Party convergence and vote switching: Explaining mainstream party decline across Europe

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Abstract. How can one explain the significant vote losses of mainstream parties across Europe in recent years? In this article, it is argued that mainstream party convergence is an important determinant of the recent political and electoral volatility in European party systems. More specifically, it is hypothesised that as mainstream parties converge on the left-right scale, voters will switch from supporting a mainstream party to a non-mainstream party in the next election as they look for an alternative that better represents their ideological views. To test these theoretical expectations, data is combined from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and the Manifestos Project for nearly 100,000 vote choices of individual voters in 30 elections in 16 West and East European countries from 2001 until 2013. The findings have important implications for understanding the recent rise of non-mainstream parties, the changing nature of party systems and the increasing complexity of cabinet formation across Europe.

Keywords: electoral volatility; party convergence; vote switching; non-mainstream parties

Introduction

The European political space has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. We have seen the rise and success of new parties, from the greens and the far-right, to left-wing anti-austerity parties, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, and right-wing populist parties such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) or the United Kingdom Independence Party. We have also seen smaller, regional parties, such as the Scottish National Party, vastly improve their electoral fortunes. In looking for an answer for what explains this political and electoral volatility, we can turn to Anthony Downs’s (1957) seminal spatial argument that as mainstream political parties’ policy positions converge and become more similar, voters will look for alternatives that better represent their preferences. Building on the Downsian framework, Kitschelt (1988, 1995) similarly argued that as established parties converged, ‘left-libertarian’ and radical right parties are more likely to form and be successful. Bartolini and Mair (1990), furthermore, found that when policy distances between the left and right blocks are smaller, electoral volatility will be higher. In this article, we build on these arguments and for the first time present an empirical test of these claims by conducting a micro-level analysis of vote switching explaining the recent rise of non-mainstream parties on both ends of the ideological spectrum with the convergence of mainstream parties across Europe.

What explains the phenomenon of parties moving in one direction and voters moving in the opposite direction? According to the Downsian spatial model, parties have an incentive to moderate their positions as most voters are located in the middle of the ideological
spectrum. Extant research on multiparty systems has thus demonstrated that when parties moderate, they are likely to do better electorally (see, e.g., Ezrow 2005; Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009; Abou-Chadi & Orlowski 2016). However, moderation can also have a downside from the perspective of voters. Following the proximity model of voting (Downs 1957), rational voters tend to support the party that is the closest to their preferences. Importantly, when parties moderate, voters are less able to distinguish among what the parties have to offer as they lose their ‘brand name’ (Aldrich 1995; Cox 1997; Lupu 2013). Voters will thus turn to other parties that have clearer policy positions and to which they are more proximate (Downs 1957). In multiparty systems, these are typically parties that have followed Downs’ (1957: 141) strategy of ‘product differentiation’ by emphasising more extreme positions (Cox 1990; Kitschelt 1994; Ezrow 2008; Wagner 2012) and have often exploited the space opened on the fringes of the policy space that resulted from established party convergence.

In this article, we seek to explain the circumstances under which (1) a party’s electoral strategy of convergence or moderation leads to subsequent vote loss, and (2) this convergence leads to another party’s vote gain. As large mainstream parties are those that are more likely to converge and smaller non-mainstream parties are likely to take divergent positions (Wagner 2012; Abou-Chadi & Orlowski 2016), we examine the probability that voters who voted for a mainstream party in the last election will switch their vote to a non-mainstream party in the current election. By examining how voters react to parties’ strategies, we are able to demonstrate an underlying mechanism for why mainstream parties lose voters and non-mainstream parties, such as the Spanish Podemos, the German AfD and Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ), gain voters when mainstream parties’ policy positions converge. Our findings offer an explanation for why established mainstream parties have continued to lose votes in recent elections while extremist parties on both ends of the political spectrum are increasingly successful across Europe.

In order to test the effect of mainstream party convergence on the rise of non-mainstream parties on both ends of the ideological spectrum, we present an unprecedented micro-level analysis of vote switching across Europe. To test our theoretical claim, we combine data on voter and party behaviour from the Manifestos Project and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems for 98,969 vote choices of individual voters who have supported 47 different mainstream parties in 30 elections in 16 West and East European countries in the period 2001–2013. We argue and find that as mainstream parties’ positions converge, voters who voted for these parties in the previous election are more likely to switch and vote for a non-mainstream party in the next election.

Our findings have important implications for parties and party systems and for understanding the changing nature of European party politics. First, our results are crucial for the electoral strategies that both mainstream and non-mainstream parties choose to take. To attract and keep voters, all parties need to differentiate themselves from their competitors, but will need to take care to not position themselves too far from where the majority of voters sit on the ideological spectrum. Second, as new parties form and attract voters, the size of party systems may increase. This could have major implications for cabinet formation as it will be harder to find legislative majorities with new parties represented in parliament that have more extremist views than established parties. In addition, since
coalition governments become more and more diverse as more parties are represented in the legislature, it becomes much more difficult for voters to predict which coalition will form. As a result, voters can no longer be sure that voting for a specific party will result in the preferred coalition cabinet.

Mainstream party convergence and vote switching

In this section, we present our theoretical argument linking mainstream party convergence and voter divergence building on previous work by Downs (1957) and Kitschelt (1995). We discuss why it is important for parties to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Finally, we present our hypothesis which posits that mainstream party voters are more likely to switch to non-mainstream parties the more similar the policy positions of the mainstream parties are.

Convergence or divergence as party strategy?

According to the median voter theorem (Downs 1957), parties in a two-party system have an incentive to appeal to the median voter – that is, the location where the majority of the voters are distributed on a one-dimensional ideological spectrum. Following from this centripetal expectation (Cox 1990: 903), studies of the American two-party system have demonstrated, ceteris paribus, that both congressional and presidential candidates perform better in general elections when their positions and platforms are more centrist (see, e.g., Ansolabehere et al. 2001; Canes-Wrone et al. 2002; Erikson et al. 2002). Spatial theories of two-party electoral competition (Downs 1957; Enelow & Hinich 1984) argue that parties that do not converge on the median voter, and follow a centrifugal strategy (Cox 1990: 903), will lose votes and are also likely to lose any offices they hold. Beyond convergence, Downs (1957: 141) posited that ‘fostering ambiguity is the rational course for each party in a two-party system’. In doing this, parties reduce the certainty by which voters can identify their positions and thus voters could then potentially vote for either party in the two-party context.

Importantly, scholars have also found that parties benefit electorally when moderating their positions in multiparty systems (see, e.g., Ezrow 2005; Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009; Abou-Chadi & Orlowski 2016). When electoral competition is high, for example, Abou-Chadi and Orlowski (2016) find that large mainstream parties will moderate their positions. Rovny (2012), moreover, has argued that parties may choose to blur issues they wish to de-emphasise and Somer-Topcu (2015) has demonstrated that parties in multiparty systems that use a ‘broad appeal strategy’ do better electorally.

Although focusing their positions on the median voter and blurring any differences between them would seem to be a beneficial strategy for parties, in fact it can have negative consequences for parties not only in a two-party system, but also for large mainstream parties in multiparty systems. In doing this, voters can no longer differentiate the parties’ positions. In contrast, parties that do not converge on the median voter typically have more identifiable positions. Wagner (2012), for example, shows that parties emphasise extreme positions when it will lead to electoral benefits. This strategy, however, varies based on a party’s size, the size of the party system and how spatially concentrated other parties’ positions are. Ezrow (2005: 882) finds in his macro-level study of parties’ policy positions in
Western European elections that although proximity to the median voter does increase a party’s vote share, ‘the benefit is relatively modest in size, so that parties that advocate non-centrist positions may nonetheless be electorally competitive’. This observation is confirmed in a subsequent piece on niche parties (Ezrow 2008), in which it is found that niche parties can be more competitive when they hold distinctive positions that voters can identify.

Recognising the difference between two-party and multiparty systems, Downs (1957: 141) argued that parties in the latter should ‘strive to accentuate ideological “product differentiation” by maintaining purity of doctrine’. By this, he meant that parties in multiparty systems would benefit by distinguishing themselves from their competitors. Other research has also found that policy differentiation can be advantageous. Adams and Merrill (1999) and Adams (1999), for example, find that parties can maximise their votes by taking non-centrist positions. Cox (1990) and Kitschelt (1994) argue that a party’s ability to distinguish itself from its competitors in a fragmented system is important for its electoral success. Indeed, Kitschelt (1995) demonstrated that when established parties became more similar, radical right parties benefited as they were able to offer something different. This finding has been confirmed by longitudinal cross-country analyses (see, e.g., Abedi 2002; Spies & Franzmann 2011). From a different perspective, Wittman (1973) has demonstrated that parties which care about policy may perform better by not moderating their positions. Finally, Bartolini and Mair (1990) find that when the distance between the left and right blocs are smaller, electoral volatility increases. All of these findings follow from Downs’s prescribed behaviour for parties in multiparty systems. By differentiating themselves, voters can more easily identify the parties’ positions.

**Why does differentiation matter?**

Parties can be thought of as brands (Downs 1957; Aldrich 1995; Cox 1997; Lupu 2013). They provide voters with a short-cut or heuristic when voting and enable them to differentiate among political products or agendas. In doing this, they function as meaningful linkage organisations between the electorate and decision makers (see Lawson 1980, 2005; Dalton et al. 2011). Parties are able to provide short-cuts to voters as they often selectively emphasise a particular issue on which they have competence and avoid an issue when they do not have this advantage (Budge & Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). Beyond emphasis, there are some issues that voters associate with a particular party (see, e.g., Walgrave et al. 2012); therefore, the clearer the party’s position is on such an issue, the more likely it is to attract voters. The issues of the environment and immigration are examples of such issues for green and radical right parties, respectively (Spoon et al. 2014; Han 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016). Research has, moreover, found that it matters which parties are in government (and their policy preferences) for policy outcomes (see, e.g., Hicks & Swank 1992; Tsebelis 2002). Thus, when a party differentiates itself on an issue, this can be helpful to voters when making their decisions as they can clearly identify the party’s position (see also Hobolt & De Vries 2015).

Following the proximity model of voting (Downs 1957), we assume that voters are rational utility maximisers who will choose the party that is closest to their policy preferences. Thus, when mainstream parties converge on the centre occupying the same ideological space and support similar policies, room is created on the ideological fringes.
New parties often develop in this available space as convergence has provided them with a political opportunity to form. Voters looking for a party that more closely aligns with their individual policy preferences may subsequently turn to these new, more extremist parties. This is often because many non-centrist voters no longer feel represented by the established parties. While we have thus far made the simplifying assumptions that parties primarily compete in a unidimensional space as it is typical in the spatial literature (e.g., Downs 1957), we expect a similar effect in a multidimensional setting where parties compete along more than one dimension.3

In addition, convergence reduces voters’ ability to distinguish among the parties.4 Minimising what differentiates them, moreover, means that voters are less able to identify which party more closely matches their own preferences. They may then turn to another party that presents a more divergent position that may be closer to their ideal position. In European party systems, these parties may have more ideologically extreme positions. When the mainstream parties in Greece and Spain, for example, took similar positions on austerity measures that would help the economy, we saw the development and success of Syriza and Podemos, respectively. Each party offered a well-defined anti-austerity message to its voters and performed well electorally as many voters rejected the austerity measures advocated by the mainstream parties and felt much better represented by Syriza and Podemos, both of which offered a clear and viable alternative. When looking at the positions of the German parties on the EU internal market in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), moreover, we find convergence between the Europhilic SPD and CDU, which both strongly support the EU internal market. Conversely, the far right AfD has a distinctly less favourable position towards the EU’s internal market (Polk et al. 2017), thereby distinguishing itself from the two mainstream parties.5

At the level of the party, extant research has demonstrated that when parties have more distinct policy positions, voters are more likely to participate and make clear policy choices. Hetherington (2007), Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), Dalton (2008) and Abramowitz (2010), for example, have shown that when elites are more polarised, voters are in turn more energised and excited, which can then result in higher levels of participation in the electoral process. This is because the candidates and parties have clearly different programmes and policies to offer to voters. Voters are therefore motivated to participate to help their preferred candidate or party win. The recent success of the populist right-wing AfD is, for example, often attributed to its ability to mobilise non-voters who previously felt under-represented by the established mainstream parties.

Similarly, at the level of the voter, Dalton et al. (2011: 120), has argued that ‘in order for voters to make clear policy choices, they must have clear options among the available parties’. Several pieces of research have empirically demonstrated this. Lachat (2008) shows that voters rely more on the ideological orientations of parties when the party system is more polarised. Ezrow et al. (2014) demonstrate that parties in new democracies benefit from taking extreme positions as this gives voters more certainty about the parties’ identity and what their intentions are once elected. Spoon (2011) finds that small parties’ vote shares increase the more ideologically distinct they are from the closest large, mainstream party. Moreover, Pardos-Prado and Riera (2016) find that as parties’ positions diverge from each other, political efficacy can increase. Finally, in examining voters’ ability to correctly identify the policy positions of parties in a governing coalition, Spoon and Klüver (2017)
have demonstrated that when parties’ positions are more distinct, voters’ misperception of parties’ positions is lower. This finding is in line with the clarity of responsibility argument – that is, when the lines of responsibility become blurred, voters are less able to attribute policy decisions to a specific party (Powell & Whitten 1993; Whitten & Palmer 1999). Thus, when voters are better able to distinguish a party’s position, they are more likely to support the party in the next election.

Following from this research, we argue that because large mainstream parties in European multiparty systems have not followed Downs’ (1957) prescribed behaviour of ‘product differentiation’, they have lost voters. When parties’ positions converge, moreover, rational voters cannot differentiate among the options offered, so they will thus defect and turn to another alternative. Typically, the alternative party is one with a more extreme ideology as such parties have more clear positions and are often formed in situations where the convergence of mainstream parties opened up space on the fringes of the ideological spectrum. We thus hypothesise that mainstream party convergence increases the probability that their supporters will switch to supporting a non-mainstream party at both ends of the political spectrum.

*H1*: As mainstream parties’ left-right positions converge, former mainstream party voters are more likely to vote for a non-mainstream party in the next election.

**Research design**

*Measuring the dependent variable: Vote switching*

The dependent variable in our study corresponds to switching from voting for a mainstream party at the last election at $t_{-1}$ to voting for a non-mainstream party at the current election at $t_0$. Our sample thus consists of all the vote choices of former mainstream party voters who have supported a mainstream party at the last election. To study vote switching from mainstream to non-mainstream parties, we rely on the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). The CSES is a cross-national survey study of voters in a wide variety of Western democracies that relies on a comparable survey that is conducted in different countries after their respective national elections. To operationalise our dependent variable, we rely on two questions which ask respondents to indicate the party they have voted for at the (1) last and at the (2) current election.

The dependent variable is coded 0 if voters continue to vote for a mainstream party at the current election and 1 if voters have defected by supporting a non-mainstream party at the current election. We define mainstream parties as those belonging to the Christian-democrat, conservative, social democrat/socialist or liberal party families. Non-mainstream parties are those belonging to the communist, agrarian, green, ethno/regional, nationalist and Eurosceptic party families. We coded the mainstream status of political parties based on information retrieved from the Manifestos Project (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; Volkens et al. 2015) which has coded the content of election manifestos of political parties in all OECD countries since the Second World War and also provides data for numerous party characteristics including the party family to which a party belongs. See Table A.1 in the Online Appendix for a list of mainstream and non-mainstream parties included.
in our analysis. In sum, 10.29 per cent of voters in our dataset switched from supporting a mainstream party at the last election to supporting a non-mainstream party in the current election.

Figure 1 illustrates which party families voters supported in the previous election before switching to a non-mainstream party. As the figure highlights, those who supported a left-wing mainstream party had a higher rate of switching (12.71 per cent) than those who supported a right-wing mainstream party (an average of 8.67 per cent). Figure 2, by contrast, shows which parties have gained from the vote switching of former mainstream party supporters. Out of the 10,182 vote switchers in our dataset, 36 per cent voted for communist parties, 26 per cent voted for green parties, 14 per cent voted for agrarian parties, 13 per cent voted for nationalist parties, 8 per cent voted for Euroskeptic or special issue parties and 2 per cent voted for regional parties.

**Measuring mainstream party convergence as divergence**

To assess the convergence of mainstream parties, we rely on the divergence of mainstream party policy positions at the current election. Rather than measuring convergence, we rely on the opposite concept – divergence – as it allows for a much more intuitive interpretation.
of the findings. We measure the policy positions of mainstream parties on the left-right scale as it constitutes the primary dimension of conflict in most established democracies (Marks & Steenbergen 2002). We obtained the policy preferences of mainstream parties on the left-right scale from the Manifestos Project (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; Volkens et al. 2015). The Manifestos Project generates the most comprehensive dataset on policy positions of political parties by conducting a manual content analysis of parties’ election manifestos which is then employed by a large number of scholars to measure parties’ ideal points (see, e.g., Adams et al. 2009). Human coders have divided the manifestos into so-called ‘quasi-sentences’ corresponding to thematic statements and have classified these quasi-sentences into policy categories based on an a priori developed coding scheme. This codebook consists of 56 categories grouped into seven policy domains. Where possible, directly opposing pro and contra categories are specified. In total, 13 categories have been defined as left and 13 as right.

The left-right scale was constructed in the following way. First, the percentages of left and right categories of the total number of coded quasi-sentences were calculated. Then, the percentage of left sentences was subtracted from the percentage of right sentences. Negative scores represent left positions and positive scores represent right positions. The left-right scale obtained from the Manifesto Project ranges from −100 (most left-wing position) to +100 (most right-wing position).

On the basis of these left-right scores, we measured mainstream party divergence as the standard deviation of the left-right policy positions of all mainstream parties in a country at the current election at \( t_0 \). Our measure thus captures the level of divergence of mainstream parties’ policy positions in a given election drawing on the standard deviation of mainstream parties left-right positions in that election.\(^\text{10}\) The measure varies from 4.085 (minimum divergence or maximum convergence) to 36.095 (maximum divergence or minimum convergence). Figure 3 illustrates party divergence for all the mainstream parties in the selected countries between 2001 and 2013. As the graph demonstrates, a high percentage of mainstream parties’ positions have converged with other parties. Roughly 40 per cent of the analysed elections have a divergence value of 10 or below.\(^\text{11}\)
Operationalisation of control variables

To test the effect of mainstream party convergence on the probability that voters switch from voting for a mainstream to voting a non-mainstream party, we include a number of control variables on the voter, party and country levels in the empirical analysis that may otherwise confound the hypothesised relationship.

At the level of individual voters, we control for age, gender, level of education and the policy distance between respondents and the party they previously voted for in the last election. We include the age of individual voters in the empirical analysis as it can have an important effect on an individual’s attitudes, political knowledge and voting behaviour. Second, we control for the gender of an individual voter as men and women systematically differ in their political attitudes, their political behaviour and their level of political information. Third, we control for the level of education of an individual voter as education can influence the political knowledge and the political attitudes of a person. The data for measuring the age, gender and the level of education are all taken from the CSES. Finally, we control for the policy distance between respondents and the party they have voted for at the last election as one would expect that the probability to defect from a party increases as the party adopts policy positions that are further away from the ideal points of voters. We use the absolute distance between the current left-right policy position of the party that a respondent has voted for at the last election and the left-right position of that respondent at the current election as a distance measure. To operationalise the party’s left-right position, we rely on the Manifesto Project data. In order to measure the left-right position of individual voters, we use a question in the CSES that asks respondents to indicate their left-right policy preference on a scale from 0 to 10. Since the Manifesto Project left-right positions are measured on a $-100$ to $+100$ scale while the policy preferences of voters are measured on a 0 to 10 scale, we have re-scaled the policy positions obtained from the Manifesto Project so that both party positions and individual voter positions by voters are measured on a 0–10 left-right scale. We then calculated the absolute distance to operationalise party-voter distance.

At the level of political parties, we control for party size, government status, a party’s policy position shift and policy extremism. Party size was measured by the percentage of votes that a party won in the last election. We obtained the data from the Manifestos Project dataset. We expect that party size is positively related to vote switching as most large parties typically follow a catch-all strategy by moderating their policy positions (Kirchheimer 1966). Government party indicates whether the party that respondents voted for in the last election subsequently took over executive offices. The data is from the ParlGov dataset (Döring 2013). We expect that defection is more likely when the party that voters have voted for at the last election took over governmental responsibility as parties typically cannot fulfill all of their demands due to economic, institutional and international constraints (see, e.g., Klüver & Spoon 2016). A party’s policy position shift was operationalised as the difference between the left-right position advocated by the party at the last election and the left-right position of that party at the current election. The data was taken from the Manifesto Project dataset. With regard to policy shift, an effect in both directions is plausible. A move to the left/right might increase the probability of switching if voters have a more right/left wing position, but it also may lower the probability.
of switching if the party moves closer to the position of the voter. Finally, the policy extremism of a party was operationalised as the absolute value of the left-right policy position of a party at the current election on the basis of the Manifestos Project left-right scale. We expect that vote switching is less likely for parties that advocate very extreme positions at the current election as voters can better distinguish extreme parties from their competitors.

We also control for several variables at the level of national elections. First, we include a measure for coalition governments to measure whether the government in office after the last election was a multiparty cabinet consisting of at least two different parties. The data for government type was drawn from the ParlGov dataset (Döring 2013). We expect that vote switching is more likely when a coalition government was in office in the previous term as voters cannot attribute responsibility in coalition cabinets and the policy positions of coalition parties become blurred in the minds of voters (e.g., Powell & Whitten 1993; Fortunato & Stevenson 2013; Spoon & Klüver 2017). Second, we include a measure for average district magnitude as the average size of the electoral districts for the lowest electoral tier. The data for this variable are drawn from Borman and Golder (2013). As voters are more likely to vote for smaller parties in more permissive systems, we expect to see an increase in vote switching from mainstream parties as average district magnitude increases.16 Third, we incorporate a measure for EU membership as European integration has an important effect on domestic party competition. More specifically, Nanou and Dorussen (2013) have shown that the transfer of competences to the EU is associated with a decrease in the distance between national parties’ policy positions. We include a dummy variable in the empirical analysis that indicates whether a country was a member of the EU at the time of the current election. We expect that EU membership has a positive effect on vote switching as voters have become increasingly sceptical of the EU, which often leads to punishing mainstream parties (e.g., Hix & Marsh 2007; Nanou & Dorussen 2013). Fourth, we include a dummy variable for countries in Eastern Europe. As party systems are less consolidated in newer democracies, we expect vote switching to be higher in these countries (see Tavits 2008).17 Finally, we have a variable that measures annual growth in gross domestic product (GDP). These data come from the World Bank (2016). Following research on economic voting (e.g., Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier 2000; Duch & Stevenson 2005), we expect that when the economy does poorly, voters are more likely to switch from mainstream to non-mainstream parties.

Dataset

Our dataset consists of 98,969 vote choices of individual voters who have supported 47 different mainstream parties in 30 elections in 16 West and East European countries from 2001 to 2013. These countries include Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Table A.2 in the Online Appendix presents descriptive statistics for all the variables included in the empirical analysis. It is important to note that this is a hierarchical dataset as variables on the level of elections only vary from one election to the next (see discussion below).
Data analysis

In this section, we test our theoretical expectations based on the newly compiled dataset on mainstream party convergence and voting behaviour. We first explain the structure of our dataset and the data analysis method we choose to evaluate our hypothesis. Afterwards, we present the results of our empirical analysis.

To test our theoretical expectations, the special structure of our dataset needs to be taken into account. Our dataset consists of the vote choices of individual citizens questioned in the CSES. As we are interested in explaining why voters switched from voting for mainstream parties to supporting non-mainstream parties at the next election, our dataset only includes the vote choices of citizens who have voted for a mainstream party at the last election. The dependent variable – vote switching – is a binary variable where 0 indicates that the voter has continued to support a mainstream party at the current election and 1 indicates that the voter who previously voted for a mainstream party supported a non-mainstream party at the current election. Given that the dependent variable is a dichotomous variable, we estimate a logistic regression model. The observations in our dataset are not independent from each other as assumed by ordinary logistic regression analysis as the vote choices of respondents are clustered into elections. Estimating an ordinary regression model on the basis of such a data structure may result in deflated standard errors and inflated type I error rates so the significance of estimated effects may be overrated (Steenbergen & Jones 2002: 219–220). Thus, to test our theoretical claim, we estimate a multilevel logistic regression model.

Table 1 illustrates the results of the multilevel logistic regression analysis. The empirical analysis provides support for our theoretical claim as mainstream party divergence has a statistically significant negative effect on the probability of switching from a mainstream to a non-mainstream party. Hence, as mainstream parties converge on the left-right scale, the likelihood significantly increases that they lose their supporters. More specifically, when the ideological differences between mainstream parties decrease as they move closer to each other, their supporters are more likely to vote for a non-mainstream party at the next election.

To further illustrate the effect of mainstream party convergence on the probability of switching from a mainstream to a non-mainstream party, we have simulated predicted probabilities as suggested by King et al. (2000). Figure 4 displays the simulated predicted probability of defecting from a mainstream party on the y-axis while mainstream party divergence on the left-right scale is indicated on the x-axis. The solid line represents the predicted point estimates and the dashed lines indicate the 95 per cent confidence interval. The histogram indicates the empirical distribution of mainstream party divergence in our individual-level dataset. Figure 4 clearly shows that mainstream party divergence/convergence has an important effect on the probability that voters abandon mainstream parties and instead support non-mainstream competitors. As the ideological divergence among mainstream parties in a given country decreases, the probability that voters defect by voting for a non-mainstream party at the next election increases significantly. When mainstream party divergence is at its minimum value (4.085) – in other words, when the parties’ policy positions are more similar – the probability that former mainstream party supporters will defect to a non-mainstream competitor amounts to 0.136. By contrast, when mainstream party divergence is at its maximum value (36.095) – in
Table 1. Results from multilevel logistic regression (left-right dimension)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed effects</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DV: Vote switching (mainstream to non-mainstream)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fixed effects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainstream party divergence</td>
<td>-0.126 (0.034)</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Government party</td>
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<td>Policy position shift from last to current election</td>
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<td>Policy extremism</td>
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<td>Coalition government</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average district magnitude</td>
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<td>EU membership</td>
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<td>Random effects</td>
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</table>

Note: *p < 0.01.

Figure 4. The effect of mainstream party convergence.
Note: As our unit of analysis is the individual voter, mainstream party divergence reflects the number of voters in a given election. Thus, the frequency of mainstream party divergence is the number of individual voters who voted for a given mainstream party in the previous election.
Table 2. Results from multilevel logistic regression (EU dimension)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed effects</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DV: Vote switching (mainstream to non-mainstream)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream party divergence</td>
<td>-0.740* (0.286)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.020** (0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.248** (0.022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.136** (0.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party size</td>
<td>0.015** (0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government party</td>
<td>-0.219** (0.030)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy position shift from last to current election</td>
<td>0.317** (0.007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy extremism</td>
<td>0.142** (0.008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition government</td>
<td>1.223 (0.748)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average district magnitude</td>
<td>-0.003 (0.006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU membership</td>
<td>-0.696 (0.728)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Europe</td>
<td>-1.948* (0.765)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>-0.004 (0.021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.162* (1.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Random effects</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance elections</td>
<td>1.936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>98,969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>-28474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>56977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC</td>
<td>57120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05. Policy distance party-voter was not included in this analysis due to the lack of EU position data for individual voters.

In other words, when the parties’ policy positions are further apart – the probability that mainstream party supporters choose a non-mainstream party at the next election is 0.005. In sum, our findings show that mainstream party convergence on the left-right scale is an important explanation for the recent vote loss of established mainstream parties in Europe.

In order to further test the robustness of our findings, we have also estimated a second model specification in which we analyse how the convergence of mainstream parties on the European integration dimension affects voting behaviour. The European integration dimension has become increasingly important in political competition across Europe (see, e.g., Marks et al. 2006). As a result, voters may also switch to non-mainstream parties because they identify with the specific position they advocate on the European integration dimension and not because they are more extreme on the left-right dimension. For instance, voters frequently support the United Kingdom Independence Party because of its anti-European position (Ford et al. 2012) and in its earlier years, the AfD campaigns focused on a strongly Eurosceptic appeal (Arzheimer 2015). To shed light on how contestation over the European integration dimension affects defection from mainstream parties, model 2 reported in Table 2 presents the results of an alternative model...
specification in which the convergence of mainstream parties on the European integration dimension is included as a predictor. The results confirm our theoretical expectations. More specifically, as the divergence of European policy positions adopted by mainstream parties becomes smaller, the likelihood for vote switching from a mainstream to a non-mainstream party significantly increases. Thus, as mainstream parties converge on the European integration dimension, voters increasingly look for alternatives and withdraw their electoral support.

Several of our control variables are also statistically significant. Older voters tend not to switch from mainstream to non-mainstream parties, while women have a higher probability of defecting. The level of education of individual respondents is also significantly related to vote switching, as better educated citizens have a higher probability of changing from supporting a mainstream to supporting a non-mainstream competitor. This supports research on cognitive mobilisation and weakening party ties by voters who are more politically aware and sophisticated (see, e.g., Dalton 1984; Inglehart 1990). Against our expectations, we find that government parties suffer less from vote losses. If the mainstream party that a respondent has voted for in the last election entered the government after that election, the probability that the respondent chooses a non-mainstream party at the next election is smaller. Furthermore, as the ideological distance between voters and the mainstream parties they have formerly supported electorally increases, the probability of switching to a non-mainstream party rises as expected. Finally, when mainstream parties adopt more extreme positions, the probability that mainstream party voters support a non-mainstream challenger at the next election increases.

Conclusion

In this article, we have offered an explanation for the recent political and electoral volatility in Europe. More specifically, we have for the first time tested Downs’s (1957) expectation that as parties’ policy positions converge on the left-right scale, voters will seek out alternative options that better represent their preferences based on a comprehensive micro-level analysis of vote switching. Oftentimes, these alternative parties are on the fringes of the ideological spectrum (see Cox 1990; Kitschelt 1994; Ezrow 2008; Wagner 2012). Through a comprehensive empirical analysis covering nearly 100,000 vote choices of individual voters who have supported 47 different mainstream parties in 30 elections in 16 West and East European countries from 2001 until 2013, we have demonstrated that as established mainstream parties’ positions become more similar, voters are more likely to defect from established parties by switching to, and supporting, a non-mainstream party at the next election. We have thus offered a micro-level explanation for understanding increasing non-mainstream party gains across Europe.

Our findings have important implications for political parties and party systems. First, these findings have considerable consequences for party strategy. If mainstream parties want to continue attracting voters, they will need to better differentiate themselves from their competitors. However, this presents somewhat of a challenge as we know that most voters lie in the centre of the ideological spectrum. Thus, established parties cannot differentiate themselves by taking a policy position that is too far removed from the median voter, yet at the same time, they have to take a position that is different enough from their rivals. Similarly,
for non-mainstream parties to attract voters, they need to offer a clear alternative, yet it cannot be one that is too extreme, or too far on the ideological fringes – what Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989: 108) referred to as outside the ‘region of acceptability’ – where there are few voters. For instance, while the radical right wing party Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD) has never been able to obtain a considerable number of votes in Germany given its radical right image and its extreme right-wing policy positions, the recently founded and more moderate right-wing populist AfD was able to exploit mainstream party convergence by winning over 12 per cent of the vote in the most recent federal elections.

Second, our results have implications for party competition and party systems. By focusing our analysis on the individual level, we are able to understand how and why party systems in Europe are changing. As long as mainstream parties follow a strategy of convergence on the median voter, they will continue to lose votes, and new parties on the fringes may continue to develop and attract voters. This could result in increasing the size of the party system. Across Europe, we are accordingly witnessing moderate multiparty systems becoming ever more diverse party systems. Germany, for example, had been a 2.5 party system until the 1980s with three established mainstream parties – the Christlich Demokratische Union/Christlich Soziale Union (CDU/CSU), Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) and the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP). It is now a six-party system with Bündnis 90/Die Grünen emerging in the 1980s, Die Linke establishing itself in the 1990s and the AfD gaining support in the aftermath of the recent economic and immigration crisis as viable competitors.

Third, our findings have crucial implications for cabinet formation. As party systems increase in size, it is harder to build legislative majorities in parliament as many of the new parties are located on the fringes of the ideological spectrum. For instance, while Germany was typically governed by coalition governments composed of two parties with clear bloc-building on the left (the social-democratic SPD and the Greens) and on the right (the Christian-democratic CDU/CSU and the liberal FDP), these coalitions are no longer possible due to the significant vote loss of the SPD and the CDU/CSU and the recent rise of the AfD. As a result, voters have a much harder time predicting which coalitions are likely to form when making their vote choice. Hence, voters can no longer be sure that voting for a specific party will result in the preferred coalition cabinet. This may lead to considerable frustration and discontent among citizens. What is more, coalition-building not only becomes unpredictable, but it becomes much more difficult to form a government at all. Following the federal elections in September 2017, for example, in which the AfD won 12.6 per cent of the vote and entered the Bundestag, none of the typical two-party coalitions between either the CDU/CSU and the FDP or SPD and the Greens seemed possible. At first, the SPD declared that it would not rejoin a grand coalition. Hence, for the first time in Germany’s history, a coalition cabinet covering three different parties appeared to be the only viable government option. It was only after six months that a coalition between the CDU/CSU and SPD was agreed upon – far surpassing the previous record for time taken to form a government.

While this analysis has provided a first step in understanding the changing nature of European political systems, it is important to recognise that we only focus on a short period of time and that we do not know if these trends will continue. We do not, for example, know
if we will see continued instability in party systems or a return to stability. Focusing on the current trends, however, there is still more research to do. Future research should examine several issues. First, it would be beneficial to assess mainstream party convergence on specific issues. We may, for example, see more vote switching when parties take similar positions on certain issues. And these issues may vary over time and across countries. Voters, moreover, may be more likely to switch their vote on the issues that are most important to them when mainstream parties’ positions converge. Second, it would be interesting to examine what explains the rate of switching both at the individual and the system level. As we discussed above, it may matter, for example, which mainstream party voters have supported in the past in determining the likelihood of switching. The rate of switching could be similarly influenced by the context of the election, media coverage or elite cues. Third, given the increasing electoral success of populist and radical right parties in recent years, this study has focused on explaining why voters switch from mainstream to non-mainstream parties to shed light on this phenomenon. However, as there is also volatility with regard to the support of non-mainstream parties, future research could also explore this question further. All of these areas will be important to explore to more fully understand the dynamic nature of European party politics in the twenty-first century.

Acknowledgements

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Online Appendix

Additional information and analysis may be found online in the Online Appendix at the end of the article:

Table A.1: Mainstream and non-mainstream parties
Table A.2: Descriptive statistics
Table A.3: Robustness check based on measuring mainstream party divergence by the range of left-right policy positions
Table A.4: Robustness check measuring mainstream parties based on the extremeness of their left-right policy position
Table A.5: Robustness check explaining vote switching from government to opposition parties
Table A.6: Robustness check including political information
Table A.7: Robustness check including lagged mainstream party divergence
Table A.8: Robustness check including interaction effect between mainstream party convergence and average district magnitude
Table A.9: Robustness check using ENPP
Table A.10: Robustness check using years of democracy
Table A.11: Robustness check including policy extremism of voters

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Table A.12: Robustness check excluding outliers
Table A.13: Results from multilevel logistic regression clustered by political parties
Table A.14: Results from multilevel logistic regression based on a two-dimensional divergence measure
Table A.15: Results from multilevel logistic regression controlling for the distance between mainstream and non-mainstream parties
Figure 1: Vote share of party families over time

Notes

1. We define mainstream parties as those belonging to the Christian-democrat, conservative, social democrat/socialist or liberal party families. Non-mainstream parties are those belonging to the communist, agrarian, green, ethno/regional, nationalist and Euro-sceptic party families. Our categorisation of non-mainstream parties is therefore broader than the niche party category (Adams et al 2006; Meguid 2008). Importantly, size and party family are not one and the same: mainstream parties can be small (e.g., the Swedish Christian Democrats) and non-mainstream parties can be large (e.g., the Swiss People's Party).

2. See Figure A.1 in the Online Appendix for an overview of the vote shares of party families over time.

3. In order to acknowledge multidimensionality, we have estimated two additional robustness checks. First, in addition to our main model that takes the left-right dimension as the major dimension of conflict, we have also estimated a second model specification based on the pro-/anti-European integration dimension (see Table 2). Second, we have also run another model specification in which we include a two-dimensional measure of convergence that simultaneously takes into account mainstream party convergence on both the left-right and the pro-anti-EU dimension (see Table A.14 in the Online Appendix). The results are substantially the same.

4. Lupu (2013, 2014) makes a similar argument to explain weakening partisan attachments.

5. On the CHES 1–7 scale, where 1 is strongly opposed to and 7 is strongly in favour of the internal market, the parties positions are: CDU-6.55; SPD-6 and AfD-3.2.


7. We do not differentiate whether voters have supported a different mainstream party at the current election as compared to the last election. As long as voters support one of the mainstream parties, we coded vote switching as 0.

8. Several of the non-mainstream party families are included in different scholars’ categorisations of niche parties (see Adams et al 2006; Meguid 2008). We have also estimated two alternative model specifications using a different conceptualisation of mainstream party. First, we estimated a model in which we consider all parties as mainstream parties whose policy positions lie within one standard deviation away from the mean party position in a given party system (see Table A.4 in the Online Appendix). Second, we estimated another model in which we explain vote switching from government to opposition parties by government party policy convergence (see Table A.5 in the Online Appendix). The results of both models are substantially the same.

9. We have estimated an additional model specification in which we also include the lagged mainstream party convergence (see Table A.7 in the Online Appendix). While the mainstream party convergence at the current election exhibits a statistically significant effect, convergence at the last election does not play a role for voter defection at the current election. This would be an interesting question to explore in further research. In addition, we have computed the distance between mainstream parties and non-mainstream parties for a given election and included this variable in a robustness check reported in Table A.15 in the Online Appendix. The distance between mainstream and non-mainstream parties does not have a statistically significant effect and our findings remain unchanged.
10. We have also estimated an additional model specification in which we used the range of the left-right policy positions as a measure for mainstream party convergence/divergence. The results are similar (see Table A.3 in the Online Appendix).

11. As Figure 3 indicates, there is one outlier (Italy in 2006) with a divergence value of about 36. In order to test the robustness of our findings, we have estimated an additional analysis excluding this outlier (see Table A.12 in the Online Appendix). The results do not substantially change.

12. We have also estimated an additional model specification in which we control for the level of political information as well as the interaction between political information and mainstream party convergence (see Table A.6 in the Online Appendix). Political information increases the likelihood of defection from mainstream parties while the interaction effect is not statistically significant. Moreover, the effect of our main explanatory variable – mainstream party convergence – is substantially the same. Since there is a high number of missing values for political information in the CSES dataset, we decided to exclude this variable from the main model presented in Table 1.

13. In addition, we have also estimated a model specification in which we control for the policy extremism of a voter measured by the absolute left-right value and interact that variable with mainstream party convergence (see model 11 reported in Table A.11 in the Online Appendix). We do not find a statistically significant effect, which indicates that mainstream party convergence affects both extremist and moderate voters alike.

14. We recognise that pre-election coalitions between parties could increase a party’s vote share, which could in turn influence a voter’s likelihood of switching. This would be an important avenue for future research.

15. We additionally estimated an alternative model specification in which we study whether policy convergence of government parties leads to vote switching from government to opposition parties (see Table A.5 in the Online Appendix). The results are in line with our general argument that policy convergence leads to vote switching.

16. We estimated an additional model specification in which we include an interaction effect between average district magnitude and mainstream party divergence (see Table A.8 in the Online Appendix). We find that there is a statistically significant negative effect indicating that the effect of mainstream party divergence varies with the permissiveness of the electoral system. We have also estimated a model using a measure for the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP) as we would expect switching to be more likely when a voter has a larger choice set (see Table A.9 in the Online Appendix).

17. As a robustness check, we have substituted years of democracy for the Eastern Europe dummy variable (see Table A.10 in the Online Appendix). Unlike the East European variable, years of democracy is positive and statistically significant, which may highlight the frustration that many voters have with mainstream parties in established democracies.

18. There are several possible explanations for this finding. Future research should explore whether there are differences between right- and left-wing governing parties, for senior versus junior coalition partners, and if there are differences depending on the ideological range and position of the coalition in relation to those of the voters.

References


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