Meguid 2005), typically clustering communist, green, and extreme right parties together. Yet, despite their obvious and immense differences on the traditional left-right dimension, their lack of ideological and organizational overlap goes beyond mere positions alone. First, these groups of parties largely originated in different time periods, with greens and radical right parties arriving to the political scene from the 1970s onwards, whereas the European communist parties are often among the oldest, still active parties in Europe - often having a higher age than most mainstream parties.

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<sup>3</sup>The decision to use the ‘mean’ instead of the ‘median’ voter position is a methodological one: the Eurobarometer indicator employed here is discrete, which results in a lack of variation in the position of the median voter.



Furthermore, whereas the agendas of the other two constituent party families are at least primarily defined by non-economic, second-dimension political issues - which is often seen as a key feature of niche parties - the communists compete more than any of their rivals on economic issues.

An alternative, more sophisticated measure is developed by Wagner (2012). He defines niche parties as primarily competing on (and emphasizing) a small number of non-economic issues - while avoiding traditional economic ones - thus excluding parties like the communists. Using a combination of expert surveys and CMP data, the resulting indicator, although still dichotomous, has the strong advantage of being neither fixed over time nor based on a party's membership to a party family. Rather, its ideological program is key.

Ideological extremity is measured simply by taking a party's absolute distance from the center of the rile-scale. While more advanced methods could be used here, this straightforward measure should suffice in determining whether the importance of shifts in the positions of the mean voter and party voter is dependent on a party's position in the political landscape.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
<i>Dependent variable</i>				
Party position change	0.50	15.85	-61.3	55.48
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Mean voter change	-0.05	0.18	-0.43	0.39
Party voter change	-0.04	0.42	-1.65	2.38
Party organization	18.51	5.53	0.00	27.77
Distance from center	18.84	13.41	0.00	78.85
Party system fragmentation	4.31	1.66	1.69	9.05
Mainstream vs niche	Frequency		Percentage	
Mainstream (=0)	586		84.56	
Niche (=1)	107		15.44	
Total	693		100.00	

Finally, to test the assumption that party system fragmentation matters for conditioning the dynamic relationship between the internal workings of parties and inter-party competition, information on the effective number of parties in parliament is collected from Gallagher & Mitchell (2005). Although some have dichotomized this variable by classifying two-party systems as having an effective number of parties of 2.5 or less (Lehrer 2012, 1302), the continuous party system variable is used here.

Descriptive statistics for all variables are shown in Table 1.<sup>4</sup> The dependent variable, party position change, ranges from -61.3 to 55.48, with an average almost exactly at zero (0.50). The voter change variables are equally centered around zero, although the mean party voter is, as one might expect, more flexible. Party organization has a maximum range of 30, with higher scores indicating leadership-dominance, although its empirical range runs from 0 to 27.77. The party with the most extreme ideological position has a distance of 78.85 from the center, but the average across all parties is 18.84. The mean number of effective parties in the studied countries is 4.31, but the range is rather big (1.69-9.05). Finally, as mentioned earlier, the niche-mainstream distinction is measured using a dummy variable (0=mainstream, 1=niche). Just over 15% of the parties included in this study are qualified as niche (mapped for each individual election).<sup>5</sup>

## Results

This section presents the empirical results of this paper. For the sake of comparability, all the extensions and hypotheses are tested separately in order to assess the extent to which the original findings by Schumacher, de Vries & Vis (2013) hold up. In addition, like the authors' original analysis, I also correct for heteroskedasticity and a first-order autoregressive (AR1) structure in the panel residuals. It is questionable, however, to what extent these

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<sup>4</sup>Electoral defeat is not discussed here, as it is only included for comparative purposes and not of any theoretical interest.

<sup>5</sup>Note that the included independent variables *do* gauge different phenomena, as can be seen from the low correlations presented in Table 3 (see Appendix).

problems are truly affecting the analysis, given the fact that the dependent variable is differenced (i.e change in position from one election to the next). Normally, differencing should take care of both problems, especially since heteroskedasticity is often caused by strongly different starting values.<sup>6</sup> Yet, since the focus here is on the theoretical contribution of Schumacher, de Vries & Vis (2013), I adopt their estimation technique.<sup>7</sup>

The output of all four regression models is presented in Table 2. Model 1 is an identical replication of Schumacher et al.'s (2013) original results. Of specific interest are the interaction terms between party organization and party voter change and mean voter change, respectively. While the sign and statistical significance are immediately interpretable, the best way to make sense of this interaction is by using marginal effects plots (see Figure 1). The graphs show that the marginal effect of mean voter change is only significant for leadership-dominated parties - in fact, it is negative for parties controlled by activists. The effect of party voter change, on the other hand, is always positive, but loses strength as a party becomes more leadership-dominated. Clearly, this is in line with their theoretical expectation, as party leaders are more interested in making it into office, and pursuing a median voter strategy is, so the argument goes, the best way to achieve that goal.

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<sup>6</sup>Indeed, exactly because the dependent variable is differenced, leaving out the correction for panel-specific AR1 does little to the results. This is not the case for omitting the correction for heteroskedasticity, though, as this deprives all the original coefficient estimates from their statistical significance. Several of the variables I add, however, remain statistically significant, including some of the interaction terms (not shown here).

<sup>7</sup>Note, however, that the authors state that they correct for heteroskedasticity using Panel Corrected Standard Errors (PCSEs) (Schumacher, de Vries & Vis 2013, 471), which is *not* the correct way to deal with this problem. Instead, PCSEs are a solution to contemporaneous correlation. That being said, it seems that the model they actually run does *not* use PCSEs, but regular robust standard errors.

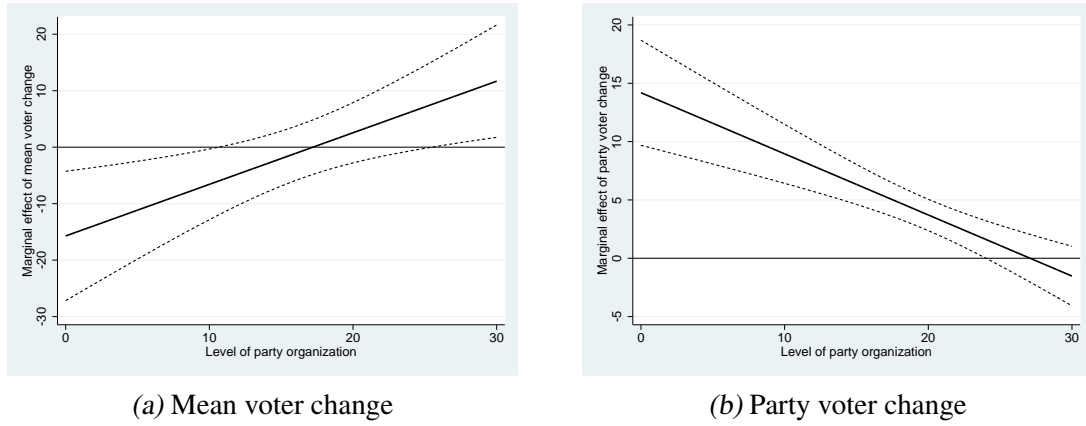
Table 2: Regression analysis of party position changes

	<b>Model 1</b> (original)	<b>Model 2</b> (niche)	<b>Model 3</b> (ideology)	<b>Model 4</b> (fragmentation)
Defeat	0.02 (0.10)	0.06 (0.09)	0.06 (0.12)	-0.03 (0.11)
Party voter change	16.24* (3.10)	16.86* (3.42)	7.93* (2.91)	15.54* (3.86)
Mean voter change	-14.50* (5.75)	-18.98* (8.04)	-34.34* (7.09)	-30.77* (10.79)
Party organization	0.01 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.08 (0.07)	0.00 (0.07)
Party voter change × party organization	-0.59* (0.14)	-0.59* (0.17)	-0.31* (0.12)	-0.38 (0.23)
Mean voter change × party organization	0.87* (0.32)	1.16* (0.41)	1.21* (0.40)	0.09 (0.40)
Party voter change × mean voter change	34.97* (17.40)	41.35* (20.60)	13.09 (16.31)	33.60 (22.63)
Party voter change × mean voter change × party org.	-1.19 (0.79)	-0.98 (0.99)	-0.32 (0.71)	-1.26 (1.10)
Niche party		-2.54* (0.85)		
Party voter change × niche party		4.47 (3.38)		
Mean voter change × niche party		-9.03 (6.71)		
Distance center			0.17* (0.01)	
Party voter change × distance center			0.22* (0.08)	
Mean voter change × distance center			0.75* (0.16)	
Party system fragmentation				-0.18 (0.83)
Party voter change × party system fragmentation				0.22* (0.10)
Mean voter change × party system fragmentation				0.53* (0.17)
Constant	2.89 (2.48)	9.69 (1.74)	-1.30 (2.46)	2.08 (3.49)
<i>N</i>	324	300	324	324
Wald	2367.33	127456.06	5800.67	4135.92

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

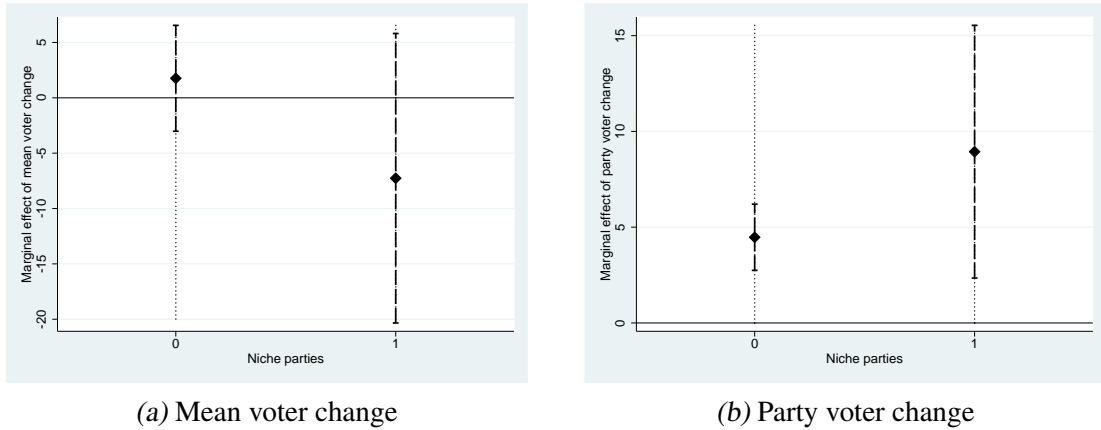
\* indicates significance at  $p < 0.05$

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



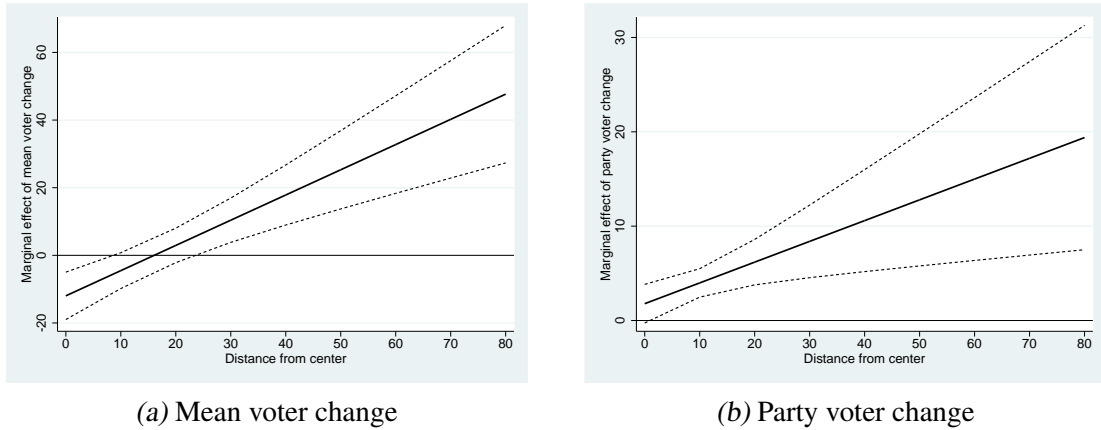
The first of the extensions, presented in model 2, concerns the niche-mainstream distinction. Are niche parties truly different from their mainstream competitors, as suggested in the literature, or does this categorization lack explanatory power? The evidence, at least to some extent, points in the direction of the latter. Although the niche dummy is statistically significant, this is by itself not of substantive interest. In fact, all the variables of the original model show highly similar coefficient estimates; some have even gained in strength. To make sense of the interactions between niche parties and mean and party voter change, we once again look at the marginal effects plots. Figure 2 confirms that, indeed, the niche-mainstream distinction does not lead to statistically significant results, as the confidence intervals around the estimates cover zero. While the coefficient estimates go in the right direction, i.e. a negative marginal effect of mean voter change for niche parties, we lack certainty to interpret this finding. For party voter change, however, we do find a statistically significant effect. Specifically, when moving from mainstream to niche parties, the marginal effect of party voter change increases. This is in line with the literature and, thus, provides partial support for hypothesis 1. Yet, since the effect of party organization is still statistically significant, we can be relatively certain that the authors' original findings were not driven by, or conditional on, the difference between niche and mainstream parties.

Fig. 2: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions  
for *mainstream vs niche parties*



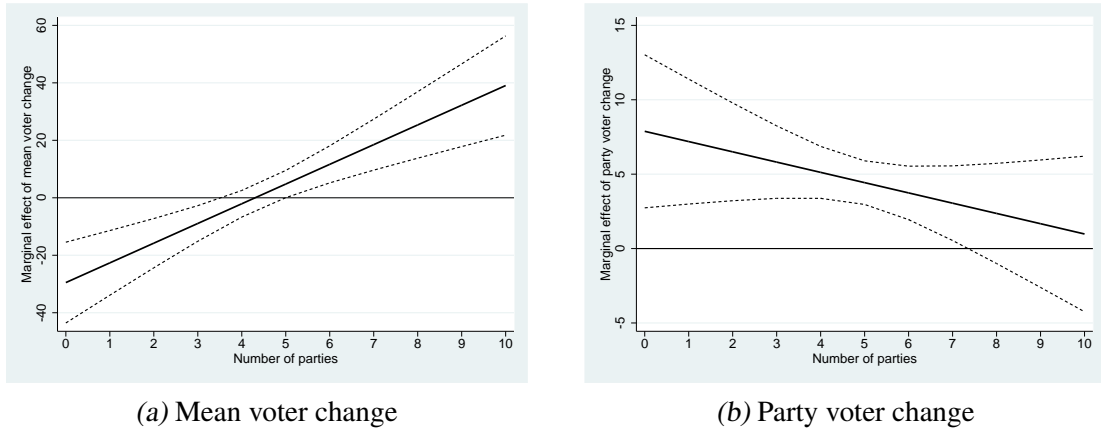
Next, we control for parties' ideological eccentricity by including the variables that map their distance from the center (see model 3). All three variables, the two interaction terms and the individual variable itself, are statistically significant. Moreover, as can be seen from Figure 3, the confidence intervals generally do not include zero, meaning that the marginal effect of both mean voter change and party voter change at different distances from the center is statistically significant. Interestingly, while the marginal effect of party voter change grows as a party is further removed from the center, which is in line with hypothesis 2, the same holds for mean voter change. A possible explanation for this is that some established parties, that you would logically expect to respond to the mean voter, could be further removed from the center as well, e.g. conservative parties. This demands further testing, however. Equally interesting, while mean voter shift by itself as well as its interaction with party organization are left relatively untouched by adding the ideological eccentricity variables, party voter change has lost much of its explanatory power and, in the case of the interaction term with party organization, its statistical significance, too. Arguably, then, a party's ideological position to some extent undermines the effect of party organization on position change.

Fig. 3: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions  
by distance from center



Finally, in order to test the third hypothesis, measures of party system fragmentation are added to the original model (see model 4). In contrast to the previous extensions, none of the party organization variables are now still statistically significant. The interaction terms with the effective number of parties, on the other hand, are. Looking at Figure 4, it is clear that, in line with hypothesis 3, the marginal effect of party voter change decreases as the effective number of parties in a system increases. In other words, parties become less responsive to changes in the position of their supporters as the political spectrum becomes more crowded. This could be both because parties' ideological flexibility is now limited by the large number of competitors or because their supporters now move less as well, since they would just switch parties if they find themselves too far removed from its ideological position. The marginal effects plot for mean voter change provides a more confusing result, as it suggests that in countries with low fragmentation parties are *not* responsive to the mean voter, while in highly fragmented systems they are. One possible interpretation could be that in the countries with only a few parties, the voter distribution is more bimodal, leading the established parties to follow their supporters and not some hypothetical mean voter. Why the effect of mean voter change is strongest in the most fragmented systems requires further investigation and undeniably contradicts our general view of party competition.

Fig. 4: Marginal effects of voter change on party positions  
by party system fragmentation



## Discussion

This paper set out to test under what conditions the internal balance of power between activists and leaders affects a party's responsiveness to changes in voter positions. To be specific, is it true that leadership-dominated parties follow the mean voter, whereas activist-dominated parties respond to shifts in the position of their own supporters (Schumacher, de Vries & Vis 2013)? Several alternative explanations that could explain this distinction were presented, focusing on the type of party in question (niche vs. mainstream), its ideological eccentricity, and the level of fragmentation of the party system it competes in.

Contrary to what the dominant literature would have us expect (Adams et al. 2006, Ezrow et al. 2011, Meguid 2005), the hypothesis regarding the different behavior of niche parties could only be partially confirmed. More crucially, adding these variables to the model did little to undermine the alleged importance of party organization. A party's distance from the center and the effective number of parties *do* matter, however. Not only were these effects themselves statistically significant, they also reduced the importance of party organization. How these characteristics interact with party organization can certainly be studied in more detail, but I hope to have provided a first comparative test of their relevance.



To conclude, Schumacher et al. (2013) made an incredibly valuable, and innovative, contribution to the field by linking the internal workings of a party to its strategic behavior in a competitive environment. Yet, at the very least, this effect is conditional on other factors (both endogenous and exogenous) and these need to be accounted for to provide a full and accurate picture of this relationship.

## APPENDIX

Table 3: Correlation matrix

	$\Delta$ Party position	$\Delta$ Mean voter pos.	$\Delta$ Party voter pos.	Party org.	Niche parties	Distance center	Party sys. frag.
$\Delta$ Party position	1.00						
$\Delta$ Mean voter pos.	0.07	1.00					
$\Delta$ Party voter pos.	0.05	0.26	1.00				
Party organization	-0.00	-0.01	-0.03	1.00			
Niche parties	-0.05	0.01	0.02	-0.18	1.00		
Distance center	0.01	0.09	0.04	-0.10	-0.01	1.00	
Party sys. frag.	-0.04	-0.04	0.00	0.11	0.01	-0.10	1.00

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