Why Political Parties Change Their Positions: Environmental Incentives & Party Organization

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Abstract

What motivates parties to change their policy positions? Earlier studies suggest that parties change their position in response to changes in the position of the mean voter, of the party voter or after electoral defeat. We build on and extend this work by arguing and empirically demonstrating that party position change is a result of the interaction of these *environmental incentives* with *party organization*. By means of a pooled time-series analysis of 55 parties in 10 European democracies between 1977 and 2003, this study demonstrates how the party organizational balance-of-power between party activists and party leaders conditions the extent to which environmental incentives (mean voter change, party voter change, electoral defeat and office exclusion) drive party position change. The study's findings have important implications for our understanding of parties' electoral strategies as well as for models of representation.

Keywords: Political Parties, Political Representation, Party Organization, Party Strategy and Public Opinion.

At almost every election, political parties change their policy position. A right-wing conservative party may, for instance, display a more positive attitude towards the welfare state, thereby becoming (a bit) more left-wing. Conversely, a left-wing social democratic party may become more favorable towards the market, thereby turning (a bit) more right-wing. Knowing that these changes exist and are frequent, why do political parties change their policy position? Put differently, what motivates a party to reverse its course and offer a different policy platform? To date, we are witnessing a steadily expanding literature on this topic. This work eloquently shows how parties respond to what we label *environmental incentives* such as mean voter change, party voter change and electoral defeat (Adams et al. 2004; 2006; 2009; Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009). Moreover, a variety of studies highlights that parties' responses may vary across different types of parties, whereby mainstream parties shift their policy position in line with changes in the mean voter position whilst so-called niche parties (i.e. communist, green or radical right parties) change their position in line with the mean party voter (Ezrow et al. 2011).

In this study, we combine the work on party organizational features, specifically how the balance-of-power between party leaders and activists shapes parties' goal-oriented behavior, with the literature on party position change to explain the degree to which parties react differently to environmental incentives. In order to do so, we distinguish between more activist-dominated versus more leadership-dominated parties. Leadership-dominated parties are characterized by weak party organizational structures, limited internal veto players and the concentration of power among a select group of party leaders, whereas the inner workings of activist-dominated parties display a decision-making structure in which power is widely shared with local and regional party branches, members and even civil society organizations such as labor unions, thus providing powerful internal veto players. We hypothesize that leadership-dominated parties are most responsive to shifts in the mean voter position and to office exclusion as rallying electoral support and gaining political office is the way in which party leaders can safeguard their organizational powerbase, ensure that their leadership remains unchallenged, and enjoy the material benefits of office. We expect activist-dominated parties to be more responsive to party voter changes, as party leaders can only consolidate their power within the party when they are responsive to the preferences of the rank-and-file.

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By highlighting variation in party responsiveness to environmental incentives due to differences in party organization, we contribute to the current state-of-the-art on party position change. What is more, we present a causal mechanism which allows us to explain which parties are more or less likely to respond to which specific environmental incentives, something that is lacking in existing work.

The argument about party organization also informs the discussion about differences between niche and mainstream parties and their responsive and representational links to voters (Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011; Meguid 2005, 2008). We contribute to this work, first, by presenting a more fine-grained empirical operationalization concerning which features of niche-ness or mainstream-ness explains inter-party variation in responding to environmental incentives. In doing so, we move beyond the mere dichotomy between niche and mainstream parties that currently dominates the literature. Second, and related, while the ongoing work on niche parties lacks a clearly spelled out theoretical expectation for why and how party organization matters for party responsiveness, and fails to provide an empirical test concerning the relationship, this study provides a causal mechanism as well as the empirical evidence for the claim that organizational features mediate party position change. We argue that the tug-of-war between party leaders and activists affects the way in which parties shift their issue positions due to environmental incentives, such as mean voter shifts or electoral defeat. Our pooled time series analysis of 55 parties in 10 European democracies between 1977 and 2003 provides empirical support for the role of party organization in this respect.[1]

The remainder of this study is structured as follows. First, we develop hypotheses about parties' environmental incentives for policy change and the interactions between these incentives and party organization. Next, we present the data, operationalizations and estimation procedure used in the empirical analysis. After that, we present the empirical results. The final section discusses the study's findings and

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[1] The included countries are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom (UK). We discuss the case selection in the data and measurement section.

the implications for further research.

Theory and hypotheses

In one of the first studies addressing party position change, Budge (1994) examines the decision of parties to move their policy position to the right or left in between election periods. He shows that parties employ different decision rules when deciding the direction of movement. Budge finds that over time party positions are remarkably stable and that this stability is mainly a result of the high degree of uncertainty concerning the political environment with which party elites are confronted. When changing policy positions, parties have to consider many possible consequences. For example, how will voters respond, how will their main competitors react, and could policy changes jeopardize future coalition negotiations? Ever since Budge's seminal study, tremendous efforts have been made to examine the different incentives to which parties may respond (or not). Five key findings stand out.

First of all, Adams and collaborators show that parties are highly responsive to voter shifts (Adams et al. 2004; 2006; 2009; Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009). Second, Ezrow and colleagues (2011) demonstrate that different types of parties respond to position changes of different types of voters. While mainstream parties are more receptive to mean voter position change, niche parties, that is to say communist, green or radical right parties, seem immune to mean voter changes but respond to position shifts of their party voters (Ezrow et al. 2011). A third important finding of the current literature is that parties anticipate their strategic positioning within the political system when deciding to adjust their policy positions. Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) eloquently show that parties are responsive to policy shifts of rival parties within the same ideological family. Put differently, leftist parties respond to their rival left-wing parties while parties on the right-wing side of the electoral spectrum tend to respond to other right-wing parties. Fourthly, Somer-Topcu (2009) demonstrates that party position shifts can be explained through parties' strategic incentives to safeguard or advance their position within the system by showing that parties respond to past election results (see also Budge 1994). Specifically, she finds that party position change occurs more frequently for parties that have experienced a bad showing in the last national election

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. However, this effect subsides as time since the last election passes since it becomes increasingly hard to distill the current state of public opinion from the election results (Somer-Topcu 2009). The fifth and final important finding documented in the recent body of research relates to parties' responses to external influences. Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) as well as Haupt (2010) highlight that parties adjust their positions due to changes in economic conditions such as globalization and the increasing international competition between enterprises and the concomitant risks of unemployment it brings for workers and entrepreneurs.

The existing literature provides valuable insights into why parties change their policy positions. Nonetheless, it fails to provide a causal mechanism that can account for the variation in environmental incentives that parties are responsive to. This study contributes to the debate by drawing our attention to the organizational features of parties. We propose that party organization is crucial for understanding the degree to which parties respond to some environmental incentives (mean voter shift, party voter shift, office exclusion and electoral defeat, see below), but not to others. Specifically, we argue that variation in the degree to which a party is more *leadership-dominated* or more *activist-dominated* is a decisive factor in this respect.

A political party can be viewed as a specific form of organization which like many other types of organizations pursues a variety of goals. Müller and Strøm (1999) argue that political parties seek three basic goals: votes, policy, and office. Although all political parties are expected to strive for electoral support, parties are likely to differ in the degree to which they value policy or office. Some parties are largely policy-seeking aiming to present and ultimately implement their vision of society, while other parties are more office-seeking in nature making the pursuit of political office a central party goal in and of itself. Political parties thus vary in the extent to which they serve as a means to regulate the competition between and channeling the ambitions for aspirant office holders, or as an organizational vehicle to solve collective action problems and propose decisions for a polity (Aldrich 1995: 22-3). By consequence political parties, regardless of their overall size, are broad and encompassing coalitions of diverse actors pursuing a multiplicity of objectives. In this study, we argue that the manner in which a party is organized bears heavily on

the way it responds to environmental incentives, such as changes in voter positions or office exclusion. Which party organizational factors are crucial in explaining variation in party responsiveness? A large body of literature both in the United States as well as European context is devoted to classifying the differences in organizational structures of parties (see for example Aldrich 1995; Katz and Mair 1994). This work focuses on candidate selection, membership structure or other mechanisms of internal party democracy. In order to understand how party organization features into party position change, we argue that one aspect is crucial: the degree to which a party is *leadership-dominated* or *activist-dominated*. This distinction is essential as it allows us to understand who dictates party policy, the cadre or activists?

More leadership-dominated parties are organizations in which party leadership is prevailing in setting a party's agenda. These parties have a weak internal organization characterized by a lack of internal checks and balances, and thus have few veto points in internal party decision-making. Activist-dominated parties on the other hand are distinguished by high levels of internal party organization where party activists, internal and/or external organizations have co-decision power over the policy positions parties put forward. Although both ideal types are expected to pursue vote-seeking strategies to meet their policy objectives or to gain political office, the trade-off between policy-seeking and office-seeking goals is likely to differ across leadership- and activist-dominated parties. This reasoning is inspired by the seminal work of Panebianco (1988) on party organization. Panebianco (1988: 25-6) persuasively argues that every party is in essence a marriage of believers and careerists, that is to say a combination of officials whose participation depends primarily on the policy platform or collective identity of a party, i.e. *believers*, and officials whose participation depends chiefly on material and status-orientated incentives, i.e. *careerists*. Within leadership- and activist-dominated parties, we are likely to find a different power balance between these two groups. Activist-dominated parties are dominated by officials adhering more strongly to a party's policy platform or collective identity, whereas officials aiming to secure material and status-orientated goals characterize leadership-dominated parties. As a consequence, activist-dominated parties are likely to favor policy-seeking over office-seeking goals as staying on message is likely more important to activists

than changing a party's platform in order to reap electoral gains. Party activists are likely to care more strongly about the policies a party pursues, as they commit their time, money, and effort with the aim of voicing a specific ideological view. In contrast, leadership-dominated parties are more likely to value office-seeking over policy-seeking goals as gaining political office maximizes material and status-oriented goals, such as power and prestige, of its party leadership. In addition, attaining a position of power within the political system allows the leadership to strengthen its position within the party by suppressing incentives for challengers to seek control. In this context, it is important to mention that we theoretically understand and empirically operationalize the distinction between activist- and leadership-dominated parties as a continuum. That is to say, parties can be more or less activist- or leadership-dominated. This is important as it allows us to capture the large variation in party organization that exists within party systems in industrialized democracies while at the same time increasing the internal and external validity of our theoretical argument.

On the basis of the distinction between activist- and leadership-dominated parties, we develop specific hypothesis about the variation across parties in the degree to which they change their position in response to environmental incentives. We focus on the four environmental incentives dominant in the literature on party position change thus far: *mean voter shift, party voter shift, office exclusion and electoral defeat*. These incentives line up with the goals we highlighted earlier that parties aim to pursue, namely securing office by avoiding office exclusion and electoral defeat, by gaining support of the average voter by responding to mean voter shifts, and by rallying support of constituents by reacting to party voter shifts. Two additional environmental incentives are present in the current state-of-the-art, namely responses to external influences and to activities of rival parties (see Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009 as well as Haupt 2010). External influences such as socioeconomic conditions also affect voters' preferences, so the mean and party voter incentives partly cover these effects (see for example Erikson et al. 2002). As for the actions of rival parties, we exclude them in this study as it is hard to conclusively define the rivals of more activist- or more leadership-dominated parties. Take for example the most leadership-dominated

party within a given Western European multiparty system; is its main rival its chief competitor for political office, the most ideologically proximate party, or the electorally more successful party in the system? Due to these definitional ambiguities regarding potential rivals, we focus on mean voter shift, party voter shift, office exclusion and electoral defeat as the main environmental incentives parties are confronted with.

How do party organizational features mediate party responsiveness? We first turn to our expectations for mean voter and mean party voter shifts. If activist-dominated parties wish to change their policy position, they need to overcome powerful internal veto players in the form of party activists or internal and external organizations that have co-decision-making power within the party. Through the inner-working of such parties the voice of the party voter is much better represented than the voice of the mean voter. Hence, if the preferences of the internal veto players change, one expects activist-dominated parties to respond accordingly. Leadership-dominated parties characterized by weak party organization, on the other hand, face a balance of power between activists and leaders that favors the leadership. Within these parties, the absence of internal checks and balances makes it easier for leaders to pursue vote-seeking strategies to achieve their ultimate goal of political office. One way to do is to listen to the signals presented by the mean voter. A mean voter strategy may be risky in multi-party settings, as a party could lose more votes to rivals than it gains. However, by representing the centre of the political system a party may in turn advance its post-election coalition bargaining position and pull the governing coalition's policy in its preferred direction, even though it lost the election. Hypotheses 1 and 2 formalize these expectations.[2]

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[2] The parties included our analysis mostly operate in dense party systems. Hence, if the mean voter shifts to the left, a party that is already to the left is expected to shift with the mean voter further to the left. This is because the party can potentially lose votes to centrist parties which could also adjust their position to the left in accordance with the mean voter shift.

H1: Mean Voter Change × Party Organization: Activist-dominated parties are less likely to adjust their party position due to shifts in the mean voter position during the previous election period than leadership-dominated parties.

H2: Party Voter Change × Party Organization: Activist-dominated parties are more likely to adjust their party position due to shifts in the mean party voter position during the previous election period than leadership-dominated parties.

Moving to the third environmental incentive, *electoral defeat*, we argue, in line with Somer-Topcu (2009), that parties often find themselves in a trade-off between office-seeking and policy-seeking objectives. That is to say, parties aim to maximize their vote share in the upcoming election and may opt for an adjustment of their policy position in order to do so, but at the same time they are concerned about their policy objectives. Consequently, parties are only likely to change "their position if they have information about how far public opinion has moved away from the position of the party, i.e. how poorly the party performed in the last election" (Somer-Topcu 2009: 239). Past election results are a key source of information for parties about the direction in which public opinion is moving. When a party finds itself confronted with a streak of losses it is more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior, i.e. party position change. Parties that have gained votes, on the other hand, are more likely to 'stay put' in order to circumvent possible negative side-effects of changing their policy position. Parties that have lost votes in the previous election have to act in order to avoid future losses. Consequently, electoral defeat likely instigates party position change. However, to spell out the main message of this study once more, we expect the extent to which parties are responsive to electoral defeat to be contingent upon party organization. For parties that are policy-seeking, which we claim activist-dominated parties are, electoral defeat is not a likely trigger for change. Such parties simply care less about electoral defeat and may interpret a loss as a failure to get the right message across rather than proposing the wrong electoral platform. On the other hand, leadership-dominated parties likely care more about defeat as it implies a weaker bargaining position in coalition formation and therefore possibly a smaller amount of office pay-offs for the party leadership. Hypothesis 3 formalizes this expectation.

H3: Electoral Defeat × Party Organization: Activist-dominated parties are less likely to adjust their party position due to a loss of votes in the previous election than leadership-dominated parties.

Finally, drawing on the seminal work by Müller and Strøm (1999) on party behavior, we expect office-seeking parties to change their policy position in response to *exclusion from office* which is the fourth and final environmental incentive we examine. We propose that office-seeking parties in opposition are more likely to take the risk involved in policy change, as these are the parties that are more in need to satisfy their office-seeking goals (see also Riker 1982). As argued, the party cadre is almost unrestrained in its pursuit of office in parties within a leadership-dominated party. When such a party fails to attain office, either by losing the majority of the vote or by not being invited to a coalition government, it loses its most valued good. Therefore, when excluded from government, leadership-dominated parties are expected to respond by changing their policy position. Vice versa if such parties remain in government there is no intrinsic reason to change the policy position, especially as no (rational) party will risk losing already acquired goods. Hypothesis 4 outlines this expectation.

H4: Office Exclusion × Party Organization: Activist-dominated parties are less likely to adjust their party position due to being in opposition during the previous election period than leadership-dominated parties.

Before we turn to the operationalizations of our theoretical concepts, and discuss our empirical results, it is important to highlight that the introduction of party organization as the causal mechanism underlying inter-party variation in position change also enriches the ongoing discussion regarding differences between so-called niche and mainstream parties, a distinction developed by Meguid (2005, 2008) and extended by Ezrow and others (2011). With regard to the relationship between party position change and the niche-mainstream party distinction, Ezrow and his colleagues (2011) show that while mainstream parties are more "catch-all" oriented and inclined to respond to mean voter shifts, niche parties are more policy-oriented and cannot remove themselves too far from their electoral base. The theoretical argument underlying this finding is that niche parties due to their small and horizontal party organizations have elites that are more responsive to party supporters, and thus have a stronger interest in long-term policy-

making rather than short-term electoral gain (Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011). The problem with the niche party versus mainstream party argument is that it fails to develop a full-fledged causal mechanism or provide a direct empirical test of the role of the party organization.

In the niche party model, a party is either a niche party or not. Parties are defined as niche parties if they belong to a specific ideological party family, i.e. they are either communist, green or radical right (Adams et al. 2006). The simple distinction between niche and mainstream parties does not allow us to capture the large variation in party organization that exists. That is to say, not all niche or mainstream parties share the same party organizational features. Social democratic or socialist parties, for example, share some characteristics of niche parties and might therefore behave more like a niche party than a mainstream one (Adams et al. 2009). In contrast to center and right-wing parties, social-democratic or socialist parties tend to be more ideology-driven, have stronger formal ties with social groups and have empowered their activists by involving them in collective decision-making procedures (Kitschelt 1994). These parties vary in the strength of party organization. The importance of social ties with, say, labor unions strongly depends on the historical relationship between the party and the union. For example, the German Social Democrats (SPD) existed prior to the main German labor union, and was the driving force behind its establishment. Conversely, the British Labour party was established by existing labor unions and therefore had to tolerate co-decision power of labor unions at high levels in its party organization (Panebianco 1988). Therefore, Labour still had to deal with radical left-wing union leaders up to the election of Tony Blair, while the German SPD was already described as a catch-all party in 1966 (Kirchheimer 1966). More importantly, many non-left parties have actively tried to mimic the leftist mass party organization as a strategy to prevent a social-democratic takeover, i.e. the so-called "contagion from the left" (Duverger 1959). The Austrian, German, Dutch and Belgian Christian democratic parties have established strong links with labor unions and other social groups. In terms of membership many non-left parties have even outperformed the left parties in their countries (Mair and van Biezen 2000). In his measurement of a party's linkage with social groups, Poguntke (2000) lists only two left parties, zero niche parties and three centre-right parties in his top 5 of parties with the highest linkage. These arguments indi-

cate that we can expect substantial variation in party organizational features within the group of main-stream left and right parties. In our view, when party organization is measured directly, we are able to capture the different dynamics in party responsiveness to environmental incentives more appropriately than by employing a simple dichotomous variable indicating if a party is niche or not (for a recent critical discussion of the niche party concept see also Wagner 2011). Let us now turn to the operationalizations of our main theoretical concepts, and the empirical test of our hypotheses.

Data and measurement

We test our four hypotheses using a dataset that covers 55 parties in 10 European countries in the period 1977-2003 (N = 324).[3] These countries are an excellent sample of advanced democracies because of the variation in party organization. We therefore have confidence that our findings also extend to other advanced democracies. Data limitations inhibit us to include more countries in this study. Two of our central environmental incentives, mean voter change and mean party voter change, are derived from Eurobarometer surveys. These surveys cover European Union (EU) members only, excluding advanced democracies such as Norway or New Zealand. Overall, we have data on the parties competing for elections between 1977 and 2003 in 7 countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK) and in elections from the mid-1990s onwards in 3 countries (Austria, Sweden and Finland).[4]

Our dependent variable is the position shift of a party on a left-right scale. We propose two different operationalizations. First, following the literature, we subtract a party's left-right position at time e, i.e.

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[3] The number of observations slightly increases when the party voter variable is excluded. This is because some parties were not included in the Eurobarometer survey.

[4] Italy was omitted because very few parties in the Laver and Hunt survey (1992) were in parliament under the same name or organizational structure after 1994. In addition, Greece, Spain and Portugal were excluded from the analysis as parts of our timeframe, i.e. 1977-2003, these systems were in transition from dictatorships to consolidating democracies.

during the current election, from the party's left-right position at time *e*-1, i.e. during the previous election. This *relative position change* variable indicates that parties shift leftwards or rightwards. Defined this way, one can test directional hypotheses, i.e. hypotheses that expect parties to move to the left or the right. For example, our first two hypotheses on party voter change and mean party voter change formulate the prediction that parties move to the left in response to a leftwards move by either the mean voter or the mean party voter.

However, our last two hypotheses regarding electoral defeat and office exclusion do not imply a directional relationship. We simply expect parties to respond to electoral defeat or office exclusion and there may be several strategies that parties follow. For example, in response to electoral defeat, a left-wing party can move leftwards in order to marginalize left-libertarian parties or it can move rightwards and appeal to centrist voters. In sum, we expect an absolute move, not a relative move. For that reason we test a second dependent variable, which we label *absolute position change*. We construct this variable by taking the absolute distance between a party's left-right position at election_year *e* and the party's left-right position at the previous election, election_year *e-1*.

We employ the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) measurement of parties' left-right positions to tap into the left-right positions of parties (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006). This measure subtracts the relative attention in a party's electoral manifesto given to left-wing issues from the relative attention for right-wing issues. The CMP coding scheme distinguishes 56 different issues categories. The project employs human coders that assign quasi-sentences within the manifestos to one specific issue. This provides a summary of attention to each policy issue within each electoral manifesto. The entire database spans manifestos of the different parties in 20 countries in the period 1945 to 2003. The main advantage of the CMP data is that they allow for the construction of time-series of party positions which are comparable both within and across countries. Recently, the reliability of the data has received its fair share of criticism (Bakker et al. unpublished ms.; Benoit and Laver 2007; Franzmann and Kaiser 2006; Gabel and Huber 2000). However, we lack a comparable data source that includes as many parties across time and space. Moreover, and important for our purposes, several authors have cross-validated the left-right

placements from the CMP with expert and voter placements and found a high level of correspondence (Marks et al. 2007).

Table 1 provides an overview of this study's dependent and independent variables, i.e. environmental incentives and party organization.

- Table 1 about here -

To capture party organization, more specifically the degree to which a party is activist- or leadership-dominated, we use two questions from an expert survey (Laver and Hunt 1992). The first question asks experts whether party leaders are influential in setting party policy; the second question asks whether party activists are influential in setting party policy. We construct a party organization variable by first subtracting the values from the first question from the values of the second question. Second, we add the minimum value of that sum to all observations. This creates a scale from 0 to 30, with low values indicating activist-dominance and high values indicating leadership-dominance. There are some pros and cons to this operationalization of party organization. For one the measurement of party organization is static over time while the balance of power between leaders and activists may shift over time. Also, the danger of every expert survey is that researchers cannot know for sure what determines the answers experts give (Laver and Benoit 2006; Steenbergen and Marks 2007). Still, we are quite comfortable using this expert survey for our measure of party organization, as it taps precisely into the theoretical element we are interested in, namely who dictates party policy: activists or leaders? Like most institutional variables, party organization does not change much over time. For example, in our sample only 4 out of 55 parties change the degree of centralization of candidate selection procedures between 1977 and 2003 (Bille 2001; Lundell 2004). Also, the founding fathers (or mothers) of parties worked with a particular idea of organization, institutionalizing a specific form of party decision-making. Such processes are not easily reversed and although parties may change a bit, it is unlikely that the change a lot over time.[5] Moreover, this static

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[5] The available time-series data on party organization have their own limitations. Member voter ratios (Katz et al. 1992; Mair and van Biezen 2000) and party centralization measures (Bille 2001; Lundell

measure of party organization represents a 'conservative' test of the key relationships we are estimating in our empirical analyses; it biases our results against finding support for our key hypotheses.[6]

Figure 1 displays the mean and standard deviation of party organization per party family, using box plots. Clearly, the category of the niche party families ecologist, socialist and nationalist (radical right) is a very diverse club, supporting our argumentation that party organization may have more explanatory power than the mainstream/niche dichotomy. Ecologist parties are mostly activist-dominated. However, most socialist parties are like social democratic parties in terms of party organization. Also, nationalist parties (here only *Front National*) are leadership-dominated and therefore do not really belong in one category with ecologist and green parties. Social democratic, liberal and agrarian parties are on average slightly less leadership-dominated in comparison to Christian democratic and conservative parties (see supporting information Table S4 for party organization values per party).

--- Figure 1 about here ---

Recall that we examine four environmental incentives, namely mean voter shifts, party voter shifts, electoral defeat and office exclusion. To measure the *shift in the mean voter position* and the shift in *mean party voter position*, we make use of the Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File that brings together yearly Eurobarometer surveys (Schmitt and Scholz 2005). The Eurobarometer surveys are excellent for

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2004) bias against small and green parties, that have small membership numbers but strong participatory norms (Kitschelt 1988). Also, having fewer members does not imply more leadership domination because the decision-making structures have not changed and the degree of activism of the remaining members may be different. See supporting information for a more extensive discussion on alternative measures and their drawbacks.

[6] We ran additional analyses for years close to the year of data collection, as well as simulated change within our partially time-variant measure. Both analyses even stronger support for our expectations, suggesting that are measure is indeed conservative. These analyses are reported in Table S1 in the supporting information.

tapping into these positions, as the respondents are directly asked to place themselves on a left-right scale. We calculate the mean voter positions by estimating the mean of all respondents' placement per country per election.[7] We calculate party voter position by estimating the mean of respondents' placement per country per election and per relevant party. We calculate changes in these variables by subtracting the mean level of one election (*e*) from that of the previous election (*e*-1).[8] *Electoral defeat* is measured as the changes in percent of the number of seats, comparing one election to the previous election. If that change is positive, we coded a 0. *Office exclusion* is coded as 1 if parties were excluded from cabinet in the last cabinet before the election. We take the cabinet data from the Party Government Dataset of Woldendorp and his colleagues (Woldendorp et al. 2000) and update these data for recent years. Table 2 lists the descriptive statistics of all dependent and independent variables.

--- Table 2 about here ---

[7] Mean and median voter are used somewhat interchangeably in the literature. Ward and others (2011) argue that the two positions must be very close, because distributions of self-placement tend to be unimodal and symmetric.

[8] It is important to point out that the shifts in mean voter as well as the mean party voter position may be due to a different group of voters, not a shift in opinion. In other words, there may be composition effects. This may be true for the mean voter position as well mean party position shifts because new voters enter the electorate and some voters leave. This is a difficult issue to address empirically as we lack panel data of European publics over time and across countries. In addition, it is important to examine the extent to which the public opinion changes we calculated are 'real' changes in public opinion or rather due to measurement error. Inspecting the percentage of "don't know" responses for the question we use may be a way of getting at this issue. We have taken a close look at the Eurobarometer surveys, and find that the level of don't knows is relatively low (12.2%). We have also performed t-tests to analyze whether the estimation of the mean is significant. All means are strongly significant, so it is unlikely that public opinion change is due to measurement error (for more information see Table S3 in the supporting information).

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Estimation technique

In order to explain party position change, we are dealing with variation between parties, across countries as well as over time. We therefore have to estimate a model that deals with both the cross-sectional structure, i.e. panel differences based on countries and parties as well as time dependencies, i.e. issues relating to autocorrelation. In order to deal with party and year effects, we use a simple party-election panel setup and add country dummies to deal with the existence of possible unobserved differences between countries. This model set-up alone does not allow us to confront all possible problems that may arise using panel data estimation strategy. First, we have to deal with issue of heteroskedastic error terms, as it is very likely that the error terms have different variances between panels and are also correlated across different panels. We estimate panel-corrected standard errors (PCSEs) to deal with these issues (Beck 2007; Beck and Katz 1995; 1996). Also, we include country dummies in order to absorb the institutional differences that exist between countries. Second, when we model party position change between elections, we may likely encounter problems of autocorrelation, that is to say the possibility that the observations of the dependent variable are correlated across time within panels and we thus face a first-order autoregressive – AR(1) – structure in the panel residuals. Tests indicate that the residuals at time *t* are indeed influenced by the size of the residuals at time *t*-1. To deal with this issue, studies often employ a lagged dependent variable. Here we choose an alternative route and eliminate autocorrelation using a Prais-Winsten solution to deal with the panel specific AR(1) error structure (Greene 1990: 473). More recent work gives primacy to this solution since 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; Plümper et al. 2005).[9]

We estimate two different full models: (1) explaining relative position change, and (2) explaining absolute position change. As argued, the party voter change and mean voter change incentives move par-

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[9] Note that we also ran the same models using a lagged dependent variable, and yield similar results that support the substantive conclusions presented in this study, see Table S1 in the supplemental information.

ties in a specific direction, whereas electoral defeat and office exclusion move parties away from its previous position. Therefore, we explain *relative position change* with the interaction between change in mean voter position and change in mean party voter position with party organization. Although we do not expect it to affect party's relative position change, we include electoral defeat as a control variable since earlier work has found this variable to have a significant effect (Somer-Topcu 2009). We explain *absolute position change* with the interaction between electoral defeat and office exclusion with party organization. Here we add mean voter change and party voter change as control variables, as it is plausible that some parties are more responsive (in absolute terms) to mean voter changes than to mean party voter changes (or vice versa). Finally, studies on the inclusion of interaction terms suggest that when there are two interaction terms in a single equation that have the same conditioning variable an additional interaction terms between the two remaining constituent terms should be introduced (Brambor et al. 2006; Braumoeller 2004). Therefore we add the interaction term change in mean party voter x change in mean voter.

(1) Relative position change$_{pt}$ = β_0 + β_1 Δ mean voter + β_2 Δ mean party voter + β_3 electoral defeat + β_4 party organization + β_5 (Δ mean voter x party organization) + β_6 (Δ mean party voter x party organization) + β_7 (Δ mean party voter x Δ mean voter) + country dummies + error term

(2) Absolute position change$_{pt}$ = β_0 + β_1 Δ mean voter + β_2 Δ mean party voter + β_3 electoral defeat + β_4 office exclusion + β_5 party organization + β_6 (electoral defeat x party organization) + β_7 (office exclusion x party organization) + β_7 (Δ mean party voter x Δ mean voter) + country dummies + error term

Empirical results

In the first step, we examine the effects of two types of environmental incentives, namely changes in mean voter position and changes in mean party voter position, on relative party position change and explore the interaction between these incentives and party organization. These results are presented in Table 3 below. This table summarizes the estimates of six regression models explaining relative position change. In model 1, we only estimate the effects of the environmental incentives. Although we argued that these environmental incentives work in conjunction with party organization, this analysis allows us to compare our results to existing research. Model 1 supports the common findings in the literature since both the change

in the party voter's position and the change in the mean voter's position have a positive effect on party policy change while defeat has no significant effect (Adams et al. 2004; 2009; Ezrow et al. 2011). Given that electoral defeat does not necessarily imply movement in a particular direction we are not surprised to find no effect. In model 2 we add our party organization variable. Recall that we did not hypothesize a direct relationship of party organization on relative party position change. This seems to be justified because the effect of party organization is small and its standard error large.

In model 3, i.e. our full model, we add the interaction terms and find support for our theoretical expectations spelled out in hypotheses H1 and H2. To interpret the moderating effect of party organization on the impact of environmental incentives, it does not suffice to simply look at the significance of the interaction terms. From the information presented in model 3 of Table 3 there is no way of knowing what the impact of the condition is when its value is greater than zero (Brambor et al. 2006). Therefore, Figures 2A and 2B illustrate the change in the marginal effect of mean voter change and party voter change on relative party position change for different degrees of party organization. These analyses provide several important results. First, the marginal effect of mean voter change on party position change increases the more party organizations become leadership-dominated (see Figure 2A). To be precise, for activist-dominated parties (party organization < 10, n = 8), mean voter change has a negative influence on party position change. Hence, the behavior of party activists shields such parties from the effects of public opinion change. For parties dominated by the party leadership (party organization > 23, n = 9) mean voter change has a positive effect on party position change. To give an example, the PSC, the Wallonian Christian Democratic party with a party organization value of 24.03, shifts 6.4 points to the left on the party manifesto scale if the mean voter shifted one point to the left on the Eurobarometer scale. The response to mean voter shifts becomes higher, the stronger a party is dominated by the leader.[10] For all party organiza-

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[10] The Eurobarometer scale runs from 0 to 10 and the minimum and maximum values of the party manifesto scale are -61.3 and 55.48. Therefore, a party shift of 10 points rightwards in response to a mean voter

tion values in-between (>10, <23), there is no significant effect of mean voter change. Substantially this makes sense. If party activists and party leaders are more-or-less equally strong, it is likely that at one election the leadership gets its way, while at the other the party activists win the struggle for setting the party's position. Consequently, such parties are responsive to different incentives. Second, the marginal effect of mean party voter change on party position change increases as parties are more dominated by activists. Hence, parties strongly dominated by activists (party organization < 10, n = 9) shift more radically in the same direction as the mean party voter as parties with less powerful activists do. Still, the British Labour party, with a party organization value of 15.25, is expected to shift approximately 7 points to the left on the party manifesto scale if the mean party voter shifted 1 point to the right on the Eurobarometer scale. This effect is significant for all levels of party organization, except for values above 24. Parties above this level are strictly response to the mean voter. Finally, the strong effect of party voter change in comparison to mean voter change suggests that the latter is much more powerful in predicting relative party position change.

We performed several robustness checks. Models 4 to 6 display results when variables are taken in and out of the analysis.[11] Both the mean voter and party voter effect slightly decrease if analyzed separately but remain significant. Moreover, excluding electoral defeat does not change the results.

--- Table 3 about here ---

--- Figures 2A and 2B about here ---

In a next step, we explore the effects of the other environmental incentives, namely electoral defeat and office exclusion on the absolute changes in party positions. Table 4 displays the results of these regression analyses using absolute party position changes as our dependent variable. Recall that we in-

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shift of 1 is approximately proportional. Parties with a party organization value of 28 have such a proportionate response, other parties have slightly less proportionate responses.

[11] Table S1 in the supporting information presents additional robustness checks, including a model with a lagged dependent variable and a model without country dummies.

clude party voter and mean voter changes only as background variables, as we have no explicit theoretical expectations about whether parties with different party organization vary in their absolute response to leftward or rightwards movements of party voters or mean voters. However, leaving these variables out would create a serious omitted variable bias.[12] We should control for this effect in order to understand the impact of the variables in which we are interested substantively, namely office exclusion and electoral defeat.

In model 7, we find that electoral defeat has an effect on party policy change, or to be precise a loss of 1 per cent of the formerly occupied seats is associated with a change of 0.11 in a party's absolute left-right position. This is in line with part of the literature (Budge 1994; Ezrow et al. 2011; Somer-Topcu 2009). However, the effect of electoral defeat disappears as soon as we control for party organization in models 8 to 11. Also, the interaction term between electoral defeat and party organization never reaches a conventional level of statistical significance. Since there may be correlation between office exclusion and electoral defeat that could bias our findings, we remove office exclusion from the analysis in model 11. This, however, does not improve the performance of the defeat variable. The latter result suggests that the effect of electoral defeat is possibly more complicated than theorized in this study. The response to electoral defeat can for example differ between different types of electoral competition. Testing directly whether this is the case would be a possible interesting avenue for future research. For now, we find no evidence supporting our theoretical conjectures outlined in hypothesis H3.

Our fourth hypothesis is supported by the results. In models 7 and 8, that is without the interactions with party organization, office exclusion is insignificant which is in line with our theoretical expectations. This means that in general office exclusion does not motivate parties to change their position. However, the interaction term between office exclusion and party organization introduced in model 9 (the full model) is statistically significant. Figure 3 plots the main effect and confidence intervals of this effect. We

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[12] Additional tests with an absolute mean voter and mean party voter change variable provide similar results (see Table S2 in the supporting information).

find that for parties with strong activists but weak leaders (party organization < 14), office exclusion has a negative effect on party position change. In this category we have mostly ecologist and some socialist, social democratic and liberal parties. These parties are quite often in opposition and seem to care less about office since there is no positive response to office exclusion. Office exclusion has a positive and significant effect on parties with very strong leaders (party organization > 23). This is in line with our hypothesis H4 that when party leaders are unconstrained by party activists, they are free in their pursuit of office. Hence, when excluded from office they move position in the hope of winning back office.

In model 10 we exclude electoral defeat from the analysis to test the robustness of the office exclusion variable. There is a very small improvement in the effect size of office exclusion. This indicates that although office exclusion and electoral defeat may go hand-in-hand in some electoral systems, their effects on party position change are largely uncorrelated.

--- Table 4 about here ---

--- Figure 3 about here ---

Summing up, our empirical analysis offers support for the core of our expectations with respect to the interaction between environmental incentives and party organization. Activist-dominated parties, which are characterized by strong activists but weak leaders, respond to party voters and not to the mean voter, whereas leadership-dominated parties with strong leaders but weak activists are more responsive to mean voter change and office exclusion. Electoral defeat, however, seems not to be a motivation for parties to change position.

Discussion

This study theoretically argues and empirically substantiates that the degree to which a party changes its policy position on a left-right scale depends on the interaction between the party's organization and the environmental incentives it faces, particularly mean voter change, party voter change and office exclusion. The main contribution of this study to the literature lies in its explicit treatment of the different goals that parties pursue given the differences in the incentive structure arising from party organization. By adding

party organization we provide a powerful mechanism that explains inter-party variation in party position change due to environmental incentives. Specifically, we distinguish between activist-dominated versus leadership-dominated parties. Whereas leadership-dominated parties are characterized by weak party organizational structures, in which the party leadership controls the policy agenda, decision-making power in activist-dominated parties is divided across a large set of actors such local and regional party branches, or even civil society organizations such as labor unions. Our pooled time-series analysis of 10 European democracies between 1977 and 2003 shows that leadership-dominated parties are most responsive to shifts in the mean voter position and to office exclusion while activist-dominated parties are more responsive to party voter changes. This suggests that the behavior of party activists shields such parties from the effects of public opinion change. We explain these differences on the basis of the varying organizational structures party leaders and activists face within these parties. Party leaders in activist-dominated parties can only consolidate their power within the party when they are responsive to the preferences of the rank-and-file. Consequently, staying in tune with constituents is a critical way to achieve this. Within leadership-dominated parties, on the other hand, party leaders aim to reap electoral gains and obtain political office in order to safeguard their powerbase within the party, leave their leadership unchallenged, and enjoy the material benefits of office. While the positive association between mean voter change and policy position change is often hauled as a victory for models of representation that stress the link between citizen preferences and parties' policy position, the similarly positive association between office exclusion and policy position change presents a darker view of representation. In this view, the desire to be in office and the competition among parties that this desire stimulates is an important motor of democracy.

Finally, this study highlights that electoral defeat, our fourth environmental incentive, does not influence party position change directly nor is conditioned by parties' organizational characteristics. This latter finding, which partly conflicts with the work of Somer-Topcu (2009), indicates that the relationship between electoral defeat and party position change seems to run differently than we theorize. Our analysis, however, does suggest that party position change due to electoral defeat is not conditioned by party organization. Hence, the findings have important implications for our understanding of parties' electoral strate-

gies as well as for models of representation.

Overall, by highlighting variation in party responsiveness to environmental incentives due to differences in party organization, this study contributes to the current state-of-the-art on party position change. In addition, it demonstrates that these partisan responses to their environment are mediated by the organizational characteristics in which party leaders and activists operate. By introducing party organization as a key condition for the increase or decrease of parties' responsiveness to environmental incentives this study provides a number of valuable insights that may spark off ongoing work uncovering the reasons why parties change their position between elections and why some are more likely to do so than others.

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Table 1. Operationalization of Main (In)dependent Variables

Dependent variables	Indicator	Data source
Party position change on left-right dimension	Relative = Party position$_e$ – Party position$_{e-1}$ Absolute = |Party position$_e$ – Party position$_{e-1}$|	(Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006)

Environmental incentives	Indicator	Data source
Office exclusion	0 = Member of cabinet preceding elections, 1 = if excluded from cabinet	(Woldendorp et al. 2000), updated for later years by authors
Electoral defeat	% Party seats$_{e-1}$ – % Party seats$_{e-2}$, if negative, otherwise 0	Various country electoral bureaus
Mean voter shift	Mean voter position$_e$ - Mean voter position$_{e-1}$	(Schmitt and Scholz 2005)
Party voter shift	Mean party voter position$_e$ - Mean party voter position$_{e-1}$	(Schmitt and Scholz 2005)

Party Organization	Indicator	Data source
Party organization	Two expert survey questions used: 1. Assess the power of party leadership over party policy choices (0 [weak] – 20 [strong]). 2. Assess the power of party activists over party policy choices (0 [weak] – 20 [strong]). Measure = party score Q1 –party score Q2 + lowest party value	(Laver and Hunt 1992)

e = election_year, e-1 = previous election year

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables.

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Absolute Left-Right Shift	11.30	9.59	0	61.3
Relative Left-Right Shift	-.65	14.81	-61.3	44.01
Electoral Defeat	-1.79	3.82	-36.03	0
Office Exclusion	0.60	0.49	0	1.00
Party Voter Shift	-.04	.41	-1.65	2.38
Mean Voter Shift	-.06	.18	-.43	.39
Party Organization	18.56	6.18	0	27.77

Table 3. Regression analysis of relative party position shifts selected EU members, 1977-2003

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3 (Full model)	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Defeat	.003	.02	.01	.01	-0.03	
	(.09)	(.08)	(.10)	(.06)	(.09)	
Party voter change	2.93*	2.66*	13.67*		11.79*	13.64*
	(.54)	(.56)	(2.28)		(1.34)	(2.31)
Mean voter change	1.84	2.76	-15.10*	-6.01		-15.07*
	(2.26)	(2.31)	(6.61)	(4.1)		(6.57)
Party organization		-.02	-.01	.009	-.06*	-.01
		(.03)	(.05)	(.03)	(.02)	(.05)
Party voter change x Party organization			-.48*		-.42*	-.48*
			(.11)		(.06)	(.11)
Mean voter change x Party organization			.90*	.41*		.89*
			(.35)	(.17)		(.35)
Party voter change x Mean voter change			9.00			8.84
			(5.27)			(5.30)
Constant	-20.70*	4.11	3.39	-20.75*	-20.1*	-.53
	(.43)	(2.44)	(2.48)	(3.95)	(.53)	(2.54)
N	335	324	324	336	326	324
Log likelihood	-1222.1	-1186.1	-1191.5	-1210.7	-1185.0	-1191.9
Wald	5219.0	11835.4	3898.2	416314.0	3670.1	3497.4

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

* significant at the $p \leq .05$ level (two-tailed).

**Table 4. Regression analysis of absolute party position shifts selected EU members, 1977-2003**

	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9 (Full model)	Model 10	Model 11
Defeat	-.11*	-.07	-.46	-.08	-.33
	(.04)	(.05)	(.35)	(.05)	(.28)
Office exclusion	-.49	.13	-4.78*	-4.94*	.31
	(.39)	(.46)	(1.64)	(1.51)	(.52)
Party voter change	-1.58*	-1.91*	-1.63*	-1.97*	-1.82*
	(.21)	(.27)	(.51)	(.30)	(.36)
Mean voter change	2.18*	2.07*	1.30	1.75*	2.15*
	(.78)	(.83)	(1.38)	(.79)	(1.04)
Party organization		.12*	-.05	-.05	.14*
		(.04)	(.07)	(.07)	(.05)
Defeat x Party Org			.01		.01
			(.01)		(.02)
Exclusion x Party Org			.28*	.27*	
			(.10)	(.09)	
Defeat x Exclusion			.18		
			(.17)		
Constant	13.30*	11.09*	11.91*	14.77*	10.49*
	(2.00)	(2.27)	(1.51)	(2.55)	(2.28)
N	335	324	324	324	324
Log likelihood	-1066.1	-1038.4	-1041.9	-1039.2	-1041.5
Wald	6841.6	89299.6	5297.5	54447.57	70687.7

Notes: Table entries are Prais-Winsten regression coefficients correcting for panel-level heteroskedasticity with country dummies (not shown in table) and standard errors.
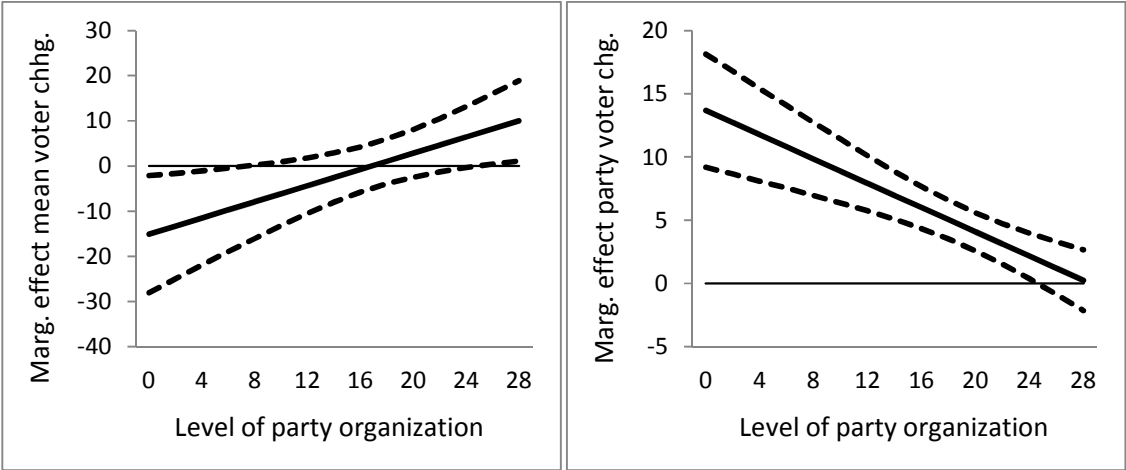
* significant at the $p \leq .05$ level (two-tailed).

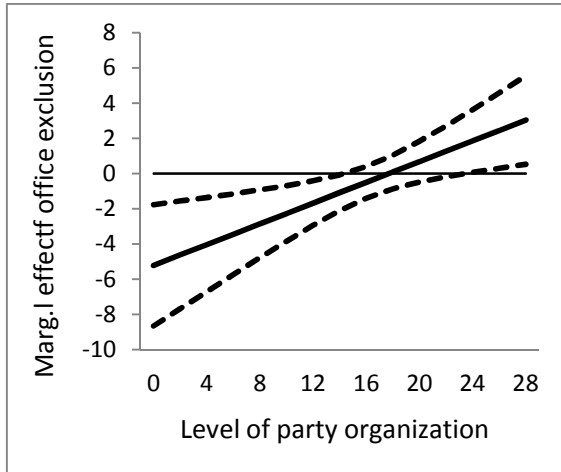**Figure 1. Boxplot of Level of Party Organization per party family**
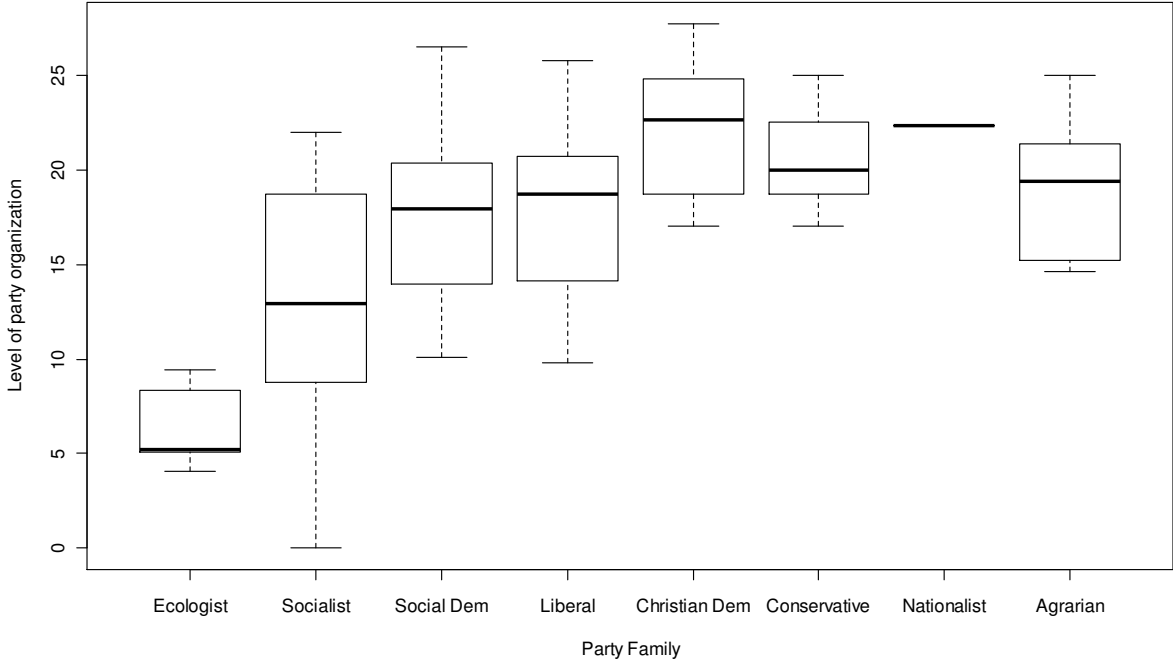
Figure 2A and 2B. Marginal effects of mean voter change (2A) and mean party voter change (2B) on relative party manifesto change for different levels of party organization

Note: The straight line is the main effect; the dashed lines are the 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 3. Marginal effect of office exclusion on absolute party manifesto change for different levels of party organization

Note: The straight line is the main effect; the dashed lines are the 95% confidence intervals.