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# Living in the Past or Living in the Future? Analyzing Parties' Platform Change In Between Elections, The Netherlands 1997–2014

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*Do parties change their platform in anticipation of electoral losses? Or do parties respond to experienced losses at the previous election? These questions relate to two mechanisms to align public opinion with party platforms: (1) rational anticipation, and (2) electoral performance. While extant work empirically tested, and found support for, the latter mechanism, the effect of rational anticipation has not been put to an empirical test yet. We contribute to the literature on party platform change by theorizing and assessing how party performance motivates parties to change their platform in-between elections. We built a new and unique dataset of >20,000 press releases issued by 15 Dutch national political parties that were in parliament between 1997 and 2014. Utilizing automated text analysis (topic modeling) to measure parties' platform change, we show that electoral defeat motivates party platform change in-between elections. In line with existing findings, we demonstrate that parties are backward-looking.*

**Keywords** political parties' strategies, electoral performance, anticipation of opinion polls, government-opposition dynamics, topic modeling

The literature on political representation identifies two key mechanisms to align public opinion and parties' electoral platforms. The first one is *electoral performance*, whereby *poor* electoral performance motivates parties to change their platform (Budge, 1994; Budge, Ezrow, & McDonald, 2010; Harmel, Heo, Tan, & Janda, 1995; Harmel & Janda, 1994; Somer-Topcu, 2009). The second mechanism is rational anticipation (Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995) or electoral prospects. Here, parties change their platform to align more closely to the electorate in anticipation of poor future electoral performance (Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson, 2002; Geer, 1996; Laver, 2005; Laver & Sergenti, 2012). While there is a burgeoning literature testing, and regularly finding support for, the first mechanism (for overviews see Adams, 2012; Fagerholm, 2015), the second mechanism—rational anticipation—has been more or less ignored by this literature. Consequently, we do not conclusively know whether

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parties are looking back to past electoral performance, as the first mechanism proposes, or whether they are looking forward and change their platform in anticipation of electoral performance, as the second mechanism, rational anticipation, proposes. Given that governing parties and opposition ones may have different incentives to change their platform (e.g., Schumacher, Van De Wardt, Vis, & Klitgaard, 2015), this difference should also be explored. In this article, we do exactly that by examining party platform change in between elections, taking into account the moderating effects of timing between elections and the effect of government participation.

To address these questions, we need data in between elections. Our data cover Dutch political parties between 1997 and 2014. We use the Netherlands because the high number of parties, the high level of electoral volatility, and the absence of fixed coalitions ensure much variation over time in who governs, and in parties' electoral performance. This makes the decision-making environment complex. So, if we find an effect here, we are likely to generalize this finding also to other—in many respects less complex—Western European party systems. We created a new data set of 21,773 press releases from 15 political parties. We analyze press releases rather than other sources of party platforms for three reasons. First, election manifestos are produced at the time of an election only, thereby failing to capture parties' reactions to environmental stimuli in between elections. The rational anticipation mechanism can thus not be tested with party manifesto data. Second, press releases are more independent (i.e., parties have more agency) from the legislative agenda and the media agenda compared to other sources that are available in between elections, such as legislative speeches, legislative voting behavior, or media reports about party positions (De Nooy & Kleinnijenhuis, 2013; Helbling & Tresch, 2011; Kriesi, 2008; Kriesi et al., 2006; Proksch & Slapin, 2015). Third, parties' press releases influence the media agenda (Asp, 1983; Brandenburg, 2002; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006) and thereby the salience of particular issues in the perception of voters (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw, 2004). Because issue salience is an important predictor of vote choice (Brandenburg, 2002; Green & Hobolt, 2008; Kleinnijenhuis & Ridder, 1998), parties use press releases strategically to manipulate voters' perception of what parties stand for. Therefore, press releases are a good source to analyze how parties respond to (prospective) electoral performance and government–opposition dynamics. We construct a dependent variable, labeled *party platform change*, which analyzes the changes in a party's attention to issues (i.e., the salience thereof) in their press releases. We use hierarchical topic modeling—an automated text analysis tool (Grimmer, 2010; Grimmer & Stewart, 2013)—to identify the topics of press releases.

We hypothesize that proximity to elections moderates the effects of past and future electoral performance. Past electoral performance should be the most relevant directly after an election, while information about future electoral performance should be the most relevant the closer is the next election. Our findings suggest that electoral defeat indeed motivates party platform change in between elections. However, we find such an effect only for opposition parties. And contrary to existing findings (Somer-Topcu, 2009), we find no indication that this effect weakens over time. Furthermore, our results demonstrate that electoral prospects do not influence party platform change. The findings are thus largely in line with the electoral performance mechanism and with a theory of political parties as slow responders (Harmel & Janda, 1994). Conversely, the findings contradict mechanism two, the theory of forward-looking parties that rationally anticipate losses. In line with our expectations, we also find a systematic difference between parties in government and in opposition, with government parties changing more on average (cf. Schumacher et al., 2015).

## **Do Parties Respond to Electoral Defeat or Rationally Anticipate Losses?**

Electoral defeat is often identified as “the mother of all change” (Harmel & Janda, 1994). Parties are typically uncertain about the preferences of the electorate. Still, what they are certain of is the number of seats they won or lost in the last national election. Electoral defeat signals that a party is on the “wrong side of public opinion,” and that it should thus change its platform (Budge, 1994; Budge et al., 2010; Harmel et al., 1995; Harmel & Janda, 1994; Somer-Topcu, 2009). There is some empirical support for the notion that parties change their platform after an electoral defeat (see the citations in the previous sentence) and some evidence against this finding (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2004; Schumacher, De Vries, & Vis, 2013). If parties change their election manifesto because of electoral defeat in the last national election, parties likely already start changing their platform over the course of the electoral cycle. Hence, we should find a similar effect on a party’s agenda in between two elections. But is the effect of past electoral performance stable in the period in between elections? Explaining changes in election manifestos, Somer-Topcu (2009) shows that the effect of past electoral performance is weaker the longer it has been since the last national election. Consequently, we consider it plausible that the pain of an electoral defeat is more likely to have an effect in the first year after the election than in, say, the fourth year after an election. The effect of electoral defeat should be strongest directly after the elections, and should weaken over time.

### ***Electoral Performance Hypothesis***

*H1:* The negative effect of past electoral performance weakens the longer it has been since the last national election.

According to the rational anticipation mechanism, conversely, parties rationally anticipate electoral losses and respond accordingly (Stimson et al., 1995). Parties then base their decision on whether to change their platform on electoral performance, captured by their standing in opinion polls. Polling agencies report opinion polls on voter preferences and thereby provide information on the popularity of the party itself and that of the other parties. Parties, pundits, and the media use these polls as if they contain real information on public opinion shifts (Daschmann, 2000; Geer, 1996; Van Der Meer, Armen Hakhverdian, & Aaldering, 2016) even though many polls are not based on representative samples, and shifts in seat shares are considered relevant even when they are insignificant. Party leaders of parties that do well in the polls have an incentive to stress their party’s success and to emphasize how well their strategy is working. Party leaders of parties that are under-performing in the polls, however, may consider this a motivation to change because this signals that the party’s platform is out of sync with public opinion (Erikson et al., 2002; Geer, 1996). By aligning their platform more closely to public opinion, a party aims to avoid electoral defeat. In several theoretical models, unsatisfactory polls motivate parties to incrementally adapt their platform until it yields satisfactory results (Bendor, Diermeier, Siegel, & Ting, 2011; Laver, 2005; Laver & Sergenti, 2012). However, this theoretical prediction has not yet been systematically tested. In addition to testing this rational anticipation mechanism empirically, we also theorize that also here it is plausible that timing in the electoral cycle matters. Polls are about a party’s future electoral performance (i.e., its electoral prospects). If the “future” is still years away, polling

information might not be very influential. If the “future” is in, say, four weeks, polling information is more relevant. In the latter case, so we hypothesize, parties are more likely to use such information (H2).

### ***Rational Anticipation Hypothesis***

*H2:* The negative effect of electoral prospects becomes stronger the closer to the next national election.

### **Do Government and Opposition Parties React Similarly to (Prospective) Electoral Performance?**

Are government parties that lost votes less motivated to change their platform than are opposition parties that lost votes? It is plausible that they are, because government parties have what they want (office), and their platform makes them an attractive coalition partner. At the same time, this also means that government parties have more to lose than do opposition parties. Consequently, Schumacher and colleagues (2015) argued that government parties are more likely to change their platform because they fear losing political power. This is a reasonable scenario, since government parties' electoral prospects are typically worse: It is a pervasive fact that parties in office lose between 1% and 3.15% of their seats (Nannestad & Paldam, 2002)—the *cost of governing*. Parties in coalition governments oftentimes have to deal with conflicting imperatives: voters want parties to stick to their policy pledges, but healthy coalition governance requires compromise—the so-called *coalition dilemma* (Sagarzazu & Klüver, 2015a). By consequence, voters perceive parties in a coalition government to be ideologically closer and as compromising their position, for which voters typically punish parties in such a government (Fortunato, 2017; Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, government parties have good reasons to clearly distinguish themselves from their coalition partner(s) (Sagarzazu & Klüver, 2015a). The latter is especially so because government parties that communicate a more extreme platform do better at the ballot booth (Bawn & Somer-Topcu, 2012). These findings imply that government parties face an incentive to change their platform to try and escape the cost of governing. Opposition parties, however, do not have the same incentive. Indeed, Schumacher and colleagues (2015) found that government parties change their election manifestos more than opposition parties. Again, we expect that this behavior also manifests itself in between elections (H3).

### ***Government Participation Hypothesis***

*H3:* Government parties are more likely to change their platform than opposition parties.

The preceding discussion indicates the interdependency between party performance in terms of votes and in terms of office. Yet, the literature on party platform change typically assumes that performance in one domain (votes or office) independently influences parties' decision to change their platform. However, parties need votes to be able to participate in a (coalition) government. At the same time, governing influences parties'

popularity. This suggests that there is some merit in exploring the mechanisms of electoral performance and rational anticipation separately for government and opposition parties in between elections. We do so by two three-way interactions: (a) between timing in the electoral cycle, government party, and electoral performance, and (b) between timing in the electoral cycle, government party, and electoral prospects.

**Data, Method, and Operationalization**

To investigate when parties change their platform in between elections, we built a new and unique data set of press releases issued by 15 Dutch national political parties that were in parliament between January 1997 and February 2014 (see Table 1) (Van Der Velden, Schumacher, & Vis, 2017). Press releases are an effective way for parties to convey their messages to a larger audience. They are relatively short messages, typically on one subject. In supplemental Appendix M we present three examples of a press release. Several studies on European countries have demonstrated that the press releases parties issue influence which issues are on the media’s agenda (Brandenburg, 2002; Grimmer, 2010; Hänggli, 2012; Hopmann, Elmelund-Præstekær, Albæk, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2012). To this end, parties have professionalized their communication strategies and “bombard journalists with messages on a daily basis” (Helfer & Van Aelst, 2016, p. 59). Still, only a limited amount of these press releases actually become news (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990; Haselmayer et al., 2017; Helfer & Van Aelst, 2016; Haselmayer, Wagner, & Meyer, 2017). Parties try to

**Table 1**  
 Overview of parties in our data set, their period in parliament, and—if applicable—in office

Party	In Parliament	In Government
50 Plus	2012–2014	
Christian Democrats (CDA)	1997–2014	2002–2012
Christian Union (CU)	2003–2014	2006–2010
Reformed Political League (GPV) <sup>a</sup>	1997–2003	
Reformatory Political Federation (RPF) <sup>a</sup>	1997–2003	
Progressive Liberals (D66)	1997–2014	1997–2002; 2003–2006
Green Left (GL)	1997–2014	
Liveable Netherlands (LN)	2002–2003	
List Pim Fortuyn (LPF)	2002–2006	2002–2003
Social Democrats (PvdA)	1997–2014	1997–2002; 2006–2010; 2012–2014
Animal Rights Party (PvdD)	2006–2014	
Freedom Party (PVV)	2006–2014	
Reformed Political Party (SGP)	1997–2014	
Socialist Party (SP)	1994–2014	
Conservative Liberals (VVD)	1997–2014	1997–2006; 2010–2014

*Note.* All parties that were not in office in 1997–2014 have never been in office.

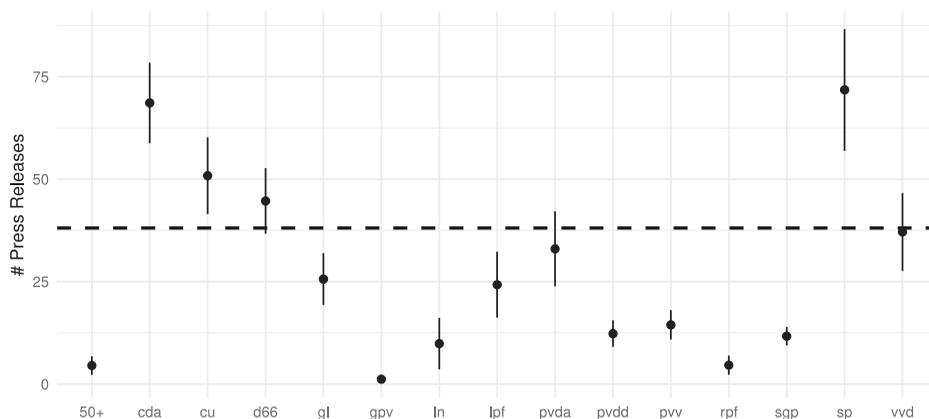
<sup>a</sup> As of 2003 merged into the Christian Union (CU).

influence to “make the cut” by sending press releases to their favored media outlets (Puglisi & Snyder, 2011), which of course is also what their electorate reads (Haselmayer et al., 2017).

The press releases were collected by *Nieuwsbank* ([www.nieuwsbank.nl](http://www.nieuwsbank.nl)). This Dutch press agency collects all press releases of organizations, companies, and governments published on the Internet since 1997 as long as the websites are accessible to their software. Their collection included >30,000 press releases issued by Dutch parties over this period. We first cleaned these documents (i.e., for each text document we removed all punctuation, white space, numbers, stop words, and sparse terms [which are words that occur less than 0.05% of the time]). Next, we removed those press releases with no substantive content, for instance those stating that parliamentarian X attended political meeting Y. This resulted in 21,773 press releases for our analysis.

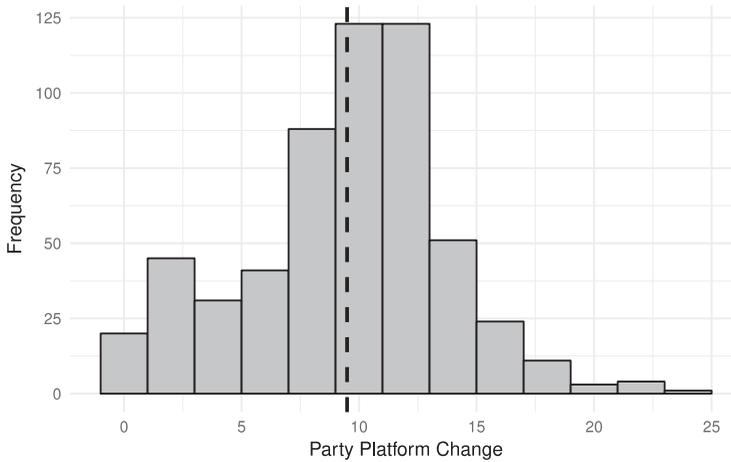
To have both a dynamic measure and sufficient variation in the press releases sent, we focus on the press releases a party sends per quarter. On average, parties sent 35 press releases per quarter, so on average one press release in three days. Figure 1 demonstrates that there is a lot of variation across and within parties (see Figure A1 in supplemental Appendix A for over-time variation within parties). The Christian Democrats (cda) and the Socialist Party (sp) sent on average the most press releases per quarter (respectively 68.6, and 66.4); this approximates issuing three press releases every four days on average. The GVP—a small and now merged Orthodox Protestant party—sent on average the fewest press releases per quarter (0.8).

Next, we created a document term matrix indicating the frequency of each lemma in each document.<sup>2</sup> Using this matrix, we identified a single topic for each press release using hierarchical topic modeling. This is an unsupervised, automated method to identify single topics in texts (Grimmer, 2010; Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). The assumption is that documents with high similarities in word frequencies are likely to be about the same topic. In addition, the hierarchical topic model uses information about which party sent the press release to assist in identifying the topic structure (for a technical exposition, see Grimmer, 2010). The researcher determines the number of topics to be identified. We ran



**Figure 1.** Descriptive information # press releases issued by parties per quarter.

*Notes:* The party abbreviations used in Figure 1 do respectively refer to the following parties: 50 Plus Party, Christian Democrats, Christian Union, Progressive Liberals, Greens, Reformed Political League, Livable Netherlands, List Pim Fortuyn, Social Democrats, Animal Party, Freedom Party, Reformed Political Federation, Reformed Political Party, Socialists, Conservative Liberals. Dashed line indicates average number of press releases.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of party platform change. *Notes:* The x-axis displays the values of our measure of party platform change and the y-axis shows the frequency of any of the values of party platform change. The dashed line indicates the mean score of party platform change.

several models setting the number of topics in a range from 15 to 50. On the basis of reading 50 of the documents per topic, 50 titles of the press releases, and the 20 best-word matches per topic, we selected the model that identified 25 topics (supplemental Appendix B describes this process in more detail). The 25-topic model balances specificity in terms of the issues the model describes (see Table B2 in supplemental Appendix B) and its unique topics. For instance, in some of the models the issue of the economy was dispersed over multiple issues (see supplemental Appendix B for our approach and the topics we identified). The correlation between the dependent variable based on models with a different number of topics and our measure based on the 25-topic model is very high (between 0.79 and 0.92; see Figure B1 in the supplemental Appendix).

The output of the hierarchical topic model is a matrix in which the cells indicate the number of press releases about topic *i* sent by a party in quarter *t*. We measured change in a party’s platform—our dependent variable—using Equation 1. For each topic *i* we take the difference in attention between quarter *t* and *t*−1. We weigh this difference by the sum of the attention to the topic in quarter *t* and *t*−1. *Party Platform Change* is the sum of all the weighted differences in issue attention (see Equation 1 and Figure 2). If this variable has a value of 0, the party did not change its platform. The average of this variable is 9.5. If this variable has a value of 14 and higher, the party changed its platform substantively (one standard deviation above the mean). Equation 1:

$$Party\ Platform\ Change = \sum_{i,k} \frac{|Topic_{i,t} - Topic_{i,t-1}|}{Topic_{i,t} + Topic_{i,t-1}} \tag{1}$$

Table 2 illustrates how we calculate our dependent variable using the Christian Democrats (CDA) in the second quarter of 2010 as an example. In 2010 Q1 and 2010 Q2, the CDA sent, respectively, 95 and 84 press releases. Our topic model assigned these press releases to a specific topic. For each topic, we divided the absolute number of press releases by the

**Table 2**  
Example of calculation of Party Platform Change for CDA, 2010 Q2

Topics	% Attention 2010 Q2	% Attention 2010 Q1	change	change/%Q2 + % Q1
Public Broadcast	0.02	0.00	0.02	1
Education	0.05	0.04	0.01	0.11
Employment Policy	0.08	0.04	0.04	0.33
Financial Policy	0.07	0.07	0.00	0
European Union	0.01	0.06	0.05	0.71
Defense	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.14
Financial Policy	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.33
Multiculturalism	0.00	0.02	0.02	1
Public Transport	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.33
European Union	0.06	0.06	0.00	0
Housing Policy	0.01	0.00	0.01	1
European Union	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.20
Economy	0.05	0.03	0.02	0.25
Local Politics	0.18	0.09	0.09	0.33
Education	0.05	0.04	0.01	0.11
International Politics	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.33
Environmental Policy	0.02	0.02	0.00	0
Agricultural Policy	0.00	0.03	0.03	1
Health Care	0.05	0.04	0.01	0.11
Economy	0.06	0.06	0.00	0
Economy	0.01	0.04	0.03	0.60
Youth Policy	0.05	0.07	0.02	0.17
Law & Order	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.14
Judiciary	0.07	0.05	0.02	0.17
Child Care	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.33
<i>Party Platform Change CDA 2010 Q2</i>				8.72

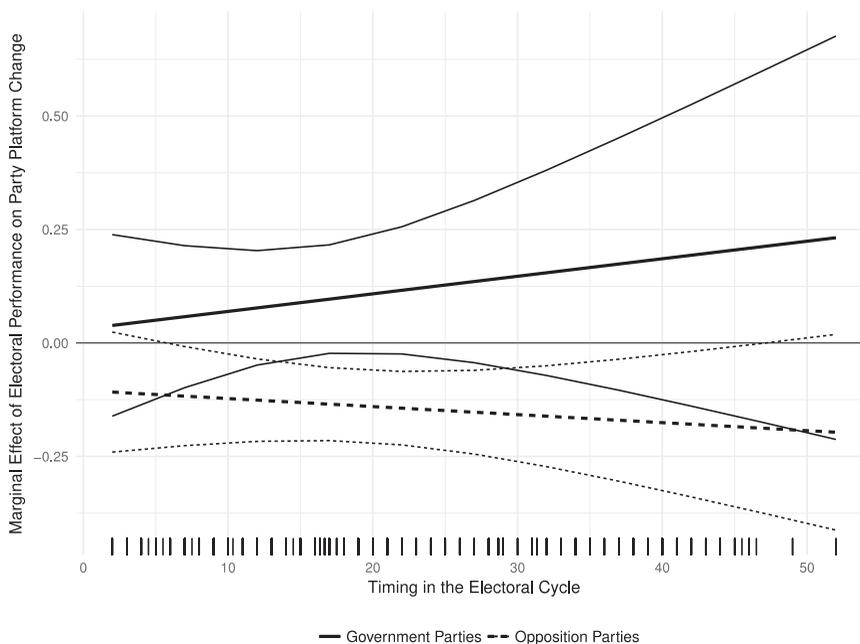
total number of press releases. This percentage indicates the relative attention of a party on each topic (columns 2 and 3 in Table 2). In the next step, we calculated the absolute change in attention per topic between two quarters (column 4 in Table 2). We divided this absolute change by the percentage of attention per topic in Q1 (column 5 in Table 2). To create an overall measure of platform change, we summed these changes; a value of 8.72 in this example. As Table 2 demonstrates, some topics are more important (i.e., salient) for the CDA in Q1 than they were in Q2 (e.g., European Union), or vice versa (e.g., local politics). Our measure accounts for this variation in salience, because discussing a new issue should get more weight than changing how much a party discusses an already existing issue. Because we examine the sum of the weighted changes, low scores hardly contribute to the value of *Party Platform Change*.

Supplemental Appendix C discusses the amount of variation within and between parties in terms of our measure of platform change. This appendix also shows more

qualitatively what a party's platform change looks like in a quarter of a month in which our dependent variable has a low or a high score. As an additional validation, we compare our measure to the average attention to issues in an electoral term to the average attention to issues in election manifestos using the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2014). A problem with this latter approach is that the topics identified by our topic model and by the Manifesto Project do not exactly match. Therefore, we focus only on a number of cases of clear matches: the issue of the economy, the environment, multiculturalism, and the European Union (EU). The correlation between the average attention for these four issues in our data set with the average attention in the Manifesto Project is 0.76. This indicates that what is salient to parties in our data corresponds with the salience of a topic in parties' election manifestos. For instance, the correlation between attention to the environment in our data and in the manifesto data for the Greens is 0.67. For the Freedom Party, the correlation on multiculturalism as measured in our data and by the Manifesto Project is 0.98. This indicates that our measure conforms to the main data source used to measure party platform change (for overviews of studies using this data, see Adams, 2012; Fagerholm, 2015).

Our core independent variables are *Electoral Performance* (H1), *Electoral Prospects* (H2), *Government Party* (H3), and *Timing in the Electoral Cycle* (H1 and H2). We use the ParlGov data (Döring & Manow, 2015) to establish parties' electoral performance and whether or not they are in government. We measure electoral performance as the seats a party gained or lost at the parliamentary elections. We measure whether a party is in government by coding the 15 parties as (1) parties in office, and (0) parties in opposition (also see Table 1). In the robustness section, we account for possible differences between the PM party and junior coalition party as well as possible differences between opposition parties who frequently alter with being in government and opposition parties that have never been in government (see also supplemental Appendixes F and G).

We operationalize electoral prospects as the difference between the percentage of seats a party currently holds and the polled seat share average over a quarter of a year. Electoral prospects are positive for parties expecting to win seats in the next election and negative for parties expecting to lose seats in the next election. In the robustness section and in supplemental Appendix E, we present analyses using two different operationalizations of electoral prospects. Substantively, the results based on these different operationalizations of electoral prospects are the same. In addition, since opinion polls are an estimate of the population's preferences and thereby introduce uncertainty, we use the confidence intervals around the point estimate of the polls for party  $i$  in quarter  $t$  to simulate 1,000 possible polling results for party  $i$  in quarter  $t$ . We average these 1,000 possible polling results for party  $i$  in quarter  $t$  and use this estimate to re-run our model. This does not change our results, as presented in Figures 3, 4, and 5. Supplemental Appendix L details the simulation and demonstrates the regression results. For the period 1997–2002, these data consist of weekly opinion polls collected by TNS NIPO in which a representative sample of the Dutch population was asked about their vote intention ("If elections were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?"). The aggregated weekly opinion polls, which are at the individual level available through the Data Archiving and Network Services (DANS), indicate the polled seat share per party over the period 1965–2000. After 2000, the weekly polls are based on a variety of polling agencies, which were collected and presented at [www.allepeilingen.com](http://www.allepeilingen.com) (Van Der Velden, 2014). Polling agencies can reliably calculate seat shares because the Netherlands has a proportional electoral system with only one district and virtually no electoral threshold.



**Figure 3.** Marginal effect of timing in the electoral cycle, government party, and electoral performance. *Notes:* The straight lines demonstrate the effect (thicker line) and the 95% confidence intervals (thinner lines) of government parties, and the dotted lines demonstrate the effect (thinner line) and the 95% confidence intervals of opposition parties (thinner lines). The y-axis shows the effect (b-coefficient) of electoral performance on parties' platform change at different points between elections. Positive values indicate that parties change their platform, whereas negative values indicate the reverse.

To measure the timing within the electoral cycle, we counted the number of months after the last national election. In our analysis, we also control for the state of the economy, measured by the change in percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) and the change in percentage of inflation as registered by the Central Bureau of Statistics (StatLine, 2016). In supplemental Appendix K, we demonstrate that the results are robust against using a people's own subjective evaluation of the economy. Because parties are likely to send fewer press releases in the summer recess of parliament, we control for that too. Since this time period had no pre-electoral coalition agreements (Golder, 2006a, 2006b), we do not need to control for those. In supplemental Appendix J, we add a dummy for the 2002 elections to control for the possible influence of the assassination of Pim Fortuyn—a salient, and highly unusual, event in Dutch politics. This did not alter our main results. Table 3 gives an overview of the descriptive information of the variables included in the analyses.

We estimate two models—that is, the electoral performance model and the rational anticipation model—with three-way interaction effects (see Table 3). We refrain from modeling this as a four-way interaction effect because such a model suffers from a large number of empty cells, which stems from combinations of values of the interacting variables for which there are no actual observations. This biases estimation. To estimate our models, we need to deal with variation between party observations (15 in total, but not all at the same time present in parliament) as well as over time (69 quarters between 1997

**Table 3**  
Operationalization and descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables

Dependent Variable	Operationalization	Mean (SD)	Min – Max
<i>Party Platform Change</i>	Change in issue attention	9.49 (4.32)	0.00 – 23.97
Continuous Independent Variables (IVs)			
<i>Electoral Performance</i>	Seats – Seats $t-1$	-0.13 (5.11)	-14.70 – 12.70
<i>Electoral Prospects</i>	Polls $t-1$ – Seats	-0.34 (4.06)	-15.12 – 13.83
<i>Timing in the Electoral Cycle</i>	Number of months since last elections	21.01 (12.40)	1.00 – 52.00
<i>GDP (%)</i>	Change in growth of GDP (%)	0.35 (0.72)	-2.20 – 1.80
<i>Inflation (%)</i>	Change in inflation (%)	2.11 (0.90)	0.32 – 4.90
Dichotomous IVs			
<i>Government Party</i>	(0) no; (1) yes	399 (70%)	167 (30%)
<i>Recess</i>	(0) active parliament(1) parliament in summer recess	430 (76%)	136 (24%)

Regression formulas

Predicted signs

*Electoral Performance Model*      $Pr(P) = \beta_1 \text{Electoral performance} + \beta_2 \text{Government party}$   
 $+ \beta_3 \text{Timing} \mu + \beta_4 \text{Electoral performance} * \text{Government party} * \text{Timing} + \text{controls}$

H1:  $\beta_1 < 0$ , increasing over time  
H3:  $\beta_2 > 0$

*Rational Anticipation Model*      $Pr(P) = \beta_5 \text{Electoral prospects} + \beta_2 \text{Government party}$   
 $+ \beta_3 \text{Timing} \beta_4 \text{Electoral prospects} * \text{Government party} * \text{Timing} + \text{controls}$

H2:  $\beta_5 < 0$ , decreasing over time  
H3:  $\beta_2 > 0$

and 2014). In supplemental Appendix N, we detail the structure of our data and show the stationary tests. Estimating a simple regression on the pooled data could therefore lead to erroneous conclusions (Beck & Katz, 1995). We have to account for heteroskedastic error terms, since it is very likely that the error terms have different variances between panels and are also correlated across different panels. Furthermore, it is likely that the observations of Party Platform Change (our dependent variable) are correlated across time within panels. Consequently, we use panel corrected standard errors (PCSE) to address the panel-specific AR(1) error structure to eliminate autocorrelation. We do not use an AR(1) process with a lagged dependent variable because a lagged dependent variable introduces biases associated with trending in the independent variables and the error term and washes out the effects of the main theoretical model (Achen, 2000; Plumper, Troeger, & Manow, 2005). Our model is robust against jackknifing standard errors presented in supplemental Appendix I and alternative model specifications (error correction model) presented in supplemental Appendix H.

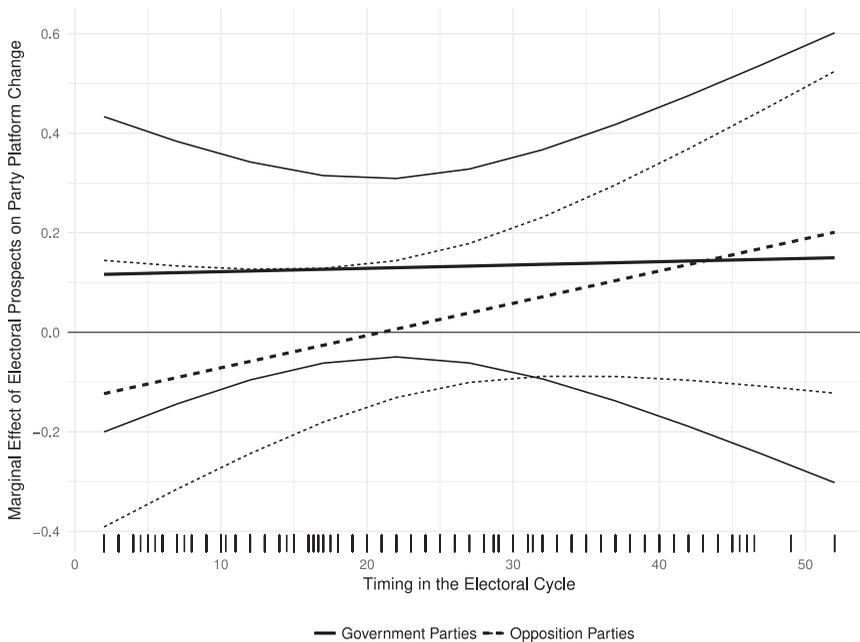
### Do Parties Live in the Past or in the Future?

Do parties that experienced electoral defeat change more than parties that experienced electoral victory? Does this effect dissipate over time? And are there differences between government and opposition parties? We address these questions with the electoral performance model, including a three-way regression effect among timing in the electoral cycle, government party, and electoral performance as specified in Table 3. In line with the recommendations of Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006), we calculate and visualize (see Figure 3) the marginal effects and standard errors to demonstrate the effect of electoral performance for all the levels of timing in the electoral cycle (0–50) and for government and opposition parties. Figure 3 demonstrates that for government parties (solid line), electoral performance does not have a statistically significant effect on party platform change, regardless of the timing in the electoral cycle. For opposition parties, conversely, electoral performance does influence party platform change (see dotted line in Figure 3). A year after the previous election, poor electoral performance motivates opposition parties to change their platform more. This effect strengthens the closer are new elections. More specifically, fresh after the elections, a unit increase in electoral performance—i.e., gaining one seat—has an average effect of change on the platform with 0.07. Our measure of party platform change is the sum of the relative changes for each of the 25 topics. A value of 25 would mean a 100% change on all the topics. The value of  $-0.06$  thus indicates very little change immediately after the elections. This value increases to  $-0.25$  at the end of the electoral cycle. This marginal effect indicates that for opposition parties, gaining one seat leads them to change on average 1% per issue. Because there is a lot of variation in the size of opposition parties, some—like the small Christian Orthodox parties (CU and SGP)—are unlikely to gain more than one seats, and others—like the Progressive Liberals (D66) and the Christian Democrats (CDA)—have known elections in this time period where they gained or lost more than 10 seats. This latter situation would, according to the model, lead to a value of  $-2.5$ , indicating a 10% change per topic. Hence, retrospective information is less important for government parties than it is for opposition parties. For reasons of clarity, we only present the effects of electoral defeat over time for government and opposition parties separately. Is there a general effect of electoral defeat over time? This effect holds the middle between the regression lines drawn in Figure 3 and is not statistically significant. We thus reject H1, the *electoral performance hypothesis*, which states the negative effect of past electoral performance weakens the longer it has been

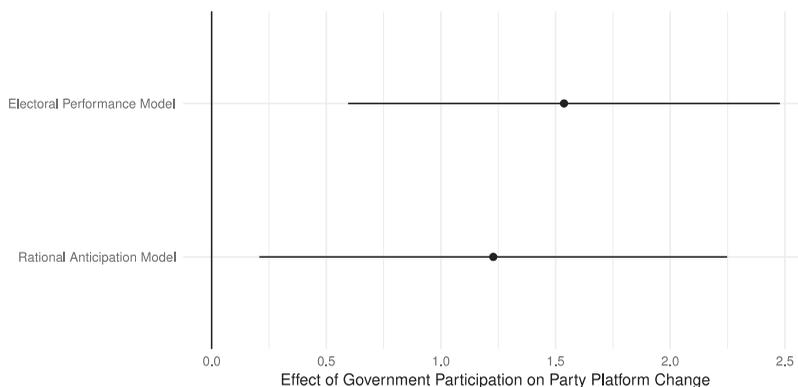
since the last national election. Instead, we find that the effect of electoral defeat does not become weaker over time—not in general, not for opposition parties, and not for government parties. We do find a negative effect of electoral defeat for opposition parties, but this effect actually becomes a little bit stronger over time.

Our H2, the *rational anticipation hypothesis*, predicts that facing negative prospects close to new elections explains party platform change. The rational anticipation model tests the three-way interaction among timing in the electoral cycle, government party, and electoral prospects. Figure 4 summarizes the effect of timing in the electoral cycle on party platform change for different levels of electoral prospects for both government and opposition parties (see supplemental Appendix D for the full model). The solid line in Figure 4 displays the effect for government parties; the dotted line displays the effect of opposition parties. These findings demonstrate that regardless of the timing in the electoral cycle, electoral prospects do not motivate government parties (solid line) or opposition parties (dotted line) to change.

While we do not find support for our first and second hypotheses—respectively testing the effect of electoral performance and the effect of rational anticipation over the course of the electoral cycle—, Figures 3 and 4 do indicate that the patterns for government parties and opposition parties are different. So, is there a main effect of being a government party on party platform change? According to H3, the *government participation hypothesis*, government parties change more than opposition parties do. We find



**Figure 4.** Marginal effect of timing in the electoral cycle, government party, and electoral prospects. *Notes:* The straight lines demonstrate the effect (thicker line) and the 95% confidence intervals (thinner lines) of government parties, the dotted lines demonstrate the effect (thicker line) and the 95% confidence intervals of opposition parties (thinner lines). The y-axis denotes the effect (b-coefficient) of electoral prospects on parties’ platform change. Positive values indicate that parties extend their platform, whereas negative values indicate the reverse.



**Figure 5.** The effect of government participation on party platform change.

*Notes:* The dots demonstrate the effect of government parties compared to opposition parties on prospective and past electoral performance. The lines around the dots depict 95% confidence intervals. The x-axis shows the effect (b-coefficient) of government participation on parties' platform change. Positive values indicate that parties change their platform, whereas negative values indicate the reverse.

support for this hypothesis. First, looking at the effect of government participation in the upper row of Figure 5, we see a statistically significant marginal effect of the being a government party. This indicates that, on average, government parties are more likely to change their platform than opposition parties are. Also, in the model testing the rational anticipation mechanism, there is a statistically significant marginal effect of being a government party. The lower row of Figure 5 demonstrates that compared to opposition parties, government parties are more likely to change their platform. This indicates that, all else equal, compared to opposition parties, government parties change their platform more with a value of 1.5 in the Electoral Performance Model—that is, the model with an interaction effect between electoral performance and timing in the electoral cycle. This equals a 6% change for all the topics if parties would change all the topics equally from one quarter to the other. For the Rational Anticipation Model—that is, the model with an interaction effect between electoral performance and timing in the electoral cycle—government parties change more compared to opposition parties with a value of 1.25. Again, if parties would change all topics equally from one quarter to another, government parties change each issue with 5% more than opposition parties do.

In both our models, we controlled for economic performance and for whether or not the parliament is in summer recess. We included both changes in the percentage of GDP growth and the percentage of inflation. The economic indicators (see supplemental Appendix D) had no effect on party platform change. Also, the activity in parliament during the recess did not significantly influence parties to change their platform.

### Robustness Checks

The results presented could have depended on some choices in our operationalizations. We have run several robustness analyses and discuss these briefly here; in supplemental Appendixes E through G, we discuss these analyses in more detail.

First, to assess their electoral prospects, parties could use different reference points to benchmark their polling results. In supplemental Appendix E, we demonstrate that our findings continue to hold when we take one of two other possible reference points: (a) the difference between the percentage of the trend in a party's polled seats averaged out over two quarters before  $t$  and the polled seats averaged out over a quarter of a year relative to the number of the trend in the polled seats; and (b) the difference between the percentage of a party's polled seats averaged out over a quarter before  $t$  and the polled seats averaged out over a quarter of a year relative to the number of the trend in the polled seats. Also, these robustness analyses fail to support H2 that electoral performance, or more specifically the prospects regarding performance, influences parties' decision to change their platform.

Second, parties in a coalition are not a homogeneous group, since the incentives junior coalition party or parties face differ from those of the Prime Minister's party due to an asymmetrical power distribution (Strøm, Muller, & Bergman, 2008; Thies, 2001). Parties in a coalition cannot single-handedly promote their own policy agenda when governing together with other partners. To avoid intra-cabinet conflicts and early cabinet breakdown, parties thus need to coordinate their activities with their partners (Strøm et al., 2008). Given that governing in a coalition requires unity and compromise to maintain cabinet stability, coalition parties coordinate their activities and talk about the issues that are emphasized by their partners. However, due to the asymmetrical power distribution between junior coalition partners and the Prime Minister's party—with the latter having usually more ministerial portfolios than the former—junior coalition parties are more likely to be responsive to the Prime Minister's party than vice versa (Sagarzazu & Klüver, 2015b). In supplemental Appendix F, we ran an additional analysis where we split up government status among (0) Prime Minister party (61 cases, 11%), (1) junior coalition party (106 cases, 19%), and (2) opposition parties (399 cases, 70%). Table F1 in supplemental Appendix F demonstrates that we find differences in the probability to change the party's platform between Prime Minister parties and opposition parties, but not between Prime Minister parties and junior coalition parties. The finding that there are no significant changes between Prime Minister parties and junior coalition parties corroborates our main results and our conclusion that government and opposition parties are incentivized by different stimuli.

Third, scholars argue that parties never in government (called *niche* or *challenger parties*) behave differently from the other parties (e.g., Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2006; De Vries & Hobolt, 2012; Meguid, 2005; Van De Wardt, De Vries, & Hobolt, 2014). To examine this, we further split the opposition in a group that frequently alters between opposition and government and a group that has never been in office. The analyses in supplemental Appendix G demonstrate that, indeed, parties that have never been in office change their platform less frequently than government parties and other opposition parties.

## Discussion

Do parties look forward and examine their electoral prospects based on their standing in the polls and change their platform accordingly, as the rational anticipation mechanism proposes? Or do parties look back to their electoral performance in the last election and change their platform in response to electoral losses, as the electoral performance mechanism proposes? And to what extent do parties in government and in opposition react differently in this regard? Our analysis of >20,000 press releases from 15 Dutch political

parties that were in parliament in the period 1997–2014 demonstrated that electoral defeat indeed motivates party platform change, but only for opposition parties. We found no indication that this effects weakens over time. We found no effect of electoral prospects on party platform change, indicating that parties thus do not change their platform in response to the polls. These results are in line with a theory of political parties as backward-looking actors (Harmel & Janda, 1994) and against a theory of forward-looking parties that rationally anticipate losses (Stimson et al., 1995). We also found a systematic difference between opposition and government parties, with government parties changing more on average.

Our findings indicate that the period in between elections is an important period to study; something which, for instance, party manifesto data are not possible, but which our press releases data are particularly apt for. Parties often receive cues about how they are performing over the course of the electoral cycle. Based on this information—conveyed by polling data but also, more and more, via social media (Barberá et al., 2014; Barberá & Rivero, 2013)—parties can, with some margin of certainty, infer whether they will face losses or gains in the next elections. With polling and social media becoming increasingly available, one might expect electoral prospects to play a more central role in the future than they did in our findings for the 1997–2014 period.

Finally, our results—and likewise, for instance, the work of Sagarzazu and Klüver (2015a)—demonstrate that communication outlets like press releases are important tools to study party behavior. A key reason for this is that voters get (most of) their information on political party platforms via the media (for overviews, see Esser & Jesper, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). Hence, voters adjust their perceptions of parties' platform based on the media information they consume. What follows from this is that voters indicate support (or not) for parties in the polls based on what parties have been saying in the media. Thereby, polling data function as a feedback loop: based on this information parties can adjust their platform and issue new press releases. These interactions among media, parties, and voters, so we argue, are important for understanding party behavior and can only be picked up by sources that are more dynamic in nature, like press releases. Whether parties strategically emphasize specific issues to jockey voters is an interesting avenue for further research.

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replication materials are stored at the Data Archiving and Networked Services (DANS) (<https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-xqf-aggx>) and on [www.marikenvandervelden.eu/publications](http://www.marikenvandervelden.eu/publications).

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Supplemental Material

Supplemental data for this article can be access on the publisher's website at <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1384771>

### Notes

1. In the robustness section, we show that these differences are robust against splitting up government parties in junior coalition parties and PM parties and spitting up opposition parties into “mainstream” and “challenger” parties.

2. We lemmatized each document using the software FrogR (Van Atteveldt, 2008; Van Den Bosch, Busser, Canisius, & Daelemans, 2007). This algorithm recognizes, for instance, the Dutch words “are” (*zijn*) and “were” (*waren*) as similar words.

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