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Random Walk or Planned Excursion? Continuity and Change in the Left–Right Positions of Political Parties

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Abstract

Implicit in theories of democratic elections is the idea of change—or at least the potential for change. Elections provide the opportunity for citizens to change their party preferences and thus alter the course of government. In addition, political parties can change their programmatic positions to attract new voters. Our research asks how much parties change their Left–Right positions between elections and what this tells us about parties' strategic choices. We utilize data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project and the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys. We demonstrate very high stability in parties' Left–Right position over time. Furthermore, we find only modest evidence that parties change their Left–Right position in a conscious process of vote seeking.

Keywords

left–right, party strategies, voting choice, vote-seeking, expert opinions

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Implicit in virtually any theory of democratic elections is the idea that party vote shares change between elections—or at least there is a real potential for change. Elections provide the opportunity for citizens to change their party preferences and thus alter the course of government. In addition, political parties can change their programmatic positions to attract new voters. This potential for change contributes to making democratic governments accountable and representative of public preferences.

Almost every election is accompanied by media reports of one party shifting their broad political positions to court new voters or regain voters lost at the last election. Following an election, it is common for political parties to engage in self-reflection to consider whether to and how to adjust in reaction to the voters' recent decision. Indeed, a burgeoning literature in recent years adopts a framework of parties as rational actors who are choosing and altering their political positions, and outlines the criteria for their choices (Adams, 2012; Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2004; Adams, Haupt, & Stoll, 2009; Budge, Ezrow, & McDonald, 2010; Budge, Keman, McDonald, & Pennings, 2012; McDonald & Budge, 2005). If parties and voters did not change their positions between elections in reaction to events and government performance, there would be little reason for more than one election.

Accounts of contemporary party systems also stress the increasing fluidity and volatility of political parties and electoral outcomes (Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007; Wren & McElwain, 2007). In addition, the effective number of parties is generally increasing in affluent democracies, so new parties are being added to the electoral mix resulting in increased electoral change. So electoral change appears to be increasing in established democracies.

Our research asks to what degree do parties actually change their broad political positions between elections and tests some of the existing theories of party continuity and change. We bring new empirical evidence to bear on this research topic. Previous empirical studies have almost exclusively used the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) to examine changes in parties' programs. We utilize a time series of citizen perceptions of party positions from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project. In addition, we supplement these data with evidence from the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (CHES) in which national experts estimate the parties' ideological positions (Bakker et al., 2012). The CSES is a coordinated cross-national election survey conducted by national election study teams; participating countries ask a common module of questions in their post-election survey (Klingemann, 2009). We argue that there are distinct advantages in using citizen perceptions to measure party positions, as these perceptions are the reality of politics for voters.

The topic of inter-election change in parties' political orientations has important implications for electoral politics and the democratic process. If partisan change follows a *vote-seeking strategy* in which parties shift position to gain more votes, this suggests the factors that drive the calculations of party elites. This may be especially significant if increased electoral volatility reflects the dealignment of contemporary systems, forcing the parties to attract support from undecided voters (Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2012). Conversely, if parties are *policy-driven actors* acting relatively independent of electoral results, this offers a different image of party competition. The balance between vote-seeking and policy-driven models reflects on the nature of democratic representation (Bishoff, 2013; Laver & Sergenti, 2012).

This article is divided into five sections. The next section reviews the existing literature on the vote-seeking and policy-driven logics of party change and continuity between elections. The second section introduces our basic measures of party positions: the Left–Right scale measured through the CSES surveys, the CHES, and other studies of party positions. The third section analyzes the stability of Left–Right orientations over several elections to answer the question of how much parties actually do change. The fourth section tests alternative theories to predict party change along the Left–Right scale between elections. Finally, we discuss the implications of our results for the nature of contemporary political parties and for larger issues of electoral choice.

Theories of Party Change

In the lore and research of electoral politics, there is a common belief that parties strategically alter their political positions between elections to increase their vote share. Our research focuses on evaluating this model with the new empirical evidence. A counter position argues that political parties have distinct ideological identities and are embedded in a network of supporters that substantially restrict their freedom to significantly change the parties' basic political positions. This section briefly reviews these different potential explanations of party behavior.

Voting-Seeking Strategies

Most of the previous literature on inter-election changes in parties' broad political positions is derived from spatial models that predict how parties consciously follow vote-maximizing strategies (e.g., Adams, 2012; Adams et al., 2004; Adams et al., 2009; Budge, 1994; Budge et al., 2012; Laver & Sergenti, 2012). The spatial model assumes that voter preferences are

exogenous and relatively fixed, whereas parties vary their political position to maximize their electoral appeal (Downs, 1957). For example, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and Gerhard Schröder notably pursued more centrist ideological campaigns in successful attempts to win more votes—and government control—for their respective parties.

A vote-maximizing strategy of party change can appear in several ways. At the most basic level, vote-maximization implies that parties respond to changes in the position of the median voter along the Left–Right dimension (Adams et al., 2009; Ezrow, 2010; McDonald & Budge, 2005). For example, if economic conditions or other events produce a substantial leftward or rightward shift in public sentiment, a responsive party system might shift with the public to retain their relative vote shares (cf. Grofman, 2004). This is, perhaps, the most basic Downsian hypothesis about parties strategic positioning on the Left–Right scale.

A more party-specific theory suggests that if a party loses voters in one election, there is an incentive to adjust its political profile to increase voter support in the next election (Adams, 2012; Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009; Andrews & Money, n.d.; Budge, 1994; Budge et al., 2010; McDonald & Budge, 2005; Somer-Topcu, 2009). To grapple with the ambiguity of choice facing parties, Ian Budge (1994) has offered a parsimonious "past election hypothesis." The past election model posits that parties look to the prior election—both vote share and previous ideological changes—for guidance on whether to change positions in the current election. He argues that parties are more likely to move in the same ideological direction as the last time if they gained votes in the previous election. This movement may continue until there is evidence that this strategy is not working for the party, perhaps because the party overshoots its maximal policy position.

If a party has lost votes, there is also a greater likelihood for the party to change strategies to seek new voters. But the Left–Right direction of change for losers is more ambiguous. In some instances, vote losses might encourage a movement toward the center and the median voter. This rationale is often applied to majoritarian electoral systems with a few large parties vying for majority status. The Clinton, Blair, and Schröder elections are examples of this logic. In other instances, a party might adopt a more distinct political position to distance itself from its nearby competitors in a multiparty system (Adams, Merrill, & Grofman, 2005). Budge (1994) extended the past election hypothesis to argue that if parties lost votes in the last election, they were more likely to move in a different ideological direction than in the previous electoral cycle. Based on analyses of party positions from the CMP, Budge found that the past election hypothesis was one of the more successful explanations of inter-election party change.

In addition, most analyses of party change based on the CMP project found that Left–Right change in one election is negatively correlated with change in the previous election (Adams et al., 2004; Budge, 1994; Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, & Tanenbaum, 2001). Budge (1994) describes this as the "policy alternation model." There are several possible explanations for this pattern. One theory traces such alternation to the limited information available to party elites on what strategy will be successful, so they explore the alternatives sequentially (Budge, 1994, p. 453). Another logic holds that parties have a political identity that provides a "homing" tendency across elections. In one election, a party might explore its electoral space by moving slightly to the Left (or Right) to see if this attracts new voters, and then return toward its home in the subsequent election.[1] If a party continues to move in a single direction over multiple elections, it would risk losing its political identity and voter constituency. Such an alternating pattern may also reflect internal organizational struggles between factions within the party that seek to moderate party platforms or pursue distinct policy objectives (McAllister, 1991), and the relative success of these factions may vary over time. Over several elections, this pattern might look like a random walk model, but it is really a systematic search for new voters (Laver & Sergenti, 2012, chap. 8). Budge (1994) showed that the policy alternation model was also very successful in explaining inter-election party change.

Policy-Driven Strategies

In contrast to rationalist vote-seeking theories, another approach emphasizes the parties' concerns about public policies and their ideological identity (Laver, 2005). Whereas some politicians and parties may change course to win more votes, others believe the party exists to advocate its key principles, which should not be abandoned in the hunt for more electoral support. In the late 1800s U.S. Senator Henry Clay famously said, "I'd rather be right than president"; it is a sentiment apparently shared by many contemporary politicians on the Left and Right.

This policy-driven strategy is commonly associated with extreme parties that are presumably more ideologically oriented than vote maximizing, and thus more rigid in their Left–Right positions. Furthermore, Adams et al. (2005) theorized that there is an incentive for parties to take more extreme positions, because voters will partially discount these positions in the expectation that the party's actual governing policies will be more moderate. The literature often describes these policy-driven parties as "niche parties" including communists, green parties, and nationalist parties (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2006; Meguid, 2005; Tavits, 2007).

A policy-driven theory would argue that centrist catch-all parties would be more likely to follow vote-seeking strategies and thus be more changeable in their ideological position. In contrast, communist, libertarian, greens, and other ideological parties that typically exist at the poles of the Left–Right continuum should be more stable in their political views.

In summary, both the vote-seeking and policy-driven models of party behavior presume that parties are calculating, rational actors in making their programmatic choices. They know what they want, and take appropriate—albeit different—actions. At the same time, there are counter-arguments about the limits of parties in identifying new programs and effecting change. We test the relative merits of these two rival explanations of party behavior by examining how parties actually change their Left–Right positions over time.

Measuring Party Positions

Analyzing inter-election change in party positions requires a reliable measure of these positions. The Downsian logic of spatial analysis holds that most party systems can be described as ranging along a single dimension of political competition. Following previous studies, we accept that the Left–Right dimension is useful in summarizing the broad positions of parties and voters (Adams et al., 2004; Budge et al., 2001; Dalton, Farrell, & McAllister, 2011; Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2012). We acknowledge that the political space is more complex than a single Left–Right dimension, but we agree with those authors who maintain that the Left–Right dimension provides a meaningful framework for analysis.

We treat the Left–Right dimension as a political reference structure that helps parties and citizens communicate their programmatic choices to one another. This does not mean that citizens understand a philosophical definition of Left and Right; rather, party positions on this dimension summarize the issues that define political competition in each nation. Thus, the Left–Right dimension is shorthand for summarizing issues, party positions, and the dynamics of electoral choice.

Previous empirical studies have used several different methods to estimate party positions on the Left–Right dimension:

Party Manifestos

In many electoral systems, manifestos (or party platforms) are formal blueprints for party positions in the legislature, providing an official source for a party's policy intentions (Budge et al., 2001; Gabel & Huber,

2000; McDonald & Mendes, 2001). Most of the previous research on changes in party Left–Right positions between elections uses these CMP measures.

Expert Evaluations

An alternative method asks academic experts to position the parties along a Left–Right scale as well as on specific policy dimensions (Bakker et al., 2012; Benoit & Laver, 2006; Hooghe et al., 2010; Marks, 2007; Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2012). Such expert surveys summarize the totality of the parties' positions, including manifestos as well as the content of recent campaigns and the policy activities of the parties.

Elite Positions

A third option asks party elites to position themselves (or their party) on the Left–Right scale. As elected party representatives, one can make a strong claim that elite positions define the party identity. Indeed, many previous studies of political representation are based on elite self-placements (Miller et al., 1999; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1997).

Citizen Perceptions

Another method asks citizens to locate the parties in their nation on the Left–Right scale. The CSES has asked respondents to position themselves and the significant parties on the Left–Right scale.[2] Dalton et al. (2011, chap. 5) showed that most people can locate themselves and the major parties on the scale.

An extensive literature evaluates and compares these alternative measures of party positions and is not necessary to evaluate them here.[3] We believe that there is no single definitive source to identify a party's political position. The best of the available measures depends on the context and the factors being considered. Still, by comparing these four sources we can determine the consistency of party Left–Right placements across measures.

We coded the entire public's Left–Right position for all the parties measured in the CSES Module II survey. Then, we added the Left–Right scores for these parties from the other sources. The Comparative Manifestos Project coded 144 parties that overlap with the CSES data, mostly from advanced industrial democracies and some Eastern European systems.[4] The 2006 CHES survey largely overlaps with the timing of the CSES Module II

Table 1. Correlations Between Alternative Party Left–Right Measures.

	Correlations (*N* of cases)								Factor loadings
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1. CSES public									.94
2. CHES party experts	.89 (168)								.95
3. MNP self-placement	.90 (40)	.92 (50)							.95
4. MNP party	.88 (40)	.90 (50)	.95 (59)						.94
5. CEP self-placement (1996)	.89 (46)	.89 (53)	.85 (46)	.85 (46)					.96
6. CEP party (1996)	.90 (45)	.89 (52)	.86 (46)	.88 (46)	.98 (60)				.95
7. CEP self-placement (2009)	.87 (45)	.88 (49)	.90 (30)	.86 (30)	.94 (30)	.92 (30)			.96
8. CEP party (2009)	.90 (45)	.89 (49)	.88 (30)	.85 (30)	.92 (30)	.91 (30)	.96 (54)		.95
9. Manifestos	.64 (144)	.64 (128)	.70 (53)	.72 (53)	.68 (55)	.67 (55)	.69 (49)	.64 (49)	.75

Source. Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) Module II; 2006 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES); 1996 Members of the National Parliament (MNP) Study, 1997 British Representation Study; 1994 Candidates for the European Parliament (CEP) Study; 2009 European Election Candidates Study; Comparative Manifesto Program
Entries are Pearson *r* correlations and the (*N*) of each correlation; the eigenvalue of the factor analysis is 7.80, which explains 86.6% of the total variance.

surveys (Hooghe et al., 2010). National experts estimated the Left–Right positions of political parties in 29 European countries, and 128 overlap with the CSES parties. The 1996 Members of National Parliament study has 40 parties overlapping with CSES and the 1994 Candidates for the European Parliament study has 46 parties in common with the CSES.[5] The 2009 Candidates for the European Parliament study has 41 parties overlapping with CSES.[6] All three elite surveys asked respondents to place themselves, their party's voters, and their national party on the Left–Right scale.[7]

The correlations in Table 1 display a striking agreement among three of the data sources—public perceptions, expert judgments, and political elites. The correlations average slightly above .90, which is very high consistency as the public, experts, and political elites are locating the parties at different points in time, with different levels of political information, and presumably somewhat different bases of evaluation (also see Bakker et al., 2012).[8]

The manifesto data are also consistent with the Left–Right positions from the other sources, but to a lesser degree. The correlation between Left–Right in the manifestos and party experts is only .64, which is the same as the correlation between the manifestos and public perceptions of the parties.[9] The factor analysis loadings in the rightmost column of Table 1 show that six variables from the public, experts, and elites display very large factor loadings on a first unrotated dimension (in the .94-.96 range), whereas the manifesto Left–Right scores are significantly lower (.75). This is not just a comparison of citizen/expert perceptions to the coding of manifestos, the CMP measures are also weakly related to the positions of party officeholders and the officeholder's placement of their own party. Furthermore, the CMP data might be handicapped because they begin with formal party platforms, which evolve from an uncertain process of defining party positions and are often separate from the actual campaign (Adams, Ezrow, & Somer-Topcu, 2011). The CMP also constructs a synthetic Left–Right score from issue salience measures, whereas all the other data sources directly assess Left–Right positions. The CMP scores are valuable, especially for their cross-national and cross-temporal coverage, but these data appear to yield the least consistent measure of party Left–Right positions.[10]

Any measure of party positions in imperfect, but public perceptions from the CSES appear as valid as the party positions assigned by experts and by party elites themselves. The accuracy of public perceptions of party Left–Right positions may surprise some skeptics of mass publics, but other research displays similar consistency.[11] We have merely strengthened these findings by expanding the cross-national evidence and comparing multiple judgments of party positions. The accuracy of public perceptions comes from the use of aggregate statistics, where individual "errors" balance out so that the overall public's collective positioning of a party is more accurate than the individual judgments. Moreover, we would argue that the public's perceptions of the parties create the basis of their voting choices—even if these perceptions are imperfect—and we have shown that academic experts and party elites share these perceptions. Thus, our analyses of party positions focus on the new data from the CSES study. Supporting this decision, in reviewing the alternative measures of party positions, Peter Mair (2001) wrote that citizen perceptions are "one of the principal and most robust means of charting party and/or voter positions" (p. 14).

Continuity or Change?

The next step of our empirical analysis asks how much political parties actually change their Left–Right positions across elections. This is a basic

theoretical and political question facing electoral studies. On one hand, our thinking might gravitate to well-known recent examples, such as Blair's centrist movement of the British Labour Party or Jörg Haider's rightward turn of the Austrian Free Democrats. These were real changes on which researchers, political analysts, and voters agree. And the seeming consensus of the spatial modeling field is that there is abundant empirical evidence of parties making such strategic shifts in their political positions (Adams, 2012). On the other hand, parties have a distinct political identity and are embedded in a network of social group ties and voter groups that constrain their movement. Our attention might be drawn to examples like Blair and Haider because they are so unusual.

To systematically judge the stability of party positions, we constructed a time series of the entire public's Left–Right position of parties across elections from the CSES project, supplemented by national election studies for elections missed by the CSES.[12] This produces a base of 135 parties scored for at least two adjacent elections. There are 102 parties for the first and third elections, and 56 parties for the first and fourth elections. Then, we repeated this data construction process for the four waves of the CHES expert study.

We begin by comparing the Left–Right positions of parties for the base pair of CSES elections (Figure 1). Despite the common discussions (and CMP evidence) of party change in contemporary democracies, these results show remarkable persistence in party positions. If one accepts the presence of some measurement error, such as sampling error in the surveys or the impact of short-term exogenous events, then this .96 correlation between elections is impressive. It seems to leave little room for real electoral change, except in a few exceptional cases.

There are fewer election pairs as we go out to two or three sequential CSES elections, but the correlations in party positions decay very little (top panel of Table 2). The .96 correlation across three elections is the same as for two adjacent elections. Across four elections, the number of parties decreases considerably (to less than half of the initial number of parties), but the correlation remains very high (r = .95). Significant change in parties' broad Left–Right positions between elections appears to be a rare event.

The stability of party Left–Right positions is not simply a function of using citizen perceptions. The CHES now span four waves: 1999, 2002, 2006, and 2010. This time span includes the consolidation of the post-Communist democracies in Eastern Europe, substantial economic change in the global and EU economies, and the Great Recession and Euro Crisis. Yet, overall party positions in overall Left–Right terms are strikingly stable. The CHES data in the bottom half of Table 2 yield correlations of .95 or higher across adjacent waves. Other expert studies of shorter duration or fewer

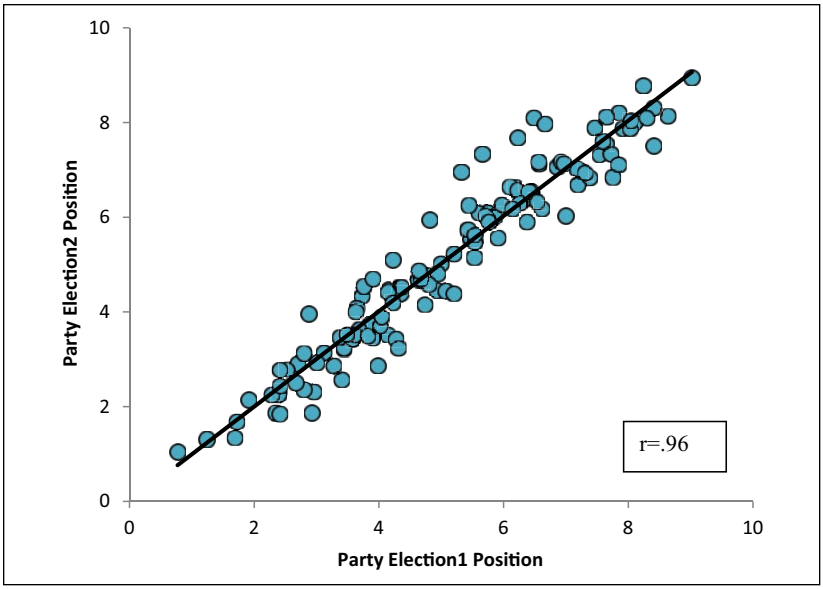

Figure 1. Party placement on Left–Right scale across adjacent elections.
Source. CSES party panel constructed by authors.
Figure entries are total public's placement of political parties on Left–Right scale across two adjacent elections (N = 135).

Table 2. Correlations Between Party Left–Right Positions Over Time.

	L/R party *M* time 1	L/R party *M* time 2	L/R party *M* time 3
Citizen perceptions			
L/R party *M* election 2	.96 (135)		
L/R party *M* election 3	.96 (102)	.98 (116)	
L/R party *M* election 4	.95 (58)	.95 (68)	.97 (69)
CHES expert perceptions			
L/R party *M* time 2	.97 (93)		
L/R party *M* time 3	.95 (101)	.97 (144)	
L/R party *M* time 4	.94 (98)	.92 (133)	.96 (164)

Source. CSES party panel constructed by authors; CHES 1999-2010 Panel File.
Table entries are Pearson's r correlations.
All correlations are significant at $p < .01$.

waves have documented this same pattern.[13] Perhaps even more striking, the comparisons of party and self-placements by party elites is equally stable over time (see Table 1). In contrast, the CMP Left–Right scores for a pair of elections circa 2000 display a more modest .72 correlation across elections.[14] So in the judgments of both citizens, academic experts and party elites, the empirical evidence underscores the substantial continuity of party Left–Right positions between elections.

Correlations are relative measures of change, and it is equally important to look at the absolute level of change. We calculated the absolute value of the change in party Left–Right positions between election$_1$ and election$_2$. Using the first pair of CSES elections, the median change is only .29 points on the 10-point Left–Right scale, meaning about half of the parties changed by about a quarter of a point or less between two elections. Two thirds of all parties changed less than .36 scale point between elections. In statistical terms, this is a small amount, especially when we consider the simple random sampling error of mean scores between two opinion surveys in the absence of real change.

The patterns from the CHES are similar. Using the 2002 to 2006 pair of surveys, the median change is .39 on the 10-point Left–Right scale. And as the expert surveys are typically based on less than 10 experts in a nation, the sampling variability is inevitably much greater. Furthermore, as with the CSES data, the level of change is about double for the new democracies in CHES compared with established democracies in West Europe. Thus, both citizen and expert perceptions of the parties point to a high level of Left–Right stability.

These results do not mean that change is entirely absent from party systems. For instance, seven parties register absolute change scores of 1.00 or more between elections using the CSES data. Four of the seven largest change scores came from Hungarian parties that underwent realignment between the 1998 and 2002 elections. The control of the government swung from a conservative FIDESZ-led government to a leftist government of the Hungarian Socialist Party and Alliance of Free Democrats after 2002. Moreover, a consolidation and polarization of the party system led several small parties to lose representation in parliament after the 2002 election, and the remaining parties became more highly polarized (Fowler, 2004). The largest change score (1.67) was for the Korean Grand National Party between the 1996 and 2000 elections. The Millennium Party also displayed a high level of change, reflecting Kim Dae Jung's dramatic shift in party affiliation between elections. Finally, the French electorate perceived the RPR/UMP as sharply moving to the Right between 2002 and 2007 under Sarkozy's leadership. Other

pairings of elections in the CSES panel also show a few extreme examples of partisan change—but significant Left–Right change is rare.

In summary, both citizens and experts perceive a broad stability of the parties' Left–Right positions across time. The consistency in positioning the parties on the Left–Right scale, and the stability of these perceptions for both groups is a striking finding. Despite persisting debates on the sophistication of mass publics, as a collectivity their judgments are comparable with professionals who are experts on party politics. Results pointing to the continuity of party positions suggest that theories predicating substantial partisan change will have limited efficacy when applied to the actual perceptions of citizens and academic experts. But this assertion requires empirical testing.

Predicting Continuity and Change

Although we have demonstrated that major change in party Left–Right positions is limited, most of the literature on this topic has focused on the factors that predict ideological change for individual parties—presuming that party change is more common. Only two measures of party positions are available across multiple elections for a significant number of nations: manifesto scores and public perceptions. In comparison with other indicators, and in longitudinal analyses, the CMP measure seems subject to problems of validity and reliability. CHES has expert data for 4 time points, but these data are limited to in their coverage (exclusively Europe, see Bakker et al., 2012) and the timing of the expert studies does not match electoral cycles. To measure what voters see at election time, we need a data source that is synchronous with elections, such as the CSES database.

The Potential Causal Variables

This section tests the two alternative theories that previous research has used to explain the changes in parties' Left–Right positions: a vote-seeking strategy or a policy-driven strategy. We expand our model to include other potential influences on party behavior.

The institutional context may influence the degree to which parties change between elections (Harmel & Janda, 1992). Most important is the distinction between new and old party systems. A large body of research has demonstrated that voters have less enduring attachments to political parties and electoral volatility is higher in new democracies (e.g., Karp & Banducci, 2007; McAllister & White, 2007; Tavits, 2006). We have already noted that ideological change is higher in new democracies, which may produce this volatility.

The type of electoral system may also have consequences for parties' ideological positions. Proportional systems encourage a large number of electoral parties. The competition between multiple parties may simulate more frequent policy adjustments than in majoritarian systems with a few large parties. Alternatively, a larger number of electoral parties may fill more gaps along the Left–Right dimension giving parties fewer options to move. Proportional systems are also more likely to see a turnover in the parties competing in elections, as a lower threshold for party representation encourages experimentation. The entry of a significant new party(ies) into the party system can create more choices for voters, with implications for how the existing parties position themselves within the political spectrum. The ideological polarization of the party system also might influence the propensity for party change. Compact party systems might offer little potential for change, except among parties at the less populous extremes; polarized systems conversely may offer more potential to move toward a centrist position.

The characteristics of individual parties also may affect the stability of their ideological position. For example, we expect that young parties have a more fluid political identity as they begin to compete and search for a clear voter base (Birch, 2003; Sikk, 2005; Tavits, 2005, 2006). At the other extreme, large established parties, like the two major parties in the United States or the SPD and CDU/CSU in Germany, have a substantial institutional base, a network of supporters, and a long political record. Thus in Bayesian terms, because of their past commitments, established parties may find it more difficult to change their image across a pair of elections.

The research literature often stresses the potential importance of party leadership in maintaining or changing a party's political course (Harmel & Janda, 1994; cf. Bille, 1997). We might call this the "Blair hypothesis." As a new leader, it was presumably easier for Blair to break with the party's past, as the past represented the policies of others. Thus, we hypothesize that a change in party leaders between elections is more likely to produce a change in the party's overall Left–Right position, whereas stable leadership is likely to result in the party continuing on the same course.

Empirical Analysis

One of the most basic Downsian predictions from the vote-seeking model argues that a party's electoral fortunes in one election shape its behavior in the next election (Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009; Andrews & Money, n.d.; Budge, 1994; Budge et al., 2010; McDonald & Budge, 2005; Somer-Topcu, 2009). There are multiple versions of this argument; we begin by focusing on

one of the most basic in this literature.[15] Several analyses of CMP data have claimed that the winner/loser distinction is directly related to the stability of party positions. This literature suggests that losers will be more mobile, but the literature provides conflicting hypotheses about election winners.

We tested whether change in party votes shares between a first pair of elections (i.e., $election_0$ and $election_1$) produced larger absolute changes in Left–Right positions between the second pair of elections ($election_1$ and $election_2$). We compared parties that gained or lost more than 2% of the vote between elections. The data show that winners are about as likely to change their Left–Right position as losers, parties that experience negligible change in vote shares varying their positions the least ($\eta = .20$). The absolute value of the change in *vote share* is linearly related to the absolute value of the change in *Left–Right position* ($r = .33$).

Ironically, whether a party wins or loses votes at $election_2$, there is a tendency to reverse course by $election_3$.[16] One interpretation is that these political reversals are a policy searching strategy: try a little to the Left and then try a little to the Right (Budge, 1994; Laver & Sergenti, 2012, chap. 8). For example, in the 1980s, the German Social Democrats struggled to develop an effective electoral strategy. In one election they leaned toward the center to capture votes from the CDU/CSU, but then they lost votes on the left to the Greens. In the next election they leaned toward the Greens to recapture these votes, but then lost centrists to the CDU/CSU. Their electoral plan seemed to be vacillation rather than strategic.

An alternative view of reversing ideological shifts is that the internal dynamics of parties and their uncertain response to changing political contexts produces a random walk pattern. Burt's (1997) less benign interpretation is that as there is little real change in party positions, we are seeing random measurement error as an autoregressive relationship.

The potential to study very detailed strategies of partisan behavior is limited because of the modest number of cases in the CSES data.[17] However, we can examine the major factors that might affect whether a party changes its Left–Right position between elections, regardless of the direction of change. That is, we predict the absolute change in Left–Right position of each party between $election_1$ and $election_2$ without regard to Left or Right direction.

To examine this question, we developed a multivariate model that combines the predictors discussed above, using robust standard errors to adjust for clustering at the country level. Our dependent variable is the *absolute change* in a party's Left–Right position between $election_1$ and $election_2$ ($n = 135$) based on the first pair of CSES elections (the deviations seen in Figure 1).[18]

Vote seeking is reflected as the absolute change in vote share in the previous election. Parties that see their vote share change between election$_0$ and election$_1$ are more likely to shift Left–Right positions between election$_1$ and election$_2$. Policy-driven behavior is tapped by the policy extremism of the party; extreme ideological parties presumably are guided more by ideology and less likely to change. Additional controls include two party characteristics (age and change in leader) with the effects hypothesized above. The model also contains several measures of national context (new/old democracy, effective number of electoral parties, party system polarization, and whether there was a significant change in the party lineup (a new party entered or an established party left) at election$_1$. Because of the restrictions caused by the modest number of cases, we are limited in the range of variables that we could use, which is further reduced by multicollinearity between some of the aggregate contextual variables.[19]

The first model in Table 3 shows that the absolute change in vote shares in the previous pair of elections has a significant effect in encouraging parties to shift their ideological position ($\beta = .24$). Even with limited Left–Right shifts between elections, this result points to a vote-seeking strategy by political parties. Both winner and losers are more likely to shift Left–Right positions, albeit following different logics. But this must be tempered by the previous evidence that parties partially reverse course at the next election.

The policy-driven hypothesis of party action is operationalized by using the Left–Right scale to identify centrist versus extreme (Left or Right) parties.[20] There is little support for the policy-driven hypothesis. Extreme parties at the Left or Right poles of the continuum are not significantly different from centrist parties in their propensity to change, after controlling for the other variables in the model.[21]

Our model also controls for the age of the party and a change in party leaders between the two elections. Neither relationship is statistically significant, although both are in the predicted direction. Prima facie, the lack of an effect for a change in party leaders might seem surprising. However, some research points out that a party is most likely to select a leader who continues the current course rather than shift direction (Burt, 1997; Harmel & Janda, 1992). A change in leader might be an opportunity for strategic change in a party's approach, but it is not a sufficient reason for change.

There are more substantial effects for the institutional context.[22] Partisan change is more likely in new democracies where party positions are emerging and the party lineup itself is changing ($\beta = .40$). We previously noted that the realignment of the Hungarian and Korean party systems produced exceptional Left–Right change over this pair of elections, and there is also greater Left–Right change across the other new democracies.

Table 3. Predicting Absolute Change in Parties' Left–Right Positions.

	All nations		Established democracies	
	b	β	*b*	β
Vote-seeking strategy				
Absolute change in vote since previous election	.02*	.24*	.03*	.43*
Policy-driven strategy				
Left–Right extremism	.00	.00	.04	.14
Party characteristics				
Year party founded	.00	.06	.00	.01
Change of leader	.06	.08	−.05	.08
Institutional context				
New democracy	.31*	.40*	—	—
Effective number electoral parties	.07*	.21*	.10*	.41*
Party system polarization	−.05*	−.17*	−.05	−.15*
New party (*t*1)	−.11	−.12	−.41*	−.33*
Constant	−.40		−.12	
Adjusted R^2	.23		.37	
(*N*)	(135)		(97)	

Source. CSES party panel constructed by authors.
Ordinary least squares regression showing partial (*b*) and beta (β) coefficients predicting the absolute change in the Left–Right positions each party. The analysis uses clustered-robust standard errors aggregated by country.
*Statistically significant at $p < .10$ or better.

The overall characteristics of the party system also influence the behavior of individual parties as they react to their competitors. A large effective number of electoral parties encourages Left–Right change, presumably because each party is adjusting their relative position in a complex multiparty environment. At the same time, a high level of Left–Right polarization of the party system seems to limit party change, although this relationship is barely statistically significant. Perhaps this later effect is indirect evidence that when parties are ideologically opposed, a policy-driven logic limits their vote-seeking behavior, confounding the effect of our Left–Right extremism variable. The entrance of a new party into the system has little impact on Left–Right change overall, but this may reflect the rarity of such events across these nations.[23]

Several methodological and theoretical considerations led us to ask whether the diverse mix of established and new democracies affect the

results, especially as most previous research was limited to established democracies. The large number of outliers among the new democracies is another factor. Therefore, we replicated the model for only the established democracies (while dropping the old/new democracy variable). The second model in Table 3 displays the results. The broad patterns are similar to the pooled model, with two changes. First, the significant predictors in the first model often have stronger effects for established democracies. For instance, the effect of prior vote change increases by nearly half, as does the impact of the effective number of parties.[24] The overall predictive value of the model is greater in established democracies (adjusted r^2 values of .37 vs. .23).

Although our models of party change yield only a modest range of effects, they suggest several conclusions. First, new democracies predictably differ from the established democracies in the levels of party change, even after a wide range of other factors, such as party age and the number of electoral parties, are taken into account. Second, parties seem to adjust their strategy in one electoral cycle based on the electoral fortunes in the previous electoral cycle. Both winners and losers are more likely to change their positions, whereas parties with stable vote shares seemingly feel less motivation to explore new positions. Third, institutional context shapes how parties compete and appeal to voters and, ultimately, it affects how change occurs. The number and polarization of political parties influence the likelihood of Left–Right change. This emphasizes the underlying dynamics of party systems, and the ways in which competition between parties and their maneuvering within the party space is something that appeals to voters in different ways. Yet, even if we can find empirical relationships with the residual change in party Left–Right positions between elections, the predominant pattern is for party continuity over time. In an alternative to Model 1, we constructed a lagged model using a party's Left–Right position in election$_1$ to explain its position in election$_2$. This lagged variable was the dominant predictor of the party's position in election$_2$ ($\beta = .97$) and no other predictor was statistically significant.[25]

Conclusion: Electoral Change and Democracy

Elections are supposed to be an iterative decision-making process. Citizens approach an election judging the performance of the current government (and the promises of the competing parties) while considering which party will best represent their political values in the future. This dynamic process is the very foundation of representative democracy.

Embedded in this process is the presumption that changes in election outcomes substantially reflect this evaluative process. Following a Downsian logic, the policy content of elections presumes that either voters or parties

change their positions in response to political events, and changes in election results reflect this dynamic. In theoretical terms, one can construct complex rational actor models in which parties are driven by vote-seeking and other complex decision rules (Adams, 2012; Adams et al., 2004, 2006; Budge et al., 2010; Budge et al., 2012). We can see this process at work in many elections. One of the clearest examples we have described is Tony Blair's centrist movement of the British Labour Party in the 1990s. This story (and others) is part of the lore of electoral research, illustrating the policy choice aspect of elections, and a large literature has examined this logic of electoral change in detail.

We began by asking how much broad policy change in party positions actually occurs between elections that might reflect a dynamic process of policy choice. We used the CSES surveys and the CHES to measure perceptions of parties' Left–Right positions across elections. The Left–Right scale is important because it provides a framework for citizen and elite discourse on politics, spatial models of party systems, and a method of linking voters and their representatives.

We found that about 90% of the total variance in parties' Left–Right position in one election can be explained by their position in the previous election. So, only 10% of the variance is potentially explainable by all other factors (including measurement error). Moreover, this is not an artifact of the CSES data, as the CHES and other expert surveys show the same high level of continuity. Parties are embedded in a political history and support network that limits their opportunities and motivations to dramatically change their broad orientation between elections. Thus, events such as Blair's reshaping of the Labor Party are notable because they are so rare. Most parties present the same basic ideological profile to voters across elections, with only minor adjustments in basic Left–Right terms.

Our results thus raise questions about the validity of the Left–Right party positions derived from the CMP that have been widely used to study party electoral strategies (see the sources cited in Adams, 2012). The CMP Left–Right scores are weakly related to party positions by experts, citizens, or party elites themselves. There is greater variation in party positions over time using CMP, but the pattern of these changes makes us suspect that a large share of this variance may be due to imprecision in measurement. The Comparative Manifestos Project codes the *salience* of various issues in the party's electoral manifesto. It does not directly measure the position of parties on a Left–Right dimension; and instead combines the salience scores to construct a measure of a party's Left–Right position. Other recent scholarship has indicated that elections are about more than what is written in a document produced by party leadership or the party congress (Adams et al., 2011). Thus, some of the very specific conclusions about the dynamics of party

change based on the CMP studies may not be substantiated with more robust measures of party Left–Right positions.

In seeking to explain the change in Left–Right positions that does occur, we found partial support for the vote-seeking strategy that has been the focus of previous research. A party that loses (or wins) a significantly larger share of the votes in an election is more likely to change their ideological position in the next election. But then the party tends to reverse its course in the subsequent election. Most examples of party change seem to follow a random walk rather than a planned excursion.

The most potent explanation of Left–Right change is whether the country is a new democracy. A new democracy implies, among other things, a high degree of volatility in the rise and fall of parties, and weaker public loyalty toward parties. The net effect is that the evaluative process is as much predicated on the institutional context, and how context shapes the behavior of parties and voters, as it is on what parties do. The effective number of parties and the polarization of party systems are additional contextual factors.

At the same time that Left–Right party positions are very stable, electoral statistics show that party vote shares are more changeable.[26] The incumbents in one administration are often out of office after the next election. Just as some parties make dramatic gains in recent elections, there are also cases of dramatic loses. We have not developed models to predict changes in vote share, but our analyses suggest some tentative answers. If parties' Left–Right positions are not shifting as Downs would predict, then something else must be occurring. It seems that four options are most likely.

First, we suspect that performance criteria, leader evaluations and valence factors heavily influence changes in people's votes as ideological positions are so constant (Adams, 2012, pp. 408-409; Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2008; Laver & Sergenti, 2012, chap. 9). Jimmy Carter lost to Ronald Reagan in 1980 not on ideology, but on Carter's poor performance; Ireland's Fianna Fail was virtually wiped out in the 2011 election because of its poor handling of the banking crisis; and Labor lost the 2013 Australian election due to a long series of policy failures. Supporting this point, Budge et al. (2012, chap. 5) show that a sizable proportion of the public in many established democracies do not vote for the party most proximate on the Left–Right scale. For democratic elections to reflect accountability as well as representativeness, voters have to consider performance and competency, as well as Left–Right congruence.

A second possible explanation is that electoral change is not normally driven by broad ideological considerations as reflected in the Left–Right scale, but by more specific issue concerns. Some electoral research emphasizes that parties compete in defining the agenda focus of elections on terms favorable to their own party (Petrocik, 1996; Rohrschneider & Whitefield,

2012). If the public rejects a prominent policy of an incumbent government, they may vote for the opposition to limit this policy or sanction the incumbents. Opposition parties may highlight issues of public concern where their positions are more compatible with the voters, perhaps diminishing the visibility of their overall party program. Thus, the salience of specific issues in an election, and changing salience across elections, can drive changes in vote shares. Similarly, if we could measure party positions on specific issues, we would expect greater change over time than for broad Left–Right positions (Thomassen, 2012). These topics can be explored with the growing number of expert surveys that include both party position and salience on more specific issue dimensions.[27] In short, the value of Left–Right is that it measures the broad framework of political competition; but its limitation in explaining electoral change is also that it measures this broad framework.

Third, we focused on the ideological continuity of parties over successive elections. But if we think about party systems and elections, the list of actors is not fixed. The lineup of significant parties changes between elections, especially over an extensive time span. Established parties frequently fragment, or smaller parties merge into a new alliance. New parties enter the electoral fray, and sometimes win seats in the parliament. Environmental issues gained representation when Green parties entered many party systems during the 1990s; in the 2000s anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe are now producing new extreme right parties; and so forth. New parties also can prod entire party systems to change (Hug, 2001).

Fourth, the stability of parties' Left–Right positions and our limited ability to explain the modest levels of observed change should raise questions of whether party strategizing works as the previous rationalist analyses of party change suggest. Several recent studies have examined parties' reactions to dramatic losses of vote share, where the incentive to regain popular support is most pressing (Little & Farrell, 2013; Svåsand & Mjelde, n.d.). Even with such strong incentives, parties struggle to diagnose the causes of their vote losses and agree on a new strategy for the future. There is limited or conflicting information on what caused the loss, and what options exist. Factions within the party differ in their political views, and see different reasons for the loss and thus the lessons to be learned. Party ties to interest groups and the party's own history further restrict the potential for movement. And some parties or subsets within parties would rather be "correct" than win, and thus dismiss the calls for change. Contemporary examples abound, ranging from the disputes within the current U.S. Republican Party and the British Labour Party, to the Norwegian Høyre in their 1997 fall from grace. With so many factors at play, the consequences of even a major loss in vote share are often continuity in the party's broad political program rather than a change.

In summary, the presumption of a single, unified, rational actor model that underlies the Downsian spatial modeling literature may be a poor representation of the short-term choices and actions actually facing political parties. The long-term structure of a party system might be determined by parties' ideological choices. However, the short-term variations in electoral fortunes largely appear driven by other forces.

Appendix

Nations and Elections in the Database

Country	Pre-survey election$_0$	Election survey$_1$	Election survey$_2$	Election survey$_3$	Election survey$_4$
Australia*	1993	1996	1998	2001	2004
Canada	2006	2008	2011		
Czech Republic*	1998	2002	2006	2010	
Denmark	1994	1998	2001	2005	2007
Finland	1999	2003	2007	2011	
France	1997	2002	2007	2012	
Germany	1994	1998	2002	2005	2009
Hungary	1994	1998	2002		
Iceland	1995	1999	2003	2007	2009
Ireland	1997	2002	2007	2011	
Israel	1999	2003	2006		
Japan	1993	1996	2000		
Korea	1996	2000	2004	2008	
Mexico	1997	2000	2003	2006	2009
Netherlands	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010
New Zealand	1993	1996	1999	2002	2008
Norway	1993	1997	2001	2005	2009
Poland	1993	1997	2001	2005	2007
Portugal	1999	2002	2005	2009	
Romania*	2000	2004	2008	2009	
Slovenia	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008
Spain	1993	1996	2000	2004	2008
Sweden	1994	1998	2002	2006	
Switzerland	1995	1999	2003	2007	
Taiwan	1998	2001	2004	2008	
United Kingdom*	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
United States	2000	2004	2008	2012	

Nations with asterisk denote additions to CSES data from national election studies. CSES = Comparative Study of Electoral Systems.

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Notes

1. Another explanation is that such a random walk pattern reflects simple measurement error in the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) Left–Right scores for parties (Burt, 1997). We return to this topic below.
2. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) question asked: "In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?"
3. The advantages and disadvantages of these alternative measures are also discussed in Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister (2011, chap. 5) and Marks (2007).
4. The Comparative Manifesto Program data are taken from the same election as the CSES survey or the closest election if no exact match were possible. We use the constructed CMP Left-Right score (RILE).
5. These data were downloaded from the CHES website: http://chesdata.eu/. The standard Left–Right question asked, "We now turn to a few questions on the ideological positions of political parties in [country] in 2006. Please tick the box that best describes each party's overall ideology on a scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right)." We also used the Benoit and Laver (2006) expert measures of party positions in an alternative model, with almost identical results.
6. We include data from the 1997 British Members of Parliament Study that asked the same Left–Right questions (available from www.pippanorris.com).
7. We only included parties with at least five candidates in the survey.
8. The questions were as follows: "In political matters some people talk about 'left' and 'right.' Where would you place yourself and others on this scale? Your position. Your party's voters. Your party's MPs." Respondent's replied in terms of a 1 to 10 Left–Right scale.
9. As we might expect, the level of agreement between the public and party experts is stronger in the established democracies ($r = .92$) than in the new democracies ($r = .81$). There is also somewhat greater agreement in positioning large parties compared with smaller parties.
10. Benoit and Laver (2006, p. 97) find a .63 correlation between party Left–Right positions for the 114 parties appearing in both the 2002 Benoit and Laver survey and in the CMP database. Keman (2007, p. 82) finds similar correlations comparing three expert surveys and the 2001 CMP coding of Left–Right.
11. Recent research suggests that parties are less responsive to change in party positions based on manifesto coding as compared to expert positions of the parties

(Adams, Ezrow, & Somer-Topcu, 2011).

12. van der Brug (2006) finds broad consistency in the Left–Right positioning of Dutch parties by their voters, members, sub-leaders and top-leaders; also see (Dinas & Gemenis, 2010; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1997).
13. In creating this panel data, we generally used the first two CSES modules that had party positions in two adjacent elections. In some cases the series begins with Module I data, in other cases with Module II. We then expanded the series with the third module of CSES, and in a few instances adding values for missing elections from the respective national election study if it used the same methodology as CSES. The panel includes parties from 27 nations (see table in the appendix). We adopted a rigorous definition of party continuity. If a party split or changed its name so voters saw a different party label across elections, we typically treated this as different parties. The list of parties is available from the authors.

    A second question is whether to use the total public, only voters or only party supporters to locate each party on the Left–Right scale. While there are some differences, the three measures are largely interchangeable. The correlation between the total public and voters is $r = .94$ and the correlation of the total public and party supporters if $r = .95$.
14. Keman (2007) found strong correlations between the expert scores for three studies ranging from the 1980s to mid-1990s. Rohrschneider and Whitefield's (2012) expert study in 2007 to 2008 showed strong continuity with the Benoit and Laver expert survey ($r = .91$) and CHES (.91).
15. This correlation is based on RILE scores for the last two elections in the CMP II data set, which is scored typically as the last election in the 1990s and the first in the 2000s (Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, Budge, & McDonald, 2006). There are 134 parties that received at least 4% of the vote with scores for this pair of elections. We excluded the sixth of these cases where the party used the same manifesto in both elections. Including these additional parties raises the correlation rises to .76. Budge (2000) claims that the lower stability of the CMP scores means these data are more sensitive to change in election debates. This might be so if Left–Right positions were validated by strong correlations with other measures of Left–Right. Furthermore, a substantial number of parties have the same manifesto scores across elections, which suggests a limitation in measuring party change with the CMP scores.
16. An even more basic thesis argues that a shift in the position of the median voter will produce shifts in party positions to retain their voting base. There is virtually no relationship ($r = .03$) between the Left–Right shift in the median citizen and the Left–Right shift among political parties.
17. The correlation between Left–Right change in election$_{1\text{-}2}$ and election$_{2\text{-}3}$ is: losers (election$_2$) −.02, winners −.13, and no substantial change +.05. However, these correlations are not statistically significant because of our smaller N for election$_{2\text{-}3}$ comparisons. The pattern suggests that some parties are both more likely to shift positions and likely to experience gains/losses over multiple elections with these two traits reinforcing one another.

18. It is possible that parties differentially respond to changes in the position of the median citizen or the change in vote share interacts with past shifts in ideological position (Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009; Grofman, 2004; Meguid, 2005). We intend to explore this possibility in future research.
19. This is virtually the same as doing an analysis of residuals after using the Left–Right score from the first election to predict a party's score at the second election. Except in this case, the model now has 100% of the residual variance to explain, ignoring the 90% predicted by $time_1$ scores. This might exaggerate the apparent impact of predictors by ignoring the autoregressive element of Left–Right positions. See Note 25.
20. For example, we excluded district magnitude and majoritarian electoral system from the analyses because of their collinearity with effective number of parties. Majoritarian/PR electoral system and district magnitude had only a modest effect for the first election pair. New democracy was also correlated with the entrance of a new party ($r = .41$ in the first election pair), but was retained because of its theoretical significance. No other correlation was greater than .54.
21. This measure is the absolute value of the difference between the party's Left–Right score and the midpoint on the CSES Left–Right scale. The logic is that extreme parties on the Left and Right are bound to their ideological position more than parties near the center of the political spectrum.
22. There is, however, a −.16 bivariate r correlation, which has a significance level of $p = .07$.
23. The institutional measures for the CSES elections were based on the methods described in Dalton and Anderson (2011, appendix) and similarly applied to the other elections.
24. We defined a new party as a party which won in an election, for the first time, parliamentary representation and a significant (usually greater than 5%) vote. Clearly, there was some judgment involved as on occasion a party that had a significant impact on the party system failed to win 5% of the vote, and new parties had often been formed some years before the election in which they first made their breakthrough.
25. Further analyses indicate that the stronger impact for a new party in this model is largely due to the turbulence of the Japanese party system in the 1996 and 2000 elections.
26. The predictors in Table 3 appear much stronger because they are explaining 100% of the variance in the inter-election Left–Right difference; that is, essentially predicting the residuals that would result from the lagged variable model.
27. A party's vote share in $election_1$ explains 72% of the variance in $election_2$. This is very high, but substantially below the 90% of Left–Right variance explained across pairings.
28. As a preliminary analysis, we calculated the stability of party positions and party salience on the taxes versus spending issue in the CHES study. These two items were only available in the 2006 and 2010 waves. Issue positions were correlated at .91 ($N = 164$), but the party's salience of the issue was correlated at only .69.

Similarly, Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012) use their party expert study to highlight the importance of partisan variations in issue salience as an important factor in electoral campaigns.

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