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## Do leadership-dominated parties change more?

Gijs Schumacher <sup>a</sup> and Nathalie Giger<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

### ABSTRACT

It is often assumed that political parties have more fluid party platforms than in the past because internal veto players – like party activists – have lost the power to restrain the office-seeking party elite. Several case studies subscribe to this view. However, there is no systematic assessment of this relationship. Using new data this research note investigates this relationship and finds a clear positive effect of leadership domination on party platform change. With leadership domination increasing over time, our model predicts increasing fluidity in party platforms. This note provides a motivational and a numerical argument in favor of this hypothesis, considers alternative hypotheses and provides empirical evidence for the claim using two different datasets.

Parties are often portrayed as conservative organizations (Harmel and Janda 1994; Panebianco 1988) that resist change and adapt slowly (Walgrave and Nuytemans 2009). In the process of adaptation to a changing political environment, organizational structure facilitates programmatic change in parties. For example, the claim that many parties have become less ideologically distinct over the last decades and provide more fluid, catch-all party programs (Kirchheimer 1966) is often associated with an organizational transformation from mass party to an organization reliant on state funding with few – primarily powerless and apathetic – party members and an isolated leadership (Katz and Mair 1994; Scarrow 2002). A key assumption here is that organizational structure privileges the pursuit of some goals (e.g. policy, vote or office) over other goals. For example, Müller and Strøm (1999, 17) claim that the “more leaders decentralize policy decision making, the more policy oriented the party is likely to become at the expense of office- and vote-seeking”. To put it differently, the more organizational constraints on the party leadership, the more the party will be characterized by policy purity (Sanchez-Cuenca

**CONTACT** Gijs Schumacher  [g.schumacher@uva.nl](mailto:g.schumacher@uva.nl)

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2004; Warwick 2005; Pedersen 2012). Programmatic conservativeness of parties should vary with the degree to which leaders determine party policy.

There are two reasons why decentralization of power to activists and away from the party leadership should bring about stability in a party's platform. First, *the numerical argument*: decentralization produces more veto players in internal decision-making procedures which on average should lead to more policy stability (Tsebelis 2002, 25). We say "on average" because the influence of activists also depends on how the preferences of activists and members are distributed within the party. In some cases, leaders need to carefully navigate between well-organized intra-party factions, in other cases leaders have more leeway within the party (Ceron 2012; Greene and Haber 2014). Comparative cross-country party membership surveys demonstrate that members and activists often disagree with their party (van Haute and Carty 2012; Kölln and Polk 2016) but there is little evidence of systematic opinion biases of members and activists (Norris 1995; Scarrow and Gezgor 2010). Regardless of this, more activists in positions in which they can block the party leader means that there are more options to coalesce against their leader, and that leaders are motivated to take the positions of these activists into account. On average this produces more policy stability than when there are no or few veto players.

Second, *the motivational argument*: policy-motivated activists are believers (Panebianco 1988, 25–26), unlikely to change policy preferences and more likely to voice dissent rather than choose exit in case of dissatisfaction with the party. By consequence, if activists are empowered they can form a stable coalition that could guarantee a long-term commitment to a specific, non-centrist party platform (Aldrich 1983). This could mean that activists veto any deviation from the party's principles (purity) or that they seek to draw policy as close as possible to their preferences (influence) (Sanchez-Cuenca 2004; Warwick 2005; Pedersen 2012b). Under the policy purity model, activists block the process of party programmatic change, under the policy influence model they "merely" restrain it. Party leaders may take and stick to the position of party activists, not only to secure their position as party leader, but also to buy the labor of these activists for campaign time (Aldrich 1983; Schofield and Sened 2005; Ceron 2012). Many case studies provide examples of this (e.g. ; Wolinetz 1977; Share 1988; van Praag 1990; Pontusson 1992; Seyd 1999). Without activist involvement party leaders are free to follow public opinion shifts, rival party shifts or encroach on potential coalition parties in pursuit of office-seeking and vote-seeking goals (for an overview of the party shifts literature see Adams 2012).

How do we conceptualize de-(centralization) of power in parties? We often discuss party organization in terms of horizontal integration – the size of the membership base and the organizational differentiation – and vertical integration, that is the degree of freedom of choice for the party leader or party

leadership (Panebianco 1988).<sup>1</sup> In some parties, leaders dominate all decision-making on issues such as candidate selection, platform construction, goal definition because the rules proscribe this, or because of the informal power the leader holds. In other parties, the rank-and-file, mid-level activists, trade unions or other potential veto players block the leadership or even dominate party policy themselves. Parties can be positioned on a continuous scale with on one end parties in which activists dictate party policy (such as policy formulation, candidate selection and organizational decisions), and on the other end parties in which leaders dictate party policy (Schumacher, de Vries, and Vis 2013). Clearly, many parties fall in the middle of this so-called leadership domination scale as they share at least some responsibilities for party policy. The scale is measured by means of expert judgments on the influence of activists and leaders (see Schumacher and Giger (2017) for an extended discussion). This way both formal and informal rules regarding the distribution of authority within a party can be taken into account. This is relevant, because formal decentralization – e.g. when the responsibility to select the party leader is shifted from conference delegates to party members – actually strengthens the position of the leader vis-à-vis the party (Katz and Mair 1994; Scarrow 2002; Schumacher and Giger 2017) and further reinforces the media attention for party leaders and the trend toward presidentialization (Poguntke and Webb 2005). Although there is an increase in leadership domination in parties (the iron law of oligarchy, see also Schumacher and Giger 2017), parties change slowly, and there is still large variation between parties in terms of the distribution of power within the party (Pedersen 2010; Schumacher and Giger 2017).

In sum, *we hypothesize that the more a party is dominated by its leadership vis-à-vis its activists the more change one can observe in a party's platform.* To our knowledge systematic analyses of the effect of leadership domination on the stability of party platforms are rare. Only Meyer (2013) relates mass organizational strength to absolute changes on a left–right scale. Schumacher, de Vries, and Vis (2013) also study the effects of leadership domination, but analyze how this moderates party's responsiveness to different sub-constituencies. They leave the question untouched whether leadership domination explains the level of change of political parties. The aforementioned case studies describe in detail the workings of social democratic or socialist parties. By consequence there is a danger of either overestimating or underestimating the effect of party organization for the whole population of parties. In the remainder of this note, we test our core hypothesis, and evaluate its robustness. The innovation of this study lays its more detailed approach to measure policy change and the broad scope of parties it covers.

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<sup>1</sup>We use the terms party leadership or party leader interchangeably. We acknowledge that some parties are better described as having a leadership, others as having a leader.

## Data and methods

*Party platform change:* A party's program is expressed in election manifestos, but also in a party's legislative behavior, leader speeches and coalition negotiations. We use two different datasets to capture this, one measures change by means of content analysis of election manifestos (the Manifesto Corpus (Lehmann 2015)) the other provides a more general<sup>2</sup> measure of change using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Hooghe et al. 2010). Our analysis of expert surveys comprises 14 countries, 88 parties in the period 2006–2010.<sup>3</sup> The analysis of election manifestos includes 6 more countries, a total of 120 parties in the period 1990–2008.<sup>4</sup> The difference in the number of countries emerges because the expert survey was fielded in EU countries only. Time is limited due to the availability of the leadership domination variable (election manifestos) and availability of data on issues (CHES).

We operationalize party platform change as a count of the amount of issues on which a party changed. The CHES has asked experts in 2006 and 2010 to indicate for 10 issues where parties stand on the issue and how important they find the issue (see Table A1 for all issues). We use *t*-tests to evaluate whether the means of the individual expert judgments on each issue in 2010 are significantly different from the 2006 means. We coded significant changes as 1 and subsequently add these changes, creating a variable that counts the number of changes in position and salience. The Manifesto Corpus data provide a summary of attention to 56 different policy issues within an electoral manifesto (Lehmann 2015). Following Schumacher et al. (2015), we aggregate the 56 issues into 19 more general scales (see Table A2) which denote either a position on an issue (e.g. pro-welfare vs. anti-welfare) or attention to an issue (e.g. environmental protection).<sup>5</sup> Again, we calculate whether a party's score on each of these 19 scales differs significantly in one election manifesto compared to the election manifesto in the previous election. For this we use estimates of the error in each coded position (Benoit, Laver, and Mikhaylov 2009). Significant changes are coded as 1, and we sum all the changes per manifesto. Table A1 provides descriptive statistics of these variables (see Figure A1 for mean values per country and per party family).

Most of the literature on party platform change uses change on the left–right dimension. This underestimates change: it excludes non-left–right issues on which parties can change. Also, a party may stick to its overall

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<sup>2</sup>With “general” we mean that experts take into account election programs, legislative behavior, campaign communication and historical party positions when determining a party's position (Hooghe et al. 2010). A change in platform using expert surveys thus indicates a change in several arenas rather than just election programs.

<sup>3</sup>Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Germany, Austria, the UK and Ireland.

<sup>4</sup>In addition to the countries mentioned in footnote 1, this analysis also includes Luxembourg, Norway, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup>The findings are robust to different classifications of the issues, for example see Table A4 in the appendix.

left–right position but changes position on the underlying issues that make up the left–right position. When a left-wing party, for example, shifts to the center on welfare and to the left on labor market flexibility, the net result is that the party stays as left-wing as it was (Schumacher et al. 2015), despite shifting on two issues. Our measure takes this into account and indicates how radical a party has changed its profile on a wide range of issues.

*Leadership domination:* to evaluate the balance of power between leaders and activists, we follow the operationalization as explained in detail in Schumacher and Giger (2017). They use two expert surveys (Laver and Hunt 1992; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012). Both ask experts to evaluate (1) how much the party leadership determines party policy and (2) how much party activists determine party policy. The first expert survey (Laver and Hunt 1992) applies a 20-point scale, the second a 7-point scale (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012). After re-scaling these question on the same interval (0–1), Schumacher and Giger (2017) subtract question 2 from question 1 providing a scale indicating pure activist-domination (–1) and pure leadership domination (+1).<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 shows the distribution of this variable.<sup>7</sup> It demonstrates that most parties have a high degree of leadership domination. Few parties are close to the activist-domination end of the scale. For the analysis of election manifestos, we take the Laver and Hunt data to construct the leadership domination score for parties in the 1990s and the Rohrschneider and Whitefield data for parties in the 2000s. For the analysis of the expert surveys, we only use the Rohrschneider and Whitefield data, because we have no time points before 2000.<sup>8</sup>

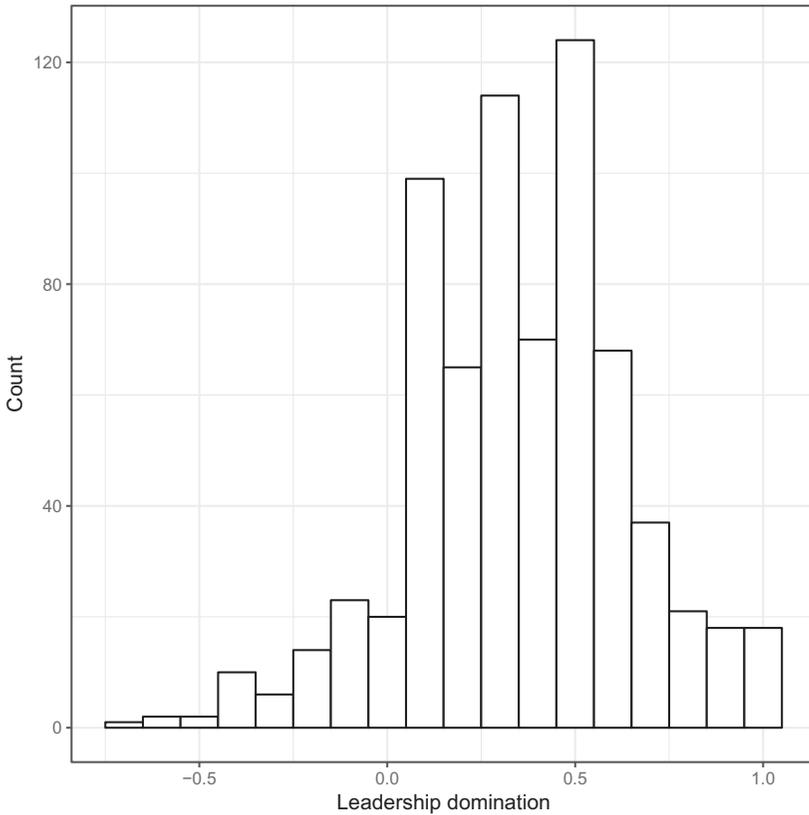
*Controls:* The literature points to other incentives why parties change their position (for an overview see Adams 2012). We therefore include a number of variables that are commonly used in models that explain absolute party position change. We control for opposition/government status because systematic differences have been reported between opposition and government parties' manifestos (Dolezal et al. 2016). We control for change in a party's seat share because losing elections motivates party change (Budge 1994). To control for party size we include a party's current seat share. The inclusion of a party's seat share and the change in a party's seat share does not affect the results. Another factor commonly discussed in the literature is that parties adjust to shifts in public opinion. However, an operationalization of this

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<sup>6</sup>Note that Schumacher and Giger (2017) also have a third time-point using Kenneth Janda's data handbook (1980). However, that time-point does not include an evaluation of activist' influence in the party and is therefore not used in this paper.

<sup>7</sup>The correlation between leadership domination at the two time points is 0.62.

<sup>8</sup>Most observations of party platform change take place after the data for the leadership domination variable was collected (1990 for the Laver and Hunt data; 2008 for the Rohrschneider and Whitefield data). In a few cases, the data have been collected approximately at the same time. The largest time gap between collection of dependent and independent variables is about eight years. Since party organizations are seen as conservative organizations, the measure of leadership domination of a party is not likely to change much in a few years' time.



**Figure 1.** Histogram of balance of power between activists and leaders.

concepts rests on the assumption of a common political space and a defined (uniform) policy dimension on which voter and parties move. Also, the empirical evidence is far from univocal and it seems that these adjustments are conditional on party type and the direction of the shift. In this paper, we take a different approach and concentrate on the amount of change across 19 policy scales. In such a setting, very fine-grained information about public opinion would be necessary to measure adverse public opinion shifts as we would need to know the position of the electorate on each of the 19 dimensions and in addition over time – information that is not available for a comparative sample as ours. It remains theoretically unclear how shifts on a left–right dimension (for which data exists) should relate to policy changes in our 19 policy scales. Given these theoretical reserves and the empirical difficulty to estimate public opinion shifts, we refrain from including such a control in our models.

At the country level, we control for party system differences by including a measure for the effective number of parties (Armingeon et al. 2016).

*Method of estimation:* Our dependent variables are count variables, for which a Poisson regression is a suitable solution. However, the change in the election manifesto variable is overdispersed and thus we employ a negative binomial regression to deal with this. Also, the election manifesto data are clustered in countries and time points, thus we treat the data as time-series cross-sectional data using the `xtbreg` command in `stata`. The expert survey data only have one time-point (of change) thus we perform an ordinary Poisson regression. In addition, we estimate robust standard errors to account for the hierarchical nature of the data.

## Do leadership-dominated parties change more?

Table 1 presents the results of the effect of leadership domination on absolute party change on issues. On the left of Table 1, we report the results of the change in expert survey data. Leadership domination is strongly significant (IRR = 16.31).<sup>9</sup> If we take one step on the leadership domination scale, the probability that a party changes increases by a factor of 16.3. Party size is insignificantly related to party change, as well as the effective number of parties and the electoral performance variables. Following Schumacher et al. (2015), we find that government parties change more than opposition parties. On the right side of Table 1, we present the result of the change in manifesto variable. Again, we find a positive and significant effect for leadership domination. Hence, both analyses provide evidence for our hypothesis that more leadership-dominated parties change more. In this analysis we also find that party size is positively related to party change.

In Figure 2, we plot the predicted number of changes for different levels of leadership domination. Both slopes move upward, meaning that the more leadership-dominated a party the more change is predicted. On the left, the analysis of the expert survey data predicts that the most strongly leadership-dominated party (.87) changes on almost 2 issues, with the party scoring lowest on this dimension (.25) not changing. The difference is quite large, almost two times the standard deviation of the dependent variable. On the right, the analysis of the manifesto data predicts that parties on the low end of the scale change on approximately four issues. The most leadership-dominated parties change on seven issues. The difference between the two is approximately one standard deviation of the change in election manifesto variable.

Next, we split the dependent variable to position changes and salience changes, by taking only the changes in respectively the position items and the salience items in CHES. We only do this for the CHES data

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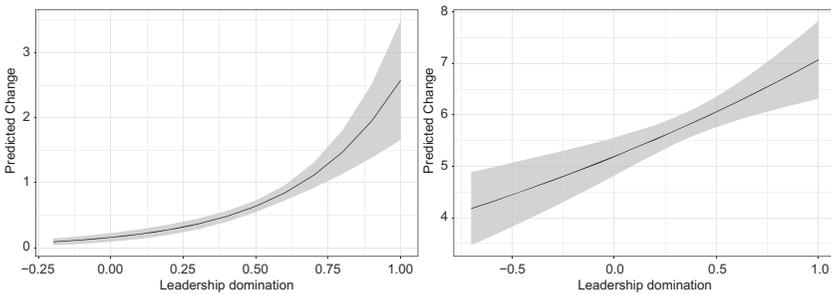
<sup>9</sup>Incidence ratios have an interpretation similar to odds ratios in logistic regression.

**Table 1.** Regression results of party platform change (issues).

	Change expert survey		Change in manifesto	
	IRR	SE (robust)	IRR	SE
Leadership domination	16.31*	15.77	1.39*	0.211
Effective no. of parties	1.01	0.065	1.01	0.024
Opposition/government	1.97*	0.704	1.06	0.070
Electoral losses/gains	0.096	0.392	1.14	0.452
Party size	0.793	0.864	2.10*	0.550
Constant	0.117*	0.074	4.68*	1.16
N	88		445	
Log likelihood	-86.43		-1174.96	
Wald chi	17.81		19.07	

Notes: All entries are incidence rate ratios. The first model is estimated as Poisson regression, the second as time-series.

\*  $p < .05$ .



**Figure 2.** Predicted change for different values of the balance of power (left = expert survey, right = election manifesto).

because there we have both salience and position for all issues. The results are depicted in Table 2. We find that leadership domination is a strong, positive and significant predictor (IRR = 33.66) for position change; it is a weaker predictor of salience change (6.42,  $p = .052$ ). In sum, position changes are much better predicted by variation in leadership domination than salience changes.

**Table 2.** Poisson regression analyses of position change and salience change in expert survey data.

	Position change		Salience change	
	IR	SE	IR	SE
Leadership domination	33.66*	36.87	6.42	7.37
Effective no. of parties	1.02	0.095	1.01	0.100
Opposition/government	1.39	0.580	2.39*	1.189
Electoral losses/gains	0.079	0.284	0.107	0.585
Party size	1.01	0.015	0.990	0.020
Constant	0.032*	0.026	0.109*	0.105
N	84		84	
Log likelihood	-51.65		-62.06	
Pseudo $R^2$	0.13		0.07	

\*  $p < .05$ .

The appendix discusses the robustness checks we ran. We replicate our findings using changes in left–right position (Table A1) as independent variable (CHES), with additional controls for unemployment rate and gdp growth (Table A4) and with a different construction of our dependent variable (Table A3). Also, we find no indication that party size (in terms of seats in parliament and in terms of membership numbers, Table A3) matters in our analysis (Table A2).

## Conclusion

Party organizations and the associated goals of office and policy moderate to which sub-constituencies parties are responsive (Lehrer 2012; Schumacher, de Vries, and Vis 2013), the degree to which parties emphasize issues they own (Wagner and Meyer 2014), and the outcomes of coalition bargaining (Sened 1996). This note demonstrates that – in addition to these earlier findings – the more leadership-dominated a party the more fluid the party's platform. This effect has been suggested by many case studies, but this is the first study to report a systematic relationship between leadership domination and the degree of party platform change measured beyond the left–right dimension. The fact that our finding applies to election manifestos and expert survey positions suggests that party organization affects party behavior in different arenas. Leadership-dominated parties should be – according to the note's results – more responsive to changes in the economy or the political context than parties with relatively strong activists.

Given that there is an increase toward more leadership domination (Schumacher and Giger 2017) parties are also expected to have increasingly more fluid party platforms. For models of representation this is a positive and a negative implication. On the positive side, one could argue that parties are becoming more responsive as party activists act as much less of an obstacle to party change. On the negative side, one could argue that with more fluid party platforms voters will increasingly fail to perceive the differences between parties. This in turn would lead to more voter apathy and reduce meaningful electoral choice.

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## Notes on contributors

**Gijs Schumacher** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. He has published on party organization, mass-elite linkages, party change, populist parties, social democratic parties, personality and welfare policies. His work has appeared in the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *Political Analysis*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Party Politics*, and *Political Psychology*, among others.

**Nathalie Giger** is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Geneva. She has published widely on representation, in particular on inequalities in party-mass linkages and party strategies, electoral behavior and electoral consequences of welfare policies. Her work has appeared in the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Political Studies* and the *European Journal of Political Research* among others.

## ORCID

Gijs Schumacher  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6503-4514>

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