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What is This?

Mainstream or Niche? Vote-Seeking Incentives and the Programmatic Strategies of Political Parties

Thomas M. Meyer[1] and Markus Wagner[1]

Abstract
Parties can choose to concentrate on topics which other parties cover relatively little. In such cases, they have a programmatic niche profile compared with their mainstream rivals. We argue that parties should be more likely to switch between a niche and a mainstream profile in response to unsatisfactory electoral results. However, these vote-seeking incentives to change salience profiles should have greater influence on parties that are small, young, and/or in opposition. Such parties will find it easier and more attractive to change their salience profiles. We use a measure of niche profiles based on manifesto coding and test our hypotheses in 22 countries with a transition model. For niche-to-mainstream transitions in party profiles, the results confirm our expectations, but vote-seeking incentives do not lead mainstream parties to shift to a niche profile. The results of this article have implications for our understanding of the dynamics of party competition in multiparty systems.

Keywords
party competition, programmatic profiles, vote-seeking incentives, niche party, mainstream party

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Political parties do not compete and campaign on the same issues: While one party may concentrate on the economy, another may focus on immigration and a third on the environment. As a result, parties differ in the emphasis they place on the various topics on the political agenda. Sometimes, parties restrict their issue focus to a narrow set of issues that other parties pay little attention to. In such cases, parties can be said to have a "niche" profile compared with the more "mainstream" issue salience of their competitors (Meguid, 2005, 2008).

What primarily defines a niche party according to the original definition by Meguid (2005, 2008) is thus the fact that they compete on different issues than their mainstream rivals. As we know, parties modify their salience strategies to focus on those areas where they have a competitive advantage (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Vavreck, 2009). As parties can change their salience profiles, they must also be able to switch from a "niche" to a "mainstream" programmatic approach or vice versa.

As a result, we argue that parties deliberately choose and switch between niche and mainstream profiles, in part due to strategic incentives. In particular, parties may decide to adopt or to drop a niche or mainstream party profile out of vote-seeking considerations. We suggest that parties that suffer losses in elections should be more likely to change the focus of their policy program, while gains should increase ideological stability (Budge, Ezrow, & McDonald, 2010; Somer-Topcu, 2009). If this hypothesis holds and these salience profiles are chosen in part for strategic reasons, it becomes problematic to argue that parties are unchangeably either niche or mainstream competitors.

Yet, almost all existing approaches to studying niche and mainstream party profiles have so far applied the terms to parties as a whole and have disregarded the possibility that parties can change their salience profile (see Meyer & Miller, 2013; Wagner, 2011a). Most prominently, Meguid (2005, 2008) has designated as "niche" those emerging parties competing on a narrow, novel set of issues and as "mainstream" their older, established mainstream rivals (Meguid, 2005, 2008). Adams, Ezrow, and various coauthors have based their classification on party families known for their left–right extremism (e.g., Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2006; Ezrow, 2008; Ezrow, De Vries, Steenbergen, & Edwards, 2011). In other words, niche status is generally treated as a fixed, unchangeable characteristic of political parties. Indeed, it is usually operationalized by simple reference to party families such as Green or radical-right/nationalist parties.

This article shows that changes from niche to mainstream (and vice versa) are frequent and that they can be explained as the result of vote-seeking incentives. Although parties may pursue different goals, gaining votes is an instrumental desire of all parties who wish to enter office or to implement

their preferred policies (Strøm, 1990). However, not all parties are equally influenced by electoral incentives, and this also applies to the decision to switch between niche and mainstream profiles. Parties are generally conservative, risk-averse organizations protective of their reputation among voters and of their support among activists and donors (Janda, Harmel, Edens, & Goff, 1995; Kitschelt, 1994; Robertson, 1976; Strøm, 1990). They will take risky decisions—and changing from niche to mainstream or vice versa may be such a decision—if the electoral incentives outweigh organizational and ideological inertia. Smaller and newer parties should therefore be particularly mobile and open for change. In addition, parties in opposition should be more willing to experiment with different profiles than their competitors in government.

We test our hypotheses on a data set based on the election programs coded by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP). Our sample covers 194 parties in 22 countries from 1945 to 2005. We find that parties change from niche to mainstream profiles in response to electoral incentives, though this applies in particular to smaller, newer, and opposition parties. In contrast, electoral incentives largely fail to explain switching from mainstream to niche profiles.

This article is structured as follows. We first present our argument that the terms *niche* and *mainstream* describe variable salience profiles rather than immutable types. We then consider the vote-seeking incentives to change between niche and mainstream profiles before explaining how party size, party age, and government participation may moderate the effect of these incentives. Next, we present the data, measurement approach, and empirical model before describing the results. We conclude by summarizing our findings and providing avenues for future research.

Conceptualizing and Measuring Mainstream and Niche Salience Profiles

The niche party concept was introduced by Meguid (2005), who considers niche parties to be mainly characterized by emphasis on a small set of issues that their mainstream rivals pay little attention to. Niche parties often emerge in later time periods and emphasize issues that have previously been neglected by their already established competitors. In other words, Meguid argues that what distinguishes niche from mainstream parties is the relative salience of certain issues, not the positions the parties take.

Although she does not state this directly, this implies that parties can choose whether to take up a niche or a mainstream party profile by modifying

how much attention they pay to each political issue. This also means that over time, parties can switch between these profiles. First, a niche party can decide to switch to a mainstream profile. For example, the policy program of the German Greens is nowadays much closer to the mainstream than it was 30 years ago (Klein & Falter, 2003; Volmer, 2009), probably due to its participation in government (Rihoux & Rüdig, 2006). Using the example of Welsh and Galician nationalist parties, Elias (2009) shows that some ethno-territorial parties have moved toward a mainstream profile. Similarly, Abedi and Lundberg (2009) describe the efforts of the anti-EU U.K. Independence Party to broaden its profile as a strategy to get rid of its "single-issue party" image. Second, previously mainstream parties may change their profile in search of an electorally beneficial niche. For example, the Austrian Freedom Party went from a liberal party platform in the 1980s to a nationalist niche (Fröhlich-Steffen, 2004; Luther, 2006).

Meguid's (2005, 2008) theory of party competition further argues that mainstream parties react to the niche party threat. They may ignore the new issues ("dismissive strategy") or decide to address them, either by taking a similar position to the niche party ("accommodative strategy") or by adopting an opposing stance ("adversarial strategy"). There are two ways in which mainstream parties can influence what constitutes a programmatic "niche." First, they can affect which issues are available for niche-seeking strategies by themselves addressing potential policy niches. For example, if many parties already focus on immigration, a new party will not be a niche party just because it heavily emphasizes this issue area. Second, existing niches can disappear if mainstream rivals decide against pursuing a dismissive strategy and opt for accommodative or adversarial approaches instead. For example, mainstream parties may react to the entry of a Green party by emphasizing environmental issues.

Most existing approaches to operationalizing the niche party concept have failed to take such dynamic aspects into account. Until now, the measurement of niche parties has generally been restricted to party families, specifically Green, radical-right/nationalist, Communist, and ethno-territorial parties (Adams et al., 2006; Meguid, 2005, 2008). However, in this article, we make use of a more recent approach that departs from the party family approach to measurement and instead operationalizes niche parties as those parties that emphasize issues neglected by their rivals (Wagner, 2011a). A party therefore has a niche profile if it concentrates on topics which other parties cover relatively little; the precise operationalization of this definition is described in more detail below. This measurement approach allows for the variance over time that is concealed by measurement based on party families and thus explicitly recognizes the dynamic

nature of party profiles. Like existing analyses, our understanding of niche and mainstream competitors in a party system is dichotomous, an approach also taken by the existing literature using this concept (Adams et al., 2006; Meguid, 2005, 2008).

Vote-Seeking Incentives to Change Between Niche and Mainstream Profiles

To understand why parties switch from niche to mainstream profiles and vice versa, we first need to understand why political parties change their political programs at all. After all, parties are organizations and as such resistant to change (Janda et al., 1995; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Walgrave & Nuytemans, 2009). This is because programmatic consistency comes with certain benefits for parties. First, they depend on the support of policy-seeking activists, supporters, and donors, who give their time and money to parties at least partly because they believe in the policy goals the party pursues. Second, parties should also maintain programmatic consistency to appear responsible and reliable to the electorate (Downs, 1957): Voters may see a party as opportunistic if it changes the focus of its program too often. Moreover, parties are useful as their name and label act as simple ideological cues to voters (Snyder & Ting, 2002). This cue will lose in value if the party changes its views frequently, making voters unsure of the party's ideological stance.

One reason why political actors nevertheless modify their policy profile is electoral defeat (Enelow & Hinich, 1984; Janda et al., 1995; Mair, Müller, & Plasser, 2004; Somer-Topcu, 2009). Losing voter approval signals party failure, and parties tend to take these signals seriously. While parties differ in the extent to which they are vote-seeking, they all have at least some incentive to gain a large share of the vote. After all, winning votes is an "instrumental goal" of parties that aim to implement their preferred policies or to enjoy the perks that come with holding office (Müller & Strøm, 1999; Strøm, 1990). Electoral defeat puts these goals at risk: It lowers the chances of being included in the next government, reduces a party's bargaining power, and potentially endangers its representation in parliament and thus ultimately possibly its survival. It may be that parties pursuing niche strategies are more interested than other parties in policy goals. If they are only interested in policy, we should not find any effect of vote gains or losses on their choice of strategy. However, parties pursuing a niche strategy will arguably understand the importance of gaining votes for realizing policy goals.

In general, parties may react to a downward trend in their electoral fortunes by becoming more willing to engage in programmatic modification. A possible scenario may be that the leadership is replaced after electoral defeat, and this new faction in power may find it relatively easy to change the party's policy program (Budge et al., 2010). A party with a niche strategy may be prompted to adapt its program to that of its competitors if it has been experiencing declining electoral success. Similarly, a party with an electorally unsuccessful mainstream strategy might be tempted to experiment by turning toward a potentially lucrative programmatic niche.

In contrast, vote gains can be taken to indicate popular satisfaction with a party. There is thus no need to change the current profile (Budge et al., 2010; Somer-Topcu, 2009). Adapting this finding to the transition between niche and mainstream party profiles, we expect that vote gains decrease the likelihood that parties shift from mainstream to niche profiles and vice versa. We can thus formulate the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 1 (General electoral change)*: Vote losses in the previous election increase the likelihood of transitions between niche and mainstream profiles at the next election, while vote gains increase the likelihood of stability between elections.

This hypothesis refers to programmatic change in terms of salience, not position. This means that a party can switch between profiles without necessarily altering its left–right position. As a result, our hypothesis does not address whether and how parties alter their policy position in response to electoral gains and losses. Our argument is therefore not directly related to that of Adams et al. (2006), who find that niche parties are electorally punished if they shift to the center of the policy space. Our hypotheses further differ from those in Adams et al. as we examine electoral defeat as a cause for programmatic change rather than as a consequence of it (see also, Harmel, Heo, Tan, & Janda, 1995; Harmel & Janda, 1994; Somer-Topcu, 2009).

Constraints on Vote-Seeking Incentives: Size, Age, and Government Participation

Not all parties will react to their past electoral results in the same way. As organizations, some parties are more conservative and risk-averse than others. Specifically, we argue that the extent to which parties are willing to

change their niche or mainstream profiles will depend on party size, party age, and government participation.

Smaller parties should be more likely to change their salience profiles than their larger competitors. For one, electoral losses are a greater, more existential threat for small parties. If a party has 35% of the vote, losing a few percentage points is unfortunate and unsatisfactory; if a party has 8%, losing a few percentage points could mean failure to enter parliament and a decline into insignificance. Moreover, small parties are more flexible than large ones. As "catch-all" parties (Kirchheimer, 1966), large parties represent a broader group of supporters, activists, and donors. To maintain their electoral success, party policy programs have to satisfy a wide range of interests. This requirement rules out the potential focus on policy niches out of vote-seeking incentives. In contrast, small parties may be more flexible in switching from and to a niche profile. Finally, smaller parties generally have fewer resources and receive less media attention (Greene, 2002; Meguid, 2005). Shifting to a niche profile—and back again—may be more attractive for such parties as focusing on an otherwise ignored topic could generate media coverage, especially if this issue is controversial and cross cuts existing party alignments (Wagner, 2011b). Larger parties are thus less likely to take on a niche party profile in reaction to electoral defeat. Therefore, we suggest the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 2 (Party size constraint)*: The smaller the party, the greater the impact of electoral results on decisions to change between niche and mainstream profiles.

Second, changes in party salience profiles may be easier for younger than for older parties. As argued by Marks and Wilson (2000), parties are "historically rooted organizations" with "highly distinct and durable identities" (p. 434). The agenda-setting literature has also shown that the issue emphases of individual parties are prone to inertia and historically determined (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). The constraints of past policy profiles will be stronger for parties that have been in existence for a long time. We therefore expect that parties that enter political competition at a later stage are more likely to change their program following electoral defeat than established parties. Yet, while emerging parties may alternate their strategies relatively easily, such changes will become less likely as they age and themselves become identified with their previously pursued strategies. We thus expect that the flexibility of "late-coming" parties diminishes with their age. In sum, we get,

Hypothesis 3a (Established party constraint): Established parties are less likely to change their niche and mainstream profiles in response to electoral incentives than parties that enter competition at a later stage.

Hypothesis 3b (Party age constraint): The older parties that enter competition at a later stage become, the less likely they are to change their niche and mainstream profiles in response to electoral incentives.

Finally, opposition parties are less risk-averse and more ideologically flexible than government parties (van Spanje, 2010; Walgrave & Nuytemans, 2009). Government parties face greater programmatic constraints than opposition parties. They have to address a wider range of political issues as they have to take positions on issues currently on the national agenda (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). Moreover, government parties will find it more difficult to change their policy profile radically as they will face greater expectations to implement such promises relatively quickly (van Spanje, 2010). In contrast, opposition parties will be less constrained by their track record and their role in government, enabling them to be more innovative in their policy profiles (Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994; Rose & Mackie, 1983). We can therefore formulate a final hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 (Government participation constraint): Electoral incentives have a greater impact on decisions to change between niche and mainstream profiles for opposition than for government parties.

Data and Measurement

To code the salience profiles of political parties into niche and mainstream categories, we need information about the different topics and issues parties address. We use salience data provided by the CMP (Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, & Tanenbaum, 2001; Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, Budge, & McDonald, 2006), which has hand-coded election manifestos across a wide range of democracies and provides researchers with the broadest coverage of party profiles available. The CMP coded each party manifesto by assigning each "quasi-sentence" to one of 56 categories. Here, we aggregate these issues into nine overarching subject areas. One of these contains all economic topics; the other eight are foreign policy, defense, interior, justice, education, agriculture, environment, and social affairs. These nine areas were chosen following the dimensions identified by Bäck, Debus, and Dumont (2011), who define each issue area so that it represents a typical jurisdiction of a

government ministry. For the precise assignment of CMP categories to the nine issue areas, see the supporting information.[1]

To then code salience profiles into a binary niche/mainstream measure, we adopt the approach described by Wagner (2011a).[2] A party needs to fulfill three criteria to be coded as having a niche profile. First, it needs to emphasize one or more of the eight noneconomic policy areas compared with the average emphasis of rival parties, weighted by party size (measured as vote share). The cutoff point is the weighted mean plus one weighted standard deviation. Second, the policy area needs to be emphasized by the party in general terms. We choose as our cutoff point that the issue needs to take up at least 10% of the party's manifesto. Finally, following Meguid (2005, 2008), parties also need to de-emphasize economic policy to count as having a niche profile. This means that we disregard the possibility that parties that focus exclusively on economic policy can also be classed as niche parties, but we believe it is empirically justified to follow Meguid's approach here given the centrality of economic policy to political debate in most (if not all) established democracies. A party is not truly a niche party if it addresses the central political conflict structuring most party systems. We code this as fulfilled if the party's salience is one weighted standard deviation below the weighted mean salience of economic policy.[3] Parties that fulfill all three conditions are coded as having a niche profile; all other parties are coded as following a mainstream strategy.

Of all 1,528 party manifestos we include in our analysis, 254 (or around 16%) are classed as "niche." These divide up among party families in predictable ways. Thus, 42% of Green, 33% of Agrarian, 26% of Nationalist, and 22% of ethnic-regionalist party family manifestos are coded as "niche," but only 12% of Conservative, 16% of Social Democratic and Communist, and 17% of Liberal party family manifestos. More details on the coding approach are provided on the authors' websites.[4]

The main independent variables are vote change, party size, party age, and government participation. *Vote change* is measured as the difference in the party's parliamentary vote share between the general elections at $t-1$ and $t-2$. Positive values mean the party increased its vote share in the last election, negative values mean it lost. *Party size* is measured as the vote share of the party at $t-1$. All electoral results are provided in the CMP data set. *Party age* is measured as the number of years since the party's first inclusion in the CMP data set. We argue that party age only has an effect for late entries to the party system; *Latecomer* is a binary variable indicating whether a party entered electoral competition more than 10 years after the first election coded by the CMP (1) or not (0). Finally, *Government participation* is 1 if the party was in government between the elections at $t-1$ and t, and 0 if not. This

information is from the Parlgov database (Döring & Manow, 2010), with information for Israel added manually using the same coding approach.[5]

In the models, we control for additional variables that may affect a party's likelihood of following a niche or mainstream strategy. We note that serial correlation may affect our estimates (Beck & Katz, 1995, 1996). The transition model we use (described below) already takes a party's profile at $t-1$ into account. In addition, we also use the *Party profile at $t-2$* as a control variable. The variable captures the inherent stability of party strategies. Using a party strategy at $t-2$ increases the likelihood that it applies the same strategy at time t, irrespective of its profile at $t-1$.[6]

In addition to its moderating effect on vote changes, *Party size* may have a direct effect on the likelihood to choose mainstream or niche strategies. Large parties are more likely to be mainstream parties (Meguid, 2005, 2008; Wagner, 2011a) and are also more likely to stick to that strategy. We thus control for party size in all models.

Niche party strategies may also have become more attractive in recent decades. Partisan alignment is declining (Franklin, Mackie, & Valen, 1992) and noneconomic dimensions may be increasing in importance (Inglehart, 1997; Kitschelt, 1994, 1995; Kriesi et al., 2008). This means that parties may be increasingly looking for electoral niches. We control for such a time effect using *decade dummies*.[7]

Our full sample consists of the 25 countries in the original CMP data set. We exclude the United States as it has always been a two-party system, so niche parties by definition cannot have existed there. We also exclude Switzerland (as there has been no alternation in government since 1959) and Turkey (as we focus on stable democracies).[8] We need information for parties from at least three elections to run our model (see below). This means that any parties that have not run (or, more precisely, been included in the CMP data set) in three consecutive elections are excluded. This leaves us with a total number of 1,528 observations for 194 parties in 22 countries.[9]

Model

As we are interested in factors that affect the probability of party profile changes between $t-1$ and t, the most appropriate model is a transition model (Jackman, 2000). The transition model is a modified logistic regression model in which the effects of the covariates on the dependent variable (here: party profile at time t) are conditional on a party's previous profile at time $t-1$. Put simply, a transition model is a logistic regression model where the estimate for each coefficient depends on the level of the dependent variable at $t-1$. This is implemented by interacting each coefficient with the binary

lagged dependent variable. The advantage of transition models is that they estimate the probability that parties adapt their strategies from mainstream to niche and vice versa (and, as a consequence, the probabilities of sticking to the strategy chosen at $t − 1$) *without* assuming a uniform transition process. A variable may therefore affect mainstream-to-niche changes but not have any significant effect on niche-to-mainstream transitions. As our empirical results presented below suggest, this flexibility is useful to identify empirical patterns in the different transition processes.

Our transition model estimates the probability that a party has a niche profile at time t, depending on its profile at time $t − 1$. Written as a formula, we get

$$\text{logit}[\Pr(y_{it} = 1 \mid y_{i(t-1)})] = y_{i(t-1)} \cdot \boldsymbol{a}\boldsymbol{x} + \boldsymbol{b}\boldsymbol{x},$$

where y_{it} indicates whether party i has a niche profile at time t. Note that the effects of the covariates $\boldsymbol{x}$, indicated by $\boldsymbol{a}$ and $\boldsymbol{b}$, are conditional on the party profile at time $t − 1$. The first part of the regression equation (i.e., $y_{i(t-1)}\boldsymbol{a}\boldsymbol{x}$) provides us with the "stability probability" for niche parties at $t − 1$, that is, $\Pr(y_{it} = 1 \mid y_{i(t-1)} = 1)$. The transition probability of changes from a niche to a mainstream party strategy is then 1 minus the stability probability (as the transition probability and the stability probability must sum to 1). The second part of the regression equation (i.e., $\boldsymbol{b}\boldsymbol{x}$) displays the transition probability of changing from a mainstream profile at $t − 1$ to a niche profile at t.

The data structure is best described as hierarchical because parties are nested in countries. We address potential country-level heterogeneity using standard errors clustered by country.[10] We control for serial correlation by adding a party's chosen strategy at $t − 2$ as an independent variable (Beck & Katz, 1995, 1996).

Results

The existing literature has treated being a niche party as a fixed characteristic, but our results show that parties in fact frequently switch between niche and mainstream profiles. Table 1 presents party profiles at time t in the columns and at time $t − 1$ in the rows; row percentages are also shown. As we can see, transitions are not rare occurrences. Of the 259 niche parties at $t − 1$, 68% switch to a mainstream profile at t. Conversely, 13.5% of the mainstream parties at time $t − 1$ become niche parties at t. In other words, many niche parties become mainstream parties, while transitions from mainstream to niche are far less frequent. In absolute numbers, however, both transitions occur equally often, with around 170 transitions for each $t − 1$ party profile.

Table 1. Change in Niche and Mainstream Strategies.

|	Mainstream party (t)	Niche party (t)	Total
Mainstream party ($t − 1$)	1,098 (86.5%)	171 (13.5%)	1,269
Niche party ($t − 1$)	176 (68.0%)	83 (32.0%)	259
Total	1,274	254	1,528

Reported percentages are row percentages.

We now turn to explaining these changes in party profile. Before discussing the vote-seeking incentives for profile changes in greater detail, we briefly summarize other structural attributes that affect the choice of salience profile. First, the results of the transition models (included in the appendix) indicate that profiles are inherently stable. Parties are more likely to have a profile at t that they already had at time $t − 2$. Second, larger parties are less likely to switch to a niche from a mainstream profile. However, party size does not directly affect changes from niche to mainstream profile. Finally, we do not find strong time effects. The decade dummies show that parties were most likely to have niche profile in the 1980s, though almost all these indicator variables are not significant.[11]

How do vote-seeking strategic incentives affect changes in party profiles? We begin by presenting the results of niche-to-mainstream transitions. The key finding is that for this type of transition all hypothesized effects are substantively large and statistically significant. We then turn to mainstream-to-niche transitions; there, our hypotheses find no confirmation in the data, and we discuss possible reasons why the two transition types may differ.

Figure 1 summarizes the empirical results for niche-to-mainstream transitions of the four hypotheses stated above. It shows the predicted effect of electoral defeat on the probability of switching from a niche to a mainstream profile; specifically, it presents the difference in the predicted transition probability between a party that maintained its vote share and one that lost 4%. Such a vote share loss is equal to a standard deviation change in vote share between $t − 2$ and $t − 1$. The horizontal bars indicate 95% confidence intervals around these point predictions. Beyond the direct effect of a loss in vote share, the figure also shows how this effect is conditional on party size, age, and government status. When calculating the predicted probabilities, the remaining covariates are set to their modes (categorical variables) and means (continuous variables).

For niche-to-mainstream profile changes, the results confirm the *General Electoral Change Hypothesis*: Parties switch between mainstream and niche
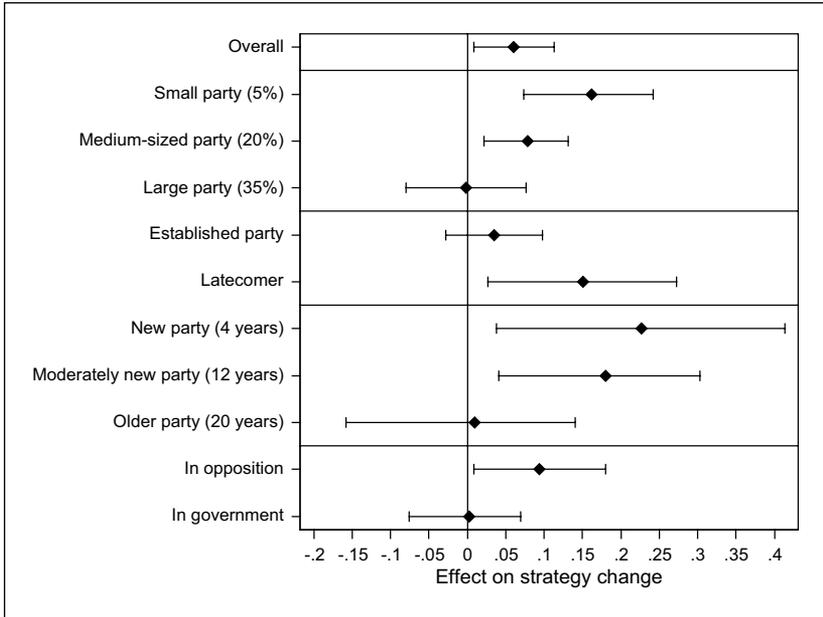
Figure 1. Effect of electoral defeat on niche-to-mainstream transitions.
Bars denote 95% confidence intervals. Effect of electoral defeat based on a vote loss of approximately 4% compared with vote stability. The overall estimated effect is based on Model 1, those for party size on Model 2, those for party entry and party age on Model 3, and those for government participation on Model 4. See appendix for detailed results.

profiles in reaction to electoral defeat. Specifically, when a party with a niche profile loses 4% in vote share, it is 6% more likely to switch to a mainstream profile. Our calculations of overall predicted probabilities of transitions show that when parties suffer even greater electoral defeats, the predicted consequences for their salience strategies are considerable. This is shown in detail in Figure 2, which presents the predicted probability of a niche-to-mainstream transition for different levels of electoral change between $t - 2$ and $t - 1$. Thus, three out of four niche parties with vote shares that decrease by 5% are predicted to change to a mainstream profile. If they gain 5%, only about 59% of all parties with a niche profile are predicted to switch to a mainstream profile.

Our second expectation is the *Party size constraint hypothesis*: Smaller parties should be more likely to switch from a niche to a mainstream profile in reaction to vote losses. Figure 1 presents evidence for parties that had 5%,
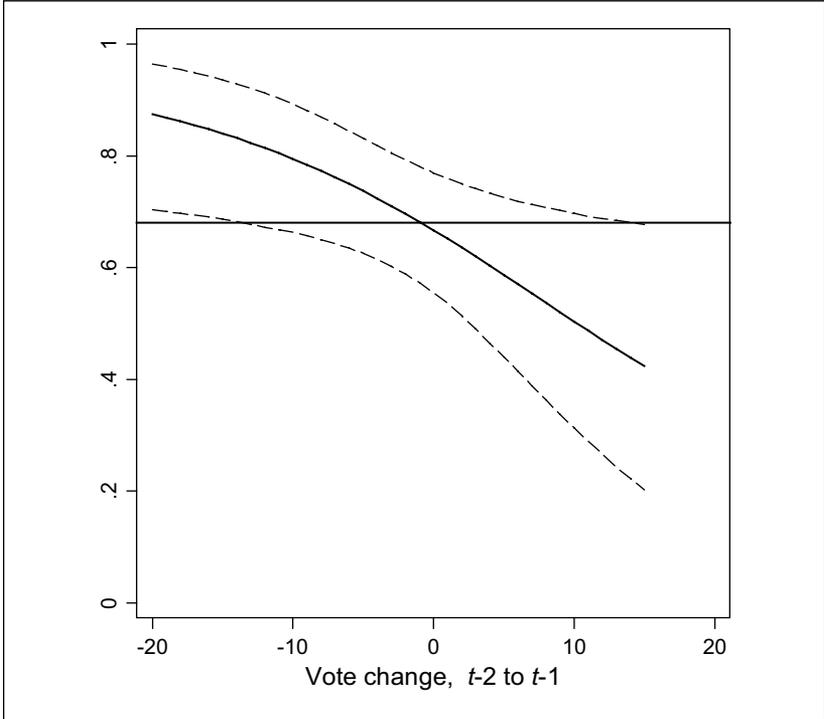
Figure 2. Predicted probability of niche-to-mainstream changes conditional on electoral success.
Dashed lines denote 95% confidence intervals. The horizontal line indicates the average rate of niche-to-mainstream transitions. Remaining covariates are set to their modes (categorical variables) and means (continuous variables). All estimates are based on Model 1 (see appendix).

20%, and 35% of the vote.[12] Confirming our expectations, the effect of a loss in vote share diminishes with party size. For small niche parties with 5% of the total vote share, an electoral loss of about 4% increases the likelihood of changing to a mainstream profile by about 16%. For medium-sized parties, the effect of a 4% electoral defeat increases the probability to change profiles by about 8%, while for a party with 35% of the vote, the effect of electoral loss is almost zero (and insignificant). In fact, our calculations indicate that the impact of vote loss becomes insignificant from a threshold of a 25% vote share. This is visible in Figure 3, which presents the marginal effect of a 4% reduction in vote share for parties sized between 0% and 50% of the vote.
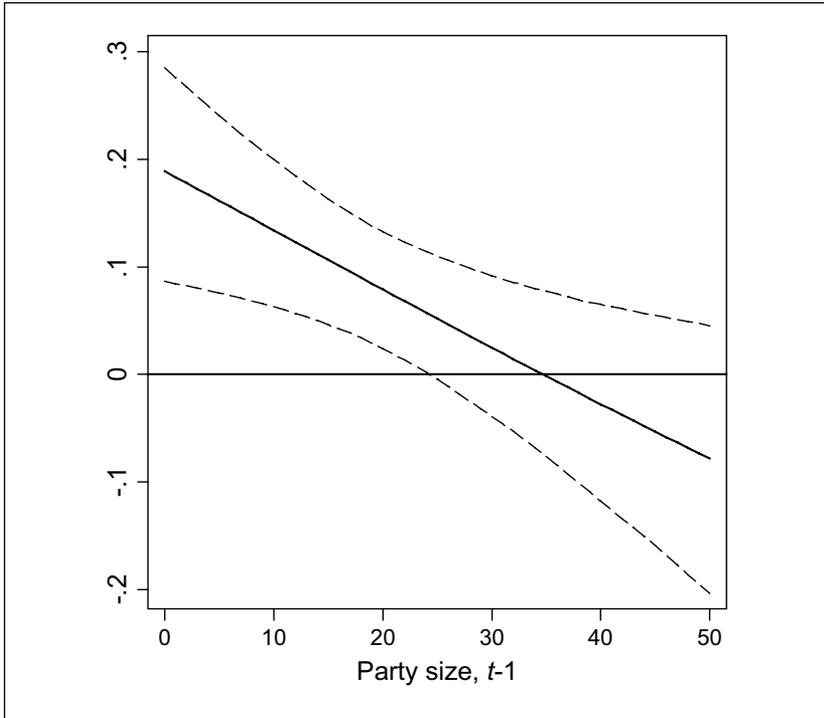
Figure 3. Marginal effect of electoral loss on the probability of niche-to-mainstream transitions conditional on party size.
Dashed lines denote 95% confidence intervals. Remaining covariates are set to their modes (categorical variables) and means (continuous variables). All estimates are based on Model 2 (see appendix).

We also find support for the *Established party constraint hypothesis*: Parties which enter party competition late are more likely to respond to vote loss by changing their programmatic profile. Figure 1 shows the effect of electoral defeat on the likelihood of changing from a niche to a mainstream profile for established parties and those that entered party competition late ("latecomers").[13] It is clearly visible that the effect is only significant for "late-coming" parties. For such parties, an electoral loss of roughly 4% increases the likelihood of changing profiles by about 15%. This is significantly larger than the effect for old, established parties (3%). The results thus support our argument that the effect of electoral results on the likelihood of changing party profiles is larger for late-coming parties.
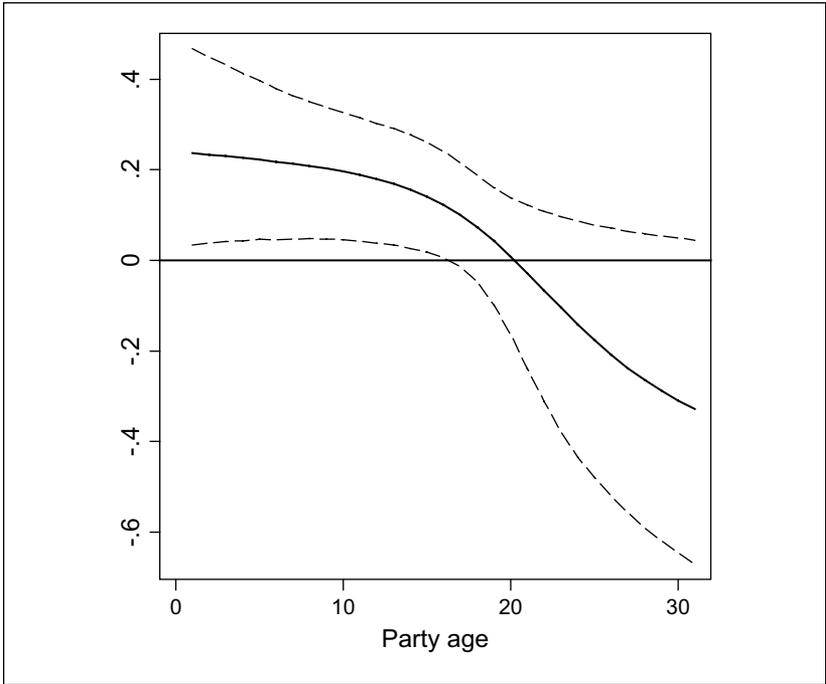
Figure 4. Marginal effect of electoral loss on the probability of niche-to-mainstream transitions conditional on party age.

Dashed lines denote 95% confidence intervals. Remaining covariates are set to their modes (categorical variables) and means (continuous variables). All estimates are based on Model 3 (see appendix).

Turning to the related *Party age constraint hypothesis*, Figure 1 also shows the change in the predicted transition probability of switching from a niche to a mainstream profile for late-coming parties at various party ages. Specifically, we present transition likelihoods for very new (4 years), moderately new (12 years), and relatively old late-coming parties (20 years).[14] The results clearly conform to our expectations. Young late-coming parties are most likely to react to electoral defeat. A vote loss of 4% increases the likelihood of changing to a mainstream profile by 23% points. With increasing party age, however, profile changes become less likely. For a 12-year-old party, a similar electoral defeat increases the likelihood of switching profiles by roughly 18%. We do not find a significant effect for parties older than 16 years (see Figure 4). The results

indicate that our hypothesis concerning the effects of party age is correct: The older the party gets, the higher its identification with its past profiles and thus, the greater its strategic inertia. As they age, parties that enter party competition late thus appear to become more like their old, established competitors.[15]

Finally, we present the results for the *Government participation constraint hypothesis*: Opposition parties are more likely to change their salience profile in reaction to past election results than government parties. The results shown in Figure 1 tend to support this expectation. For opposition parties, a vote loss of 4% significantly increases the likelihood of switching from a niche to a mainstream profile by about 9%. For government parties with a niche profile, however, the change in the predicted likelihood of transition is almost 0 and the effect of vote change is insignificant at conventional levels. The empirical results thus let us conclude that opposition parties react to electoral defeat while government parties stick to their policy profiles. However, the difference between the reactions of government and opposition parties is significant only at the .1 level.

In sum, the results presented in Figure 1 support the hypothesized effect of electoral defeat on the likelihood of changing from a niche to a mainstream profile. Parties with a niche profile are likely to react to electoral defeat by taking on a mainstream profile, but this effect diminishes with party size and age. There is also some evidence that the influence of vote loss is lower if the party is in government.

As noted above, we do not find a similar effect of electoral defeat on switching from mainstream to niche profiles. Although the direct effect of vote share change points in the expected direction, it is smaller than for transitions from a niche to a mainstream profile and does not reach statistical significance at conventional levels. Moreover, the negative finding for the effect of vote loss on mainstream-to-niche transitions is not due to the fact that mainstream parties tend to be larger, older, or are more often in government than niche parties. For example, even smaller parties with a mainstream profile are no more likely than larger parties to change to a niche profile if they lost votes in the previous election. The same holds for younger parties and those in opposition.

This means that parties with a mainstream profile do not react to electoral defeat by switching to a niche salience strategy. Green's (2011) discussion of the British Conservatives shows that although mainstream parties may change their program in response to their electoral performance, these changes are not sufficiently large to be coded as a swing to a niche profile. Such parties may see themselves as catch-all parties and aim to address a broad range of supporters, so switching to a niche profile may endanger their

raison d'être. This finds support in the effects of our control variables: Parties that switch to a niche profile are generally smaller and have in the past pursued such a profile already. It appears that becoming a niche competitor is not attractive to parties that are larger and have historically had mainstream strategies, and even electoral defeat is not enough to persuade such parties to narrow their issue appeals.

In addition, mainstream-to-niche transitions are arguably more complex than their niche-to-mainstream counterparts. This is because the decision whether to pursue a niche strategy is not just up to each party individually (see Meguid, 2005, 2008; Meyer & Miller, 2013; Wagner, 2011a). It is a characteristic that also depends on the actions of competitors: A party with a mainstream profile may attempt to become a niche party, but its success at doing so depends on the simultaneous issue emphases of its competitors. Thus, a party's effort to take on a niche profile may be foiled by the salience-related decisions of other political parties. This applies much less to niche-to-mainstream transitions, as all a party with a niche profile generally has to do to become mainstream is to turn toward economic issues or to reduce its emphasis on specific policy areas. The difficulty of explaining mainstream-to-niche transitions may therefore stem from the greater complexity of this kind of change in a party's salience profile.

Conclusion

One of the key shortcomings of the existing literature on niche parties is that niche and mainstream status are seen as fixed characteristics. This is an unreasonable assumption: Salience profiles can be changed, so it must be possible to switch between the two. Using the measurement approach suggested by Wagner (2011a), we show that transitions between party strategies are indeed relatively frequent. For instance, two thirds of parties with a niche profile at time $t - 1$ take on a mainstream profile at time t.

Electoral incentives help to explain these changes in salience profiles, just as they motivate positional shifts in party policy (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2004; Somer-Topcu, 2009). Put simply, recent election results influence the tendency for parties to take risky decisions. We find clear evidence that parties with a niche profile are more likely to switch to a mainstream profile if they recently lost votes and less likely to do so if they gained votes.

Yet, parties differ in how they respond to vote-seeking incentives to switch to a mainstream from a niche profile. Niche competitors are thus

more likely to change to a mainstream profile based on their past election results if they are small and young. There is also some evidence that parties in opposition are more likely to change in reaction to past defeat than government parties. While niche parties appear to respond to vote-seeking incentives to broaden their salience profile, mainstream parties fail to react to electoral defeat by narrowing their policy profile. This may be because being a niche competitor is simply not electorally appealing to large and organizationally inert catch-all parties who wish to address a broad base of supporters, but it may also reflect the fact that parties occasionally fail to take on a niche profile due to the salience actions of their competitors.

These findings have important implications for theories of party competition. First, niche and mainstream salience profiles are at least in part chosen as a result of the strategic incentives created by vote-seeking motivations. Put simply, strategic considerations underlie changes between mainstream and niche party profiles, just as they do when parties choose and alter their positions. This means that treating niche and mainstream as unchangeable characteristics ignores the strategic components of how parties compete by modifying issue salience.

Second, the results suggest that we have to take the dynamics of party competition seriously, particularly concerning changing issue emphasis. Salience-based models of issue competition are often static, arguing that parties emphasize issues which they "own" (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; but see Riker, 1986). While Meguid (2005, 2008) has argued that mainstream parties may react to the niche party threat by changing which issues they address, her theory is a one-shot game, only dealing with the mainstream parties' reaction. We have highlighted that parties constantly adapt their salience-based strategies, even if the probability of doing so decreases with party age.

Finally, this article has concentrated on parties' own decisions to change their niche or mainstream profiles, and electoral incentives have been shown to influence these decisions substantially. However, we also suggested that the actions of competitors may affect how successful parties are in pursuing their salience strategies, in particular if they want to take on a niche profile. Future work on explaining changes in niche and mainstream strategies should explore the role of such interactions between political parties. However, by recognizing the inherent dynamic nature of party strategies, we are already one step closer to understanding the place of niche and mainstream profiles in party competition.

Appendix

Estimates of Transition Models of a Party's Niche Profile at Time t.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	General electoral change		Party size constraint		Party age constraint		Government participation constraint	
	Niche (t − 1)	Main (t − 1)	Niche (t − 1)	Main (t − 1)	Niche (t − 1)	Main (t − 1)	Niche (t − 1)	Main (t − 1)
Vote change (t − 2 → t − 1)	0.069*** (0.030)	−0.007 (0.016)	0.220*** (0.067)	−0.026 (0.039)	−0.044 (0.046)	0.024 (0.036)	0.104** (0.047)	−0.050* (0.027)
Party size (t − 1)	−0.016 (0.012)	−0.018** (0.008)	−0.018 (0.013)	−0.018** (0.008)	−0.010 (0.012)	−0.015* (0.009)	−0.010 (0.013)	−0.021** (0.008)
Vote change × Party size			−0.006** (0.003)	0.001 (0.002)				
Party age					−0.045** (0.020)	−0.007 (0.006)		
Latecomer					−1.602* (0.902)	0.351 (0.486)		
Vote change × Party age					0.003 (0.002)	−0.001 (0.001)		
Vote change × Latecomer					0.915** (0.446)	−0.001 (0.119)		
Party age × Latecomer					0.033 (0.053)	−0.016 (0.022)		
Vote change × Party age × Latecomer					−0.045* (0.024)	−0.004 (0.005)		
In government (t − 1)							−0.493* (0.274)	0.153 (0.205)
Vote change × In government							−0.098 (0.071)	0.087* (0.050)
Niche party (t − 2)	0.579** (0.263)	0.845*** (0.207)	0.547** (0.266)	0.848*** (0.208)	0.570** (0.260)	0.848*** (0.208)	0.591** (0.255)	0.878*** (0.213)
1950s	0.210 (0.451)	−0.195 (0.197)	0.362 (0.446)	−0.200 (0.197)	−0.880 (0.734)	−0.265 (0.196)	0.286 (0.486)	−0.170 (0.196)
1960s	−0.330 (0.456)	−0.029 (0.248)	−0.361 (0.461)	−0.024 (0.248)	−1.027* (0.586)	−0.051 (0.238)	−0.282 (0.442)	0.011 (0.248)
1970s	−0.676 (0.446)	0.089 (0.193)	−0.724 (0.445)	0.093 (0.197)	−0.960* (0.515)	0.074 (0.184)	−0.656 (0.460)	0.126 (0.201)
1980s	reference		reference		reference		reference	
1990s	−0.559* (0.333)	−0.370** (0.176)	−0.598* (0.341)	−0.368** (0.176)	−0.375 (0.491)	−0.337* (0.181)	−0.578* (0.343)	−0.366*** (0.175)
2000s	−1.013 (0.774)	−0.129 (0.394)	−1.023 (0.783)	−0.124 (0.398)	−0.998 (0.801)	−0.064 (0.448)	−1.106 (0.783)	−0.103 (0.398)
Intercept	−0.410 (0.313)	−1.605*** (0.227)	−0.352 (0.315)	−1.613*** (0.228)	0.964 (0.680)	−1.520*** (0.258)	−0.335 (0.341)	−1.678*** (0.247)
Log likelihood	−639.9		−637.7		−629.3		−635.3	
Observations	1,528		1,528		1,528		1,528	

Dependent variable is a party's niche/mainstream strategy at time t (*niche strategy* = 1, *mainstream strategy* = 0). The effects of covariates are conditional on party profile at time t − 1. The baseline models are logistic regressions with standard errors clustered by country. Standard errors in parentheses.
*p < .1. **p < .05. ***p < .01.

Acknowledgments

Authors' Note

Both authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

Notes

1. See staatswissenschaft.univie.ac.at/mitarbeiterinnen/thomas-meyer or homepage. univie.ac.at/markus.wagner. It has been pointed out that Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data suffers from measurement error (Benoit, Laver, & Mikhaylov, 2009). To account for this, we use the uncertainty estimates provided by Benoit et al. (2009) to simulate 1,000 election manifestos per party. In each simulation, we apply our niche party measure as described above. Parties are classified as niche if they are coded as niche parties in at least 501 simulations. This modified niche party measure correlates highly with the measure used in this article. The two measures fail to match in only 4% of all cases (58/1,447, Spearman's rho = 0.85).

2. A binary classification into niche and mainstream strategies necessarily entails the loss of the detailed salience information provided by manifestos. This information can in fact be used to create a continuous measure that captures the degree to which a party pursues a niche strategy; we would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this. Based on this idea, we calculated a score for a party's difference from its rival parties on a continuum from "completely mainstream" to "completely niche." The resulting measure (which is described in more detail in the supporting information) correlates quite highly with the dichotomous measure used in this article (Spearman's rho = 0.51). With the exception of the hypothesized government participation constraint (Hypothesis 4), the results are robust to this modification (for more information on the measurement and model

specifications, see the supporting information on the authors' websites staatswissenschaft.univie.ac.at/mitarbeiterinnen/thomas-meyer or homepage.univie.ac.at/markus.wagner).

3. We also ran our analysis allowing parties to also be classed as "niche" if they emphasized economic policy more than rivals; the results do not differ meaningfully. The only exception is the party age hypothesis (Hypothesis 3), which is no longer confirmed.

4. See staatswissenschaft.univie.ac.at/mitarbeiterinnen/thomas-meyer or homepage.univie.ac.at/markus.wagner.

5. Any period in government at all results in the party being coded as having participated in government. Information on government participation of parties in Israel taken from the Knesset's detailed website (www.knesset.gov.il) in December 2010.

6. We are aware that the lagged dependent variable absorbs time-series variance (Plümper, Tröger, & Manow, 2005). However, we refrain from using alternative approaches to capture serial correlation (e.g., Prais-Winsten transformation) because we are interested in the substantial effect of party profile at $t - 2$ (and because the transition model described below explicitly uses party strategies at $t - 1$).

7. Mainstream parties may of course react to the entry of a niche party (at time $t - 2$) by emphasizing the niche party's issues (at $t - 1$). As a consequence, the niche party may lose electoral support (at $t - 1$) and react by switching to a mainstream profile (at time t). In other words, electoral defeat could merely be an intervening variable that captures the consequences of the mainstream parties' reactions to the niche party entry. To check whether our results are based on this scenario, we ran further models that included the changes in the mainstream parties' emphasis on niche party issues (between $t - 2$ and $t - 1$) as an independent variable. The results reported here are robust to these modifications.

8. Turkey is the only CMP country not continually listed as "Free" by Freedom House for the time period in which manifestos are coded (see www.freedomhouse.org).

9. The CMP data set covers mainly parliamentary parties. In addition, our statistical model requires data on programmatic profiles at three time points (elections). Therefore, very small and/or short-lived parties are excluded from the analysis. It would of course also be interesting to adapt our arguments to these parties, for example, to explain the success and failure of new party entry in the system.

10. The model choice reflects our primary interest in covariates that vary across countries, parties, *and* time. We therefore refrain from using hierarchical models that are better suited to test group-level effects and cross-level interactions. Furthermore, Arceneaux and Nickerson (2009) demonstrate that the estimates of models using clustered standard errors, random effects, and hierarchical modeling are almost identical when the number of clusters exceeds 20 (as in the case in our analysis).

11. The coding approach of the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) dates from the 1970s. It may therefore be the case that the policy concerns of newer parties

fit less well into the coding scheme. This may create a coding bias as these par-
ties' statements may be classed as "uncoded." We test the robustness of our
results by excluding all party manifestos from 2000 onward. This eliminates
roughly 10% of our sample. The results are generally robust. One exception is
the party age hypothesis: Although the size of the effect corresponds closely to
that reported in this article, the effects no longer reach statistical significance.
This may well be due to the restricted time period, which reduces the number of
"late-coming" parties.

12. These values are appropriate as 20% is approximately the mean party size in
    our sample, with a standard deviation of around 15%. As above, the remaining
    covariates are held constant at their modes (categorical variables) and their mean
    values (continuous variables).

13. As above, the remaining covariates are held constant at their means (continuous
    variables) and modes.

14. These values roughly correspond to the observed mean party age for latecomers
    (14 years) plus/minus one standard deviation (8 years). As above, the remaining
    variables are set to their mode or mean value.

15. Older parties are likely to think in longer time spans than younger ones. For an
    established party, vote losses in the last election may therefore, not be sufficient
    to make it change its strategy. Rather, an established party may only react to a
    pattern of vote losses in two or more elections. In this case, our findings would
    only be an artifact of the measurement of vote changes and differences between
    older and younger parties may not exist once we incorporate vote changes in the
    last two or three elections. To test this, we ran additional models using the cumu-
    lative vote change in the last two (or three) elections under the same strategy as
    an indicator for party strategy changes. Our results are robust to this alternative
    measurement approach.

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