Leadership Turnovers and Their Electoral Consequences: A Social Democratic Exceptionalism?

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(1) **Introduction**

When Martin Schulz was elected as the leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Germany in March 2017, the media and the public were in awe of him. In the first weeks of the campaign, Schulz helped the battered and beaten SPD to regain confidence, members, and support in the polls. Initial gains in the polls of over ten percentage points let the Guardian ask if, after three devastating election defeats, "Germany's Social Democrats [have] found a winner in Martin Schulz?" (Conolly 2017). Others even called the nomination of Schulz as the chancellor candidate and party leader "a tectonic shift" and predicted that "Angela Merkel must prepare for a real fight" (Bartsch et al. 2017). Der Spiegel described Schulz as radiating confidence and having a hunger for power, while his predecessor Sigmar Gabriel was characterized as a politician who struggles and dithers (Bartsch et al. 2017). It was a change that BBC classified as "an attempt to improve the party's chances" in the upcoming election ("Germany election" 2017). In March 2017, the scene seemed to be set for an exciting and close election with the party that finally found its stride and was ready to challenge the chancellor, Angela Merkel.

Alas, the excitement lasted only a few months, and on the election day in September 2017, the SPD suffered further election losses. The party's crash-landing at the ballot box led Schulz to resign from his position less than a year after his historic unanimous appointment. Even a leader as exciting as Schulz was not enough for SPD's recovery. For the party this was yet another example of a failed leader with a very short tenure in office, a pattern that many pundits blame for the SPD's decline in recent years. Between Gerhard Schröder's resignation in 2004 and Sigmar Gabriel's appointment in 2009, SPD had four additional leaders, each of whom, on average, lasted only about one and a half years in office. During that period, the SPD was in free fall. Its seats in the Bundestag declined from 251 seats (out of 603, 41.6%) in 2002 to 146 seats (out of 622, 23.5%) in 2009. At the same time, their official vote total shrunk from almost 18.48m votes (38.5%) to 9.99m (23%). At the time of writing, the SPD does not only trail the CDU/CSU in the polls but has also fallen into the third spot behind their former junior coalition partner, the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. Does the electoral diminishment of the SPD over the last decade teach us an important lesson about the significance of party leaders and leader turnover for party performance? Do quick leader turnovers and downturns in electoral performance go hand in hand? Do parties perform better with stable leadership? Or, is there a social democratic exception (or even an SPD exception) at work? Have party leaders and leadership churns contributed to the decline of social democratic parties we witness across Europe?

From the existing literature we know that leaders are increasingly important for political parties, even in parliamentary systems. Over the past few decades, scholars have noted that politics has become more candidate-centric (Wattenberg 1991) and "presidentialized" (Pogutke and Webb 2005). As mass parties decline in numbers and party membership numbers continue to decrease across Europe, leaders have acquired more power and influence: they are now identified as the central actors in running parties' election campaigns and attracting voters to their parties (Scarrow et al. 2000).[1] A growing literature also shows how leaders, their campaigns, personal

[1] The SPD's Sigmar Gabriel is in fact described by Jun and Jakobs (2021) as a representative case of these party leaders that take more extensive control over their party as well as its public representation and perception. His grip over the SPD was so tight that journalists called him a "part-time autocrat" (Kister 2018, as cited in Jun and Jakobs (2021)).

characteristics, and traits affect vote choice (Butler and Stokes 1974, LeDuc 2001, McAllister 2007, Aarts et al. 2011, Bittner 2011).

Given the heightened importance of leaders in electoral politics, it is not surprising that political parties are ever more careful in selecting their leaders and do not shy away from replacing their leaders when their performance is low. In addition, while traditionally the incumbent leaders appointed their successors, or a small group of party elites appointed a high-ranking party official to the leadership position behind closed doors without much, or any, fanfare, leadership changes are now highly strategic affairs and take place in large party conferences, with more inclusive selectorates and high media attention (Cozza and Somer-Topcu 2021). These all suggest that parties increasingly use leadership changes and new leader selection as devices to show their responsiveness to their supporters' and the public's preferences at large.

Yet, while leaders and leadership changes are critical for parties, we do not know much about whether and how leadership changes affect parties' electoral prospects. The few studies that examine the question are often single-country studies (Stewart and Carty 1993, Nadeau and Mendelsohn 1994). The only cross-national work on the question to our knowledge is by Pedersen and Schumacher (2015). Using data from four West European countries, they show small short-term bumps in the polls following a leadership change but no long-term electoral effects. Cozza and Somer-Topcu (2021) recently show similar short-term positive effects for leadership elections by party members. Given that it is mainly left and center-left parties that have opened up their leader selectorate to party members in recent years (Cozza and Somer-Topcu 2021), can we say that leadership changes help social democratic parties? Or, as the example of the SPD might suggest, are too many leadership changes the culprit for the decline of social democratic parties?

In this paper, we use a novel dataset that covers nine advanced democracies between the early 1990s and 2019 to test whether the decline of social democratic parties can be attributed to party leadership changes and especially to the frequency of party leadership changes by answering three questions:

1. Is party leader tenure shorter in social democratic parties,
2. What determines the duration of leadership tenure across different party families, and
3. How does leader turnover (and especially the frequency of leadership turnover) affect party performance both in the short-term (for opinion polls) and in the long-term (for election results)?

Our findings suggest interesting patterns. First, we see that, except for SPD, social democratic parties have similar leadership turnover rates compared to other party families. This suggests the patterns in leadership changes, and especially in the frequency of leadership changes, are not unique to social democrats. Analyzing leader durations in office, we see similar variables explain the length of leadership tenure across different party families. However, we do find different variables explain leader duration in different regions/electoral systems. Finally, we analyze the short-term and long-term performance effects of leadership changes and see that while leadership changes and the frequency of leadership changes have some minor impact on polling results, they do not influence election results. These results are consistent across party families and do not suggest social democratic exceptionalism.

Below, we first describe the novel data that is the foundation of our analysis in more detail and then discuss the SPD as an extreme case with frequent leadership changes (Seawright

and Gerring 2008). Next, we show the results for the duration models testing the factors that explain leader tenure before turning to the analyses focusing on the performance consequences of leadership changes. We conclude this chapter by discussing these results and potential theoretical expectations we drive from these results for future work.

(2) Leadership Changes Data and the Unique Case of German Social Democrats

Our examination of party leader changes builds on a novel dataset we collected using Keesing's World Archives, secondary literature, and online newspaper archives and captures information about leadership changes in 40 political parties across ten advanced parliamentary democracies between the early 1990s and 2019. The countries in the dataset include Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, which ensures that the analysis is built on a sufficient number of political parties from Westminster as well as European PR systems.[2]

All political parties that received at least 5 percent of the vote in two consecutive elections between the first election in the 1990s and 2019 and those that did not have shared/dual leadership were coded. The five percent threshold limits the parties to those we consider electorally relevant. A clear definition of who is a political party leader is not straightforward and depends on the time, country, and even the political party under study. The decision on who we coded as the leader of each party was taken based on an extensive reading of the literature and in consultation with country experts.

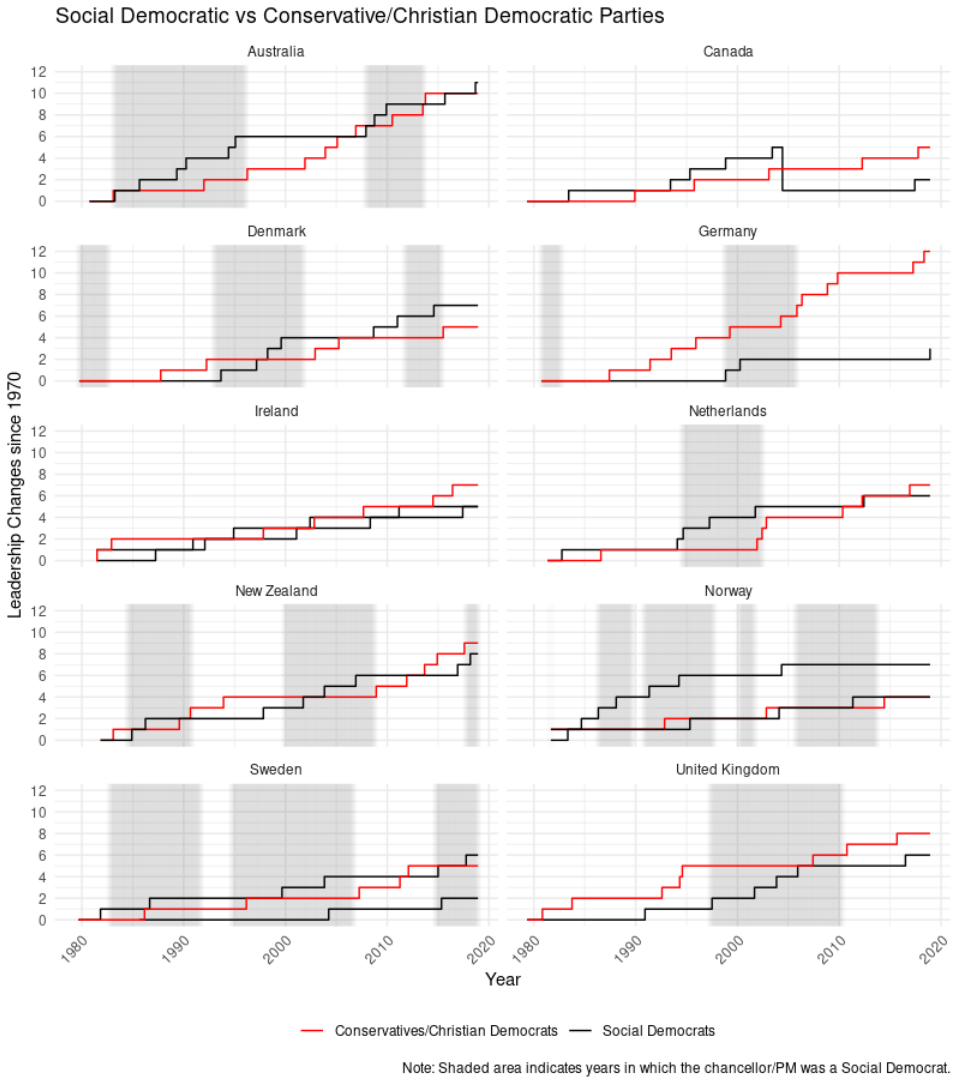
Comparing the number of leadership replacements of social democratic parties and their main rivals for the chancellor/PM position, Christian Democratic and Conservative parties, we see that there is little difference in the general trajectory of leadership changes in most countries. While the timing of replacement differs from country to country and from party to party, most social democratic parties are within two cumulative leadership changes of their primary opponents by 2020. Except for Australia, where Labour at some point trailed by three cumulative leadership changes before they caught up and started to move in lockstep, this also holds more generally for the entire time since 1979. Most social democratic parties and their main rivals move somewhat in tandem when it comes to replacing their leaders—except for the German Social Democrats.

As we detail below, the SPD had nine leadership changes more than their main rival, the CDU and only the Australian parties come even close to – but still trail – the total number of changes the SPD had. Truly remarkable for the SPD is the difference compared to its main rival. The CDU's three leadership changes in about thirty years (between 1990 and 2019) make for quite a different trajectory than the SPD's twelve during the same period. There are other political parties in the data set that show diverging patterns in leader replacement compared to their main competitors. For instance, the Norwegian Conservative Party has consistently had three more cumulative leader changes than the Norwegian Labour and Christian Democratic parties. But no other party has more leadership changes and is so different than its main competitor than the German SPD.

[2] The resource limitation in data collection limited our focus to these nine countries but given electoral and party system differences among our cases, we believe that they are representative of other cases and our results would hence generalize to other advanced parliamentary democracies.

More generally, the pattern for social democratic and other parties appears to be that the leaders tend to stay in office during times of incumbency, at least the frequency of changes goes down, but that leaders are more readily replaced when the party is not holding the office of, for example, chancellor/prime minister. As shown in Figure 1, losing control over the government is usually associated with an immediate leader replacement.

Figure 1: Leader Changes in Social Democratic and Conservative/Christian Democratic parties



Notes: Figure shows the number of leadership changes in Social Democratic (red) and Conservative or Christian Democratic (black) parties since 1979. Shaded area indicates years in which Social Democratic parties held the office of the chancellor/ prime minister. Interim leaders are not included in the calculation of the totals. Canada's Conservative party experienced a merger in 2003.

Now that we have seen that SPD has been an exception, we would like to discuss its case in more detail. We started this chapter with the Icarian example of Martin Schulz. Initially celebrated as the savior of the SPD, he flew to new heights in the polls, only to have all the gains in public

support melt away just before the election day. The party's downward tumble also spelled the end for Schulz's time in office as the SPD leader, adding him to the long list of short-lived post-war leaders of the party. The frequent leadership turnover is not something that has been gone unnoticed in public. "One number sums up the misery of the SPD, sums up its crash: 12. That's how many former leaders the party has." This is how the online platform of the largest local newspaper in North-Rhine Westphalia, historically a stronghold of the SPD, commented on the resignation of then-party leader Andrea Nahles in 2019 after being in office for only 407 days ("SPD versinkt im Chaos" 2019). Shortly before Nahles' resignation, her deputy-leader Malu Dreyer explicitly warned the party against forcing Nahles out of office: "If we have one lesson behind us, it is that permanent changes in the leadership do not get us any further" (Greive and Stratmann 2018). This call from within the SPD to end leadership fights, unite the party, and focus on substantive discussions was not new. It was issued only 406 days earlier when Nahles initially took office. Manuela Schwesig, deputy leader and head of the SPD-led government in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, called on the party to unite and "to get these days of chaos behind us" ("SPD-Vorsitz" 2018).

These calls for unity, continuity, and stability come with reasons. The SPD itself identified frequent changes in its leadership (leader, general secretary, and deputy leaders) as a key weakness in its appeal to voters and its ability to organize effective electoral campaigns (Faus et al. 2018). This has been a sentiment that has been echoed in basically every statement of leading SPD politicians when an old leader throws in the towel and a new one steps up. When Martin Schulz resigned, Ralf Stegner, deputy leader of the SPD, called for the end of debates about party office: "Each of us is well advised to put the interests of the party and the country above our ambitions." Thorsten Schäfer-Gümbel, deputy leader of the SPD, said that it is a top priority of the party to re-establish its ability to act and demanded that the "unsorted nature at the federal level" must be remedied ("Widerstand gegen Nahles" 2018). Michael Müller, heading the government of the SPD in Berlin, put it more bluntly and called for the party to stop the process of appointing leaders on an annual basis ("Widerstand gegen Nahles" 2018).

The data in Table 1 show that the SPD indeed is a party of many leadership changes. Since 1945 the SPD has had 16 leaders and six acting leaders. To make matters worse, while the initial leadership tenure was long, the first three leaders were in power for over 6, 11, and 23 years respectively, while after that period, leaders have been replaced in rather a rapid succession. Since Willy Brandt's resignation in 1987, only two leaders remained in office for more than five years, while two leaders didn't even last an entire year. The average tenure of an SPD leader following Brandt has been slightly above 2.5 years, resulting in, on average, two new leaders per electoral cycle.

The replacement of leaders has happened for several reasons and mostly not with the strategic goal of maximizing electoral support in the short- or long term. A series of changes were unrelated to the performance of the political party. Some of the resignations happened because the leader was in conflict with other key personnel of the party over the party's direction or office allocation. Oskar Lafontaine left the party leadership in 1999 following a power conflict with then-chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Kurt Beck resigned claiming that he had been wronged in a power struggle with Sigmar Gabriel and Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Franz Müntefering's first stint as SPD leader was cut short when he failed to place an ally as secretary-general. Sigmar Gabriel resigned leading up to an election because the SPD chancellor candidate Martin Schulz wanted to unite both the chancellorship candidacy and party leadership. Matthias Platzeck resigned due to illness after just five months in office.

Table 1: Noninterim leaders of the SPD and their tenure since 1970

	Name	Appointment	Resignation	Duration	
1	Kurt Schumacher	1946-05-11	1952-08-20	6 years	103 days
2	Erich Ollenhauer	1952-09-27	1963-12-14	11 years	80 days
3	Willy Brandt	1964-02-15	1987-06-14	23 years	125 days
4	Hans-Jochen Vogel	1987-06-14	1991-05-29	3 years	350 days
5	Björn Engholm	1991-05-29	1993-05-05	1 year	342 days
6	Rudolf Scharping	1993-06-25	1995-11-16	2 years	144 days
7	Oskar Lafontaine	1995-11-16	1999-03-12	3 years	117 days
8	Gerhard Schröder	1999-04-12	2004-02-06	4 years	301 days
9	Franz Müntefering	2004-03-21	2005-10-31	1 year	224 days
10	Matthias Platzeck	2005-11-15	2006-04-10		146 days
11	Kurt Beck	2006-05-14	2008-09-07	2 years	117 days
12	Franz Müntefering	2008-10-18	2009-11-13	1 year	26 days
13	Sigmar Gabriel	2009-11-13	2017-03-19	7 years	128 days
14	Martin Schulz	2017-03-19	2018-02-13		331 days
15	Andrea Nahles	2018-04-22	2019-06-03	1 year	42 days
16	Saskia Esken Norbert Walter-Borjans	2019-12-06	current[3]		

Note: This table omits the five interim leaders who were in office for periods ranging from 51 to 186 days between 1993 and 2019.

Another set of leader resignations were performance-related, focusing on lost elections on the federal or state level (or the expectation of those losses). Gerhard Schröder resigned due to internal party criticism about the direction of the political agenda and poor polling performance leading into a year with fourteen local, state, and federal elections ("Schröder" 2004). Müntefering's second resignation and the resignations of Nahles and Schulz were related to poor electoral performance in recent state, federal, or European elections. However, the immediate polling performance of the party appears to have rarely played a role in the resignations. The SPD explicitly states that. Maximilian Janetzki, SPD member and co-author of a thorough internal report analyzing the election failures of the SPD in 2017, commented on the expectations that the party has in their then-new leader Andrea Nahles: "I think [she] knows that what counts isn't the polls taken between elections but she has to make sure that the SPD also shows what it can do during this government. It's in her own interest to take back control over the discussion" (Chase 2018).

Conversely, while the immediate polling performance appears not to be central for the resignation, the new appointments also do not have performance effects. The SPD's attempt to have a party-wide election of their next leader showed no effect on the party's performance (Pergande 2019). The appointment of a new leader, even if done in a very public and with a (what is designed to appear like) highly democratic and participatory selection procedure, does also not necessarily yield immediate electoral gains.

[3] Included in the analysis are only leaders that started their tenure before the 1990s hence SPD leaders before Björn Engholm are excluded. The tenure of Esken and Walter-Borjans is outside of the temporal scope of our analysis. However, since the SPD currently has a dual leadership it would not be coded in our data anyways.

To sum up the SPD example, leadership changes hence can happen for a variety of reasons – related to electoral performance or not. Leadership changes, both resignation and appointment, can also be perceived very negatively as a source of infighting or instability or positively as a consolidation of the party and enhancing its electoral capability. We now turn to the cross-national analyses of leader duration and their consequences for party performance.

(3) **Why do parties change their leaders?**

As we descriptively showed in the previous section, apart from the German SPD, the various parties and party families in our sample appear more similar than different when it comes to party leader replacement. Are there any *systematic* differences across party families? While leader duration has received some attention in the comparative literature, no work examines whether leaders of a particular party family are replaced for different reasons. This is the question we examine in this section.

The dependent variable in all our models is the time (in months) a leader is in office. We measure a leader's tenure from the month of her official appointment to the month of her resignation announcement. We use Cox duration models with a robust variance estimator to examine the factors that determine leader durations.[4] Proper selection of the underlying hazard rate is still debated in the literature (Warwick 1992, Alt and King 1994). We use the Cox proportional hazard model because it does not require a specification of an underlying hazard rate shape, as parametric models do. We censor all months for the leaders that are still in the office as of the end of 2019, all leaders who were appointed before the start of our data period (the first leadership appointment in the 1990s), and the two leaders in our data who died in office (John Smith of the UK Labour Party and Jack Layton of the Canadian New Democracy).

For our explanatory variables, we first add several performance indicators to our models. Andrews and Jackman (2008) and Ennser-Jedenastik and Müller (2015) have shown that electoral performance is the most crucial factor that affects leader duration in office. We operationalize electoral performance as the change in parties' electoral performance between the two most recent elections (*ΔVote Share*). We expect that, as electoral performance declines, party leaders are more likely to be replaced. This is a retrospective performance indicator, and the election results data come from the ParlGov dataset (Döring and Manow 2016).

Recent polls also inform political parties more immediately than past election results about their expected electoral performance. To assess the effects of polling on leader duration in office, we calculated the cumulative changes in the polling performance of a political party over the previous six-month period ($\Delta Polling_{6\ Months,\ cum.}$). The monthly polling results data for this calculation come from Jennings and Wlezien (2016) and updated using polling data from each of our countries. We focus on the cumulative performance change over six months because we expect that monthly opinion poll changes do not immediately make or break a leader's chances of survival. Their time in office is more closely tied to the long-term development of the party's expected electoral performance under their rule. We expect that, as parties rack up continuous losses in public support and as expected losses on election day become more likely, leaders are more likely to resign or be replaced.

[4] Duration modeling provides clear benefits over OLS regression and logit analysis. For discussions of these benefits, interested readers can refer to Zorn (2005) and Box-Steffensmeier and Jones (1997).

Another retrospective performance indicator for political parties is governing status. We include a dummy variable at the party level that is coded 1 if the leader lost the governing party status (*Lost Government*). As Figure 1 already suggests, we expect a leader that cost a party its government participation to be more likely to be replaced (Bille 1997, Ennser-Jedenastik and Schumacher 2015). The variable is coded 1 starting in the month when the leader's party is no longer in government and stays 1 until the next leadership change or until the party joins the government again with the same leader. If the leader's party was never in government during that leader's tenure, the variable is coded 0 for all the months for that leader. We used the ParlGov data (Döring and Manow 2016) to code the government status.[5]

In addition to these performance indicators, we also control for several additional factors that may influence leader duration in office. Hence, we add the age of the leader (*Leader Age*), whether party members elected the leader as opposed to any other selectorate (such as delegates, parliamentary members of the party, party elite) (*Member Vote)*, and whether the vote for the party leader was unanimous or whether the appointment was made by acclamation (as opposed to a divided or competitive election) (*Unanimous_Acclamation*). We expect older leaders to be more likely to be replaced (Andrew and Jackman 2008, Cross and Blais 2012) and leaders who got elected by unanimous vote to be more likely to last longer in office given that they have widespread support from the selectorate. Regarding the effects of the leader selection method, there are different expectations put forth in the literature. While Ennser-Jedenastik and Müller (2015) argue that membership elections should hurt a leader's duration in office, given that the larger the selectorate, the more the leader needs to rely on public goods, which reduces the likelihood of survival, Cozza and Somer-Topcu (2021) present evidence that membership elections likely result in higher legitimacy and competence evaluations for the newly elected leader, which may positively affect their duration in office. We hope that our results will shed light on these contradictory expectations for the effects of different selectorates. For all the leader-specific variables we relied on the leader data we collected.

We note that the incumbent leaders do not necessarily resign in the same month of the new leader appointment. For about half of the leader changes in our data, the resignation was announced before the month of the new leader's appointment. This is because it either takes time for the party to elect a new leader or because the old leader announces resignation but stays in office until the next party conference or until the end of their term, according to the party statute. Therefore, it is crucial that we use the resignation date of the old leader and not the appointment date of the new leader to mark the end of a leader's tenure. As part of our coding procedure, we not only coded when the new leader was appointed (the information used in the performance analyses below) but also coded the announcement date of the resignation and used this date as the end of a leader's term. This is an important contribution to the literature as the existing literature mainly uses the appointment date in estimating leaders' duration in office (see, e.g., Andrews and Jackman 2008), which potentially conflates the effects of leader resignation and leader appointment.

As we noted before, the countries in the dataset are Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. We first run our models for all countries and then separately analyze our models for the Westminster and European PR systems. So (2018) shows that different institutional features

[5] Parties in the government or those that hold the prime minister position rarely change their leaders while in office, and hence we cannot include the in-government or PM variables into the models.

related to opposition party influence in policy-making differently affects opposition party leaders' duration across the Westminster systems and other advanced democracies. Pooling Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK, So shows that the large opposition parties are more likely to replace their leaders in the Westminster systems. In addition, the argument that politics is more personalized with party leaders and individual candidates holding more personal political power in elections applies more strongly to the Westminster systems with their plurality/non-PR electoral systems (Poguntke and Webb 2005). Finally, there are some critical, descriptive differences across these two regions for some of our independent variables. As widely known, coalition governments are more common in the European PR systems compared to the more frequent single-party governments in the Westminster systems. Hence, losing the government status likely has stronger negative effects on political parties in the Westminster systems than those of the European PR systems. In comparison, electoral losses or polling results should have more considerable effects on the European PR system leaders. Another difference concerns the method of the leadership election. While 11 of the 14 Westminster system political parties in our dataset have adopted either membership vote or some form of electoral college method with party members having some say in the final leadership election, only seven of the 26 parties from the European PR systems have given the right to elect the leader to their party members (two out of six parties in Denmark, one out of three parties in Germany, four out of five parties in the Netherlands, and zero parties in Norway and Sweden). Given this difference, we expect membership elections to have larger effects (either in the positive or negative direction) in the Westminster systems compared to the European PR systems. To sum up, it is more appropriate to test the duration models separately for the European PR systems of Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, and the Westminster systems of Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the UK.

Column 1 in Table 2 presents the Cox proportional hazard model coefficients with all countries analyzed together. The coefficients of this model represent the risk of experiencing a leadership replacement event. Hence, a negative coefficient would indicate a decrease in the risk of a leader replacement, while a positive coefficient would mean that the covariate is associated with a higher risk of a leader replacement. We see that three of our variables have statistically significant effects on leader duration. Parties are more likely to replace older leaders, leaders who lose votes in elections, and those who have lost government participation. Columns 2 and 3 show the results separately for the European PR systems and Westminster systems. While vote losses and age still matter for leader replacement in the European PR systems, we see that government loss does not matter for leader duration and instead, the change in polling performance matters. Leaders performing worse in opinion polls are being removed by their parties. However, in the Westminster systems, instead of changes in polling performance or electoral losses, the loss of government matters, as we expected. In addition, we see that those leaders who got elected by the party membership and those with unanimous support or acclamation are more likely to last longer in the office in the Westminster systems. The former result supports Cozza and Somer-Topcu (2021) findings that membership elections likely increase legitimacy and competence evaluations for the elected leaders. Higher age is a significant contributor to the leader replacement risk across both regions.

Table 2: Explaining leader durations across regions

	All Countries	European PR Systems	Westminster Systems
ΔVote Share	-0.108**	-0.200**	0.029
	(0.041)	(0.065)	(0.050)
$\Delta Polling_{6\ Months,\ cum.}$	-0.035	-0.111*	-0.003
	(0.025)	(0.059)	(0.046)
Lost Government	1.234**	0.333	3.933**
	(0.432)	(0.538)	(0.837)
Leader Age	0.132**	0.135**	0.218**
	(0.022)	(0.040)	(0.059)
Member Vote	-0.205	-0.139	-1.941**
	(0.356)	(0.499)	(0.559)
Unanimous/Acclam.	-0.145	0.278	-3.438**
	(0.399)	(0.477)	(1.505)
N	4375	3045	1330
Log-likelihood	-131.054	-63.623	-29.086
Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses; * p<0.1, ** p<0.05			

These results explain the determinants of leader replacement. However, the more important question we are interested in is whether these factors are consistently important for all party leaders or whether social democratic parties have different reasons to replace their leaders compared to other party families. We tested the possible conditional effects of different variables by interacting each variable in the duration models with a dummy variable for social democratic parties. We note, however, that given that some of our independent variables do not have sufficient variation for the social democratic versus other party families, we could not test the conditional effects for all variables in separate regions.

Table 3 summarizes the model output for the conditional effects of social democratic parties and only reports the statistically significant results. Covariates that have no conditional effects are indicated by *NCE ("no conditional effect")*. In cases where we could not include a covariate due to the lack of variation between social democratic and non-social democratic parties, we indicate this with *NA ("not available")*. The first column shows the results for all countries; column 2 drops the German SPD due to their unique history of leader replacement and runs the models across all countries without the SPD; column 3 shows the results for the European PR systems; column 4 re-estimates this model without the SPD; and column 5 reports the results for the Westminster systems.

Overall, we see that only a few variables seem to affect the tenure of social democratic leaders and other party families' leaders. The 6-month cumulative polling losses increase the

chances of replacement for all party families, except the social democrats (the effect becomes nonsignificant for the social democratic parties). Older age is especially associated with leader replacement for the social democratic parties of the European systems, but only if the SPD is excluded. Unanimous election/acclamation also increases the risk of leader replacement for the social democratic parties in the European PR systems more than for the parties from other party families (but the effect is only statistically significant at 0.10 level and the models do not run due to lack of variation when we exclude SPD from the data).

To sum up the findings from this section, we see that different variables explain leader durations across two regions. However, pretty much the same variables explain leader durations across different party families. Are there any differences in how leadership changes affect party performances? This is the question we turn to now.

Table 3: Different Effects for Social Democrats and other party families?

	1	2	3	4	5
	All countries	All except SPD	European PR	European PR except SPD	Westminster
ΔVote Share * SocDem	NCE	NCE	NCE	NCE	NCE
$\Delta Polling_{6}$ *Months, cum.* *Soc Dem	NCE	NCE	ΔPolling: -0.222** Interaction: 0.161**	ΔPolling:-0.159** Interaction: 0.129**	NCE
Lost Gov. * Soc Dem	NCE	NCE	NA	NA	NA
Leader Age * Soc Dem	NCE	NCE	NA	Age: 0.101** Interaction 0.140**	NCE
Member Vote * Soc Dem	NCE	NCE	NA	NA	NCE
Unan./Acc. * Soc Dem	NCE	NCE	Unanimous: -0.185 Interaction: 1.290*	NA	NA
Note: We report only statistically significant conditional coefficients. NCE indicates no conditional effects, and NA indicates not available. Robust standard errors in parentheses; * p<0.1, ** p<0.05.					

(4) **What are the consequences of (frequent) leadership changes?**

The existing literature provides contradictory explanations as to whether new leaders help parties electorally. On the one hand, we know that no party changes its leader to fail. Parties are often quite strategic in changing their leaders and deciding on whom to appoint. Most new party leaders in parliamentary democracies have been previously deputy leaders or senior politicians in the party, whom people already knew and respected, and who had reputations as electoral winners.[6]

Moreover, leader changes are critical events in parties' histories and have become even more salient in recent decades. New leaders attract voter attention and increase excitement about the party. A new leader is more likely to attract airtime and newspaper coverage to advocate her leadership and party policies. As the media coverage about the new leader and the party

[6] The evidence for this argument comes from the leadership data we collected.

increases, we can expect that voters get more exposure to the party and learn more about its policies (Pedersen and Schumacher 2015). Somer-Topcu (2017) and Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu (2019) show that voters develop more accurate perceptions of party policy positions and agree more on party positions following a recent leadership change. As a result, one may expect a leadership change to bring new dynamism and attention to the party and is more likely to influence a party's electoral performance positively.

Yet, despite all the intended positive effects of leadership changes, any change is a destabilizing event for party organizations. Leadership changes are especially risky (Harmel et al. 1995), particularly if they are frequent. Frequent leadership changes are likely to destabilize party organizations, as they are occasions "to rethink the commitment to the present agenda, to reflect on roads not taken in the past, and to review future choices" (Gilmore 1988, p.14). Grusky (1960), writing in the management literature, argues that leader successions in businesses are disruptive. With leadership changes the relationships among organization members change, traditional practices are overhauled, and new policies are introduced. Similar studies of the English soccer leagues (Audas et al. 1997, 2002) and the National Hockey League (Rowe et al. 2005) show that within-season coach or general manager changes often result in declined team performance. Add to that the public perception of frequent leadership changes, the party that replaces its leaders often over short periods of times is likely seen as unsuccessful, disorganized, and divided, all of which have negative consequences for party performance (Greene and Haber 2015).

There are only a handful of studies that examined how party leadership changes affect party performance and no work (to our knowledge) that focused on the effects of the *frequency* of leadership changes on performance. Pedersen and Schumacher (2015) was the first comparative work on the question. Using data from four European countries, they showed that leadership changes have minor effects on short-term polling rates and no long-term effects on election outcomes. They also present empirical evidence that the short-term polling effects are stronger for those parties with a contested leadership election and allowed members to vote for party leadership. Cozza and Somer-Topcu (2021) expanded on these results in a recent paper using data from 11 countries. They confirm that inclusive selectorates have positive effects on short-term party performance but no long-term electoral effects. Using a survey experiment from Australia, they then unpack the mechanisms behind these short-term positive effects and present evidence that leaders that get elected by party membership have higher legitimacy and are evaluated as more competent.

Despite this evidence from these limited work, we still do not know how *frequent* leadership changes affect party performance. That is the question we analyze below. Following Pedersen and Schumacher (2015) and Cozza and Somer-Topcu (2021), we examine both the short-term and long-term electoral effects of party leadership changes in our ten countries. Similar to the previous section, we run our models together for all countries and then separately for the European PR systems and Westminster systems and check whether there are any conditional party family effects. Do the social democratic parties lose more when they have more frequent leadership changes? Are there short-term or long-term effects?

To test the short-term polling effects of leadership changes (Figure 2 and Figure 3), we rely on monthly polling data (Jennings and Wlezien 2016). We use the monthly-aggregated polling results and calculate our dependent variable as the change in the monthly polling performance of the party between the current month and two months later ($\Delta Poll$). We use the two-month difference in calculating our dependent variable because we believe that leadership

changes and other important events likely impact opinion polls with a short lag. In addition, given that opinion polls are not necessarily done based on calendar months, using two-month lags ensures that the field dates of polls do not overlap. We also replicated our results using the monthly polling difference as the dependent variable. The results are weaker (as expected) but in the same direction.

We have three main independent variables in the short-term effects models. First is a dummy variable, coded 1 if a new leader took office in that month (*Leader Appointment*). There are 127 months in which there was a leadership appointment and 8,749 months without a leadership appointment in our data. Given previous work, we expect a positive coefficient for this dummy variable, indicating that political parties gain in the polls from a new leader's appointment (Pedersen and Schumacher 2015).

The second and third variables are measures of the frequency of leadership changes. The second independent variable is a short-term measure of turnover frequency. It codes the cumulative number of leadership changes between the last election up until the current month (*In Between Elections Changes*). The variable ranges from 0 to 3. There were 5,712 months before which there was no leadership change since the last election, 2,805 months before which there was one leader change, 334 months with two, and 25 cases with three leadership changes since the previous election. 11 of these 25 months were coded for the German Social Democrats between November 2008 and September 2009. The others come from Canada and Australia (and not from their social democratic parties).

The third independent variable measures long-term turnover frequency. It codes the number of cumulative leadership changes for the last ten years for each month in our dataset (*10 Year Changes*). The variable ranges from 0 (for 527 months in the data) to 8 (for 59 months). Nine of these eight changes were coded for the German Social Democrats between July 2013 and March 2014, and 15 of them were coded for the New Zealand Labour Party between August 2017 and October 2018. The rest were from other party families.

We also control for the lagged change in polling performance (change in polling results between months *m-1* and *m*), $\Delta Poll_{m-1}$ as well as the change in polling outcomes between months *m-2* and *m-1*, $\Delta Poll_{m-2}$, the difference in the party's electoral performance (between elections *t-1* and *t*), $\Delta Vote$; a dummy variable for whether the party was in government in that month (*Government*); a dummy variable for whether the leader was elected by party members (*Member Vote),* and a dummy variable for whether the leader was elected with unanimous support or by acclamation (*Unanimous_Acclamation)*. We expect to see that parties that lost in the recent elections (compared to the previous elections) to recover more in the polls but lose if they are in government. We add the lagged polling changes to control for serial correlation in the polling data. Following Pedersen and Schumacher (2015) and Cozza and Somer-Topcu (2021), we expect the inclusive leader selection method to affect party performance positively. Finally, we also expect unanimous elections for party leaders to increase party performance by showcasing party unity.

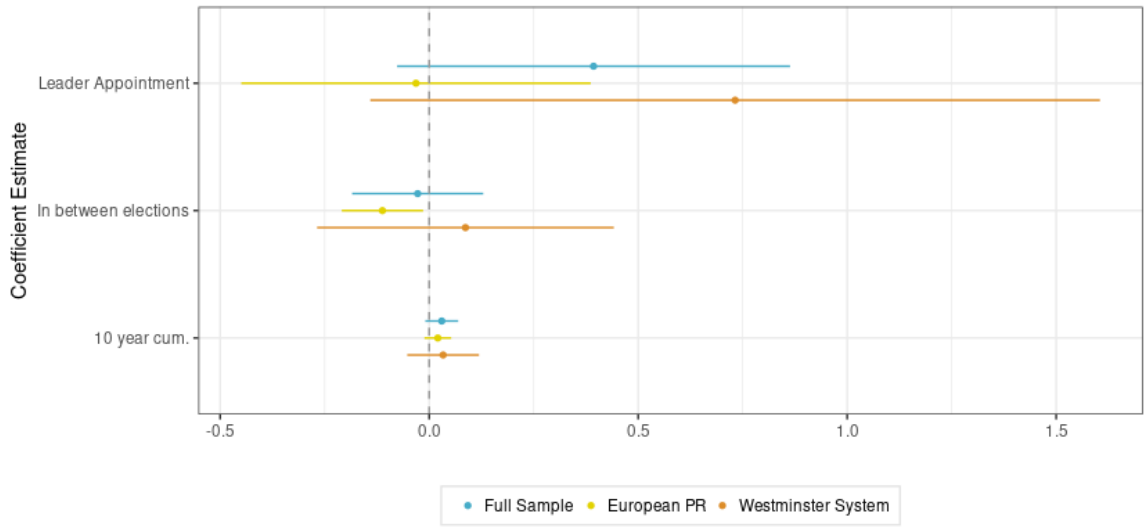
Figure 2 shows the short-term effects of party leadership changes and the frequency of party leadership changes for all countries, European PR systems, and the Westminster systems.[7] Once we control for the frequency of leadership changes, the leadership change dummy variable does not affect polling results. Regarding the frequency of changes, between-elections-changes

[7] The models include all the additional variables we discussed above but we only report the key variables. Full results are available upon request.

negatively affect opinion polls in the European PR systems, but the ten-year cumulative number of changes does not affect performance. None of the frequency variables are statistically significant in the Westminster systems.

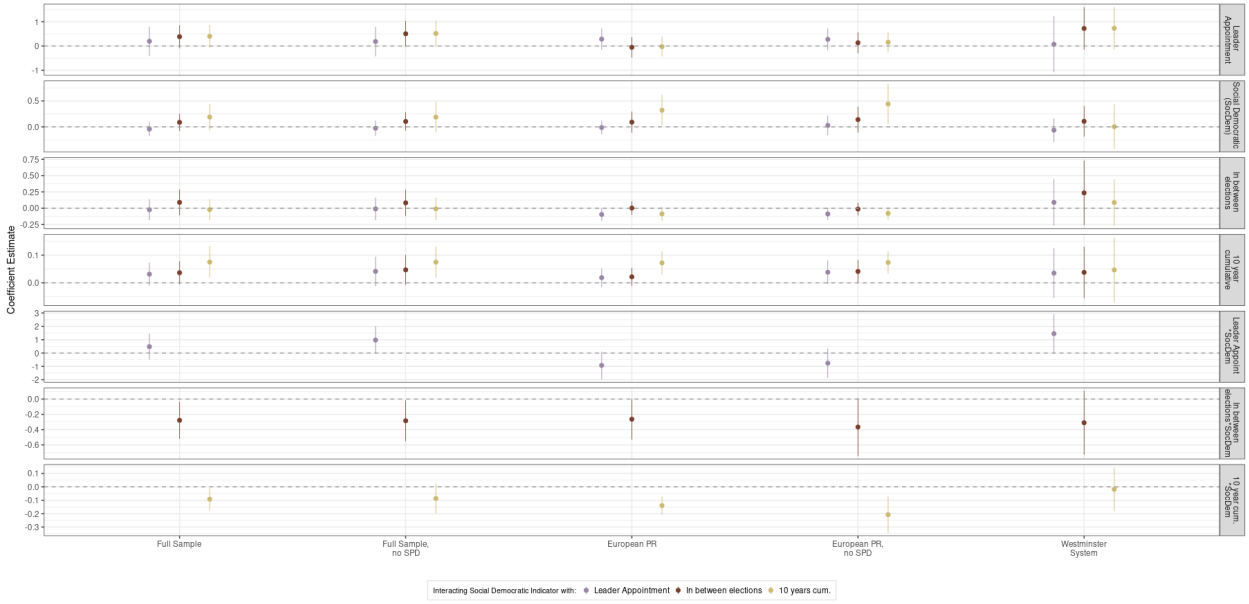
Are there differences between the social democratic parties and others regarding how leadership changes affect short-term performance? Figure 3 shows that if we pool all countries together and drop the SPD, social democrats experience short-term gains in the polls after a leadership change, and the effect is even stronger than in the Westminster systems. However, as the results in the European PR model show, the conditional effect disappears when we drop the SPD. Regarding the frequency of changes in-between elections and over 10-year periods, the social democratic parties clearly lose more with frequent leadership changes in the European PR systems (with or without SPD), while there are no conditional effects in the Westminster systems (although the coefficients for the interaction variables are similarly negative but not statistically significant).

Figure 2: The Polling Effects of Leadership Changes and the Frequency of Leadership Changes



Note: Figure shows coefficients and robust standard errors of models testing the effect of leader replacement on short-term performance for three different samples. Models are fully specified but the additional coefficients are not presented for space saving purposes.

Figure 3: The Polling Effects of Leadership Changes and the Frequency of Leadership Changes Conditional on Party Family



Note: Figure shows coefficients and robust standard errors of models testing the effect of leader replacement on short-term performance. Each column shows the regression results using different samples. For instance, the first column of results shows the effects for the full sample, the second column shows the effects for the full sample excluding SPD, etc. Each row shows the coefficients for the variables specified on the right-hand side. The first row shows the coefficients for the leader appointment dummy variable. The second row shows the coefficients for the social democratic dummy variable. The third row shows the coefficients for the number of leadership changes in-between elections variable. The fourth row shows the coefficients for the number of 10-year leadership changes variable. The final three rows show the interaction coefficients for the leadership change dummy and social democracy, the number of in-between elections and social democracy, and the number of 10-year changes and social democracy, respectively. Models are fully specified but the additional coefficients are not presented for space saving purposes.

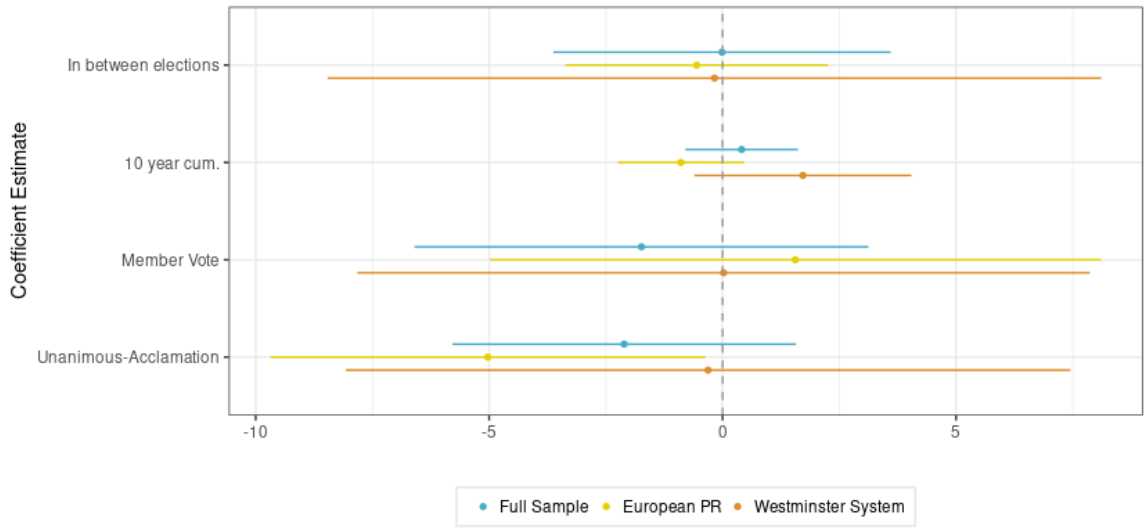
To examine the long-term electoral effects of leadership changes (Figure 4 and Figure 5), we use the election results in the parliamentary elections following a leadership change, coded using the ParlGov data (Döring and Manow 2016). We are, once again, interested in how the party's performance changes after the leadership change. However, the often-used change in vote share variable – measuring the change in electoral performance as the difference between the current election result (t) and the result in the previous election (t-1) – would not be appropriate to test the electoral effect of a leadership change in the inter-election period. This is because a decline in vote share compared to the previous election may mean either that the new leader hurt the party's electoral performance or that the positive impact of the leadership change was simply not (yet) enough to offset earlier losses in public support during the inter-election period. Given that we cannot answer which of these scenarios reflects the reality with an electoral performance change variable measured, we use a new measure to test the electoral effects and focus only on those elections before which there was a leadership change.

The dependent variable in these models is the difference between the current vote share of the party in the parliamentary election at time t and the monthly polling result of the party

(i.e., the party's expected vote share) in the month before the leadership change. Using this dependent variable, we can tell whether the leadership change affected the party's electoral performance by comparing the polling results for the party right before the leadership change to the election outcome following the leadership change.

Our independent variables are (1) the number of leadership changes that happened between the last election and the current election (*In Between Elections Changes*), and (2) the number of leadership changes for the last 10 years before the current election (*10 Year Changes*). Because we only focus on cases where there was a leadership change in these analyses, we cannot include the leadership change dummy or its interaction with the social democratic dummy. Similar to the polling results models, we control for several factors. Namely, we have the previous change in the party's electoral performance (between elections *t-2* and *t-1*), $\Delta Vote_{t-1}$; a dummy variable for whether the party was ever in government in the inter-election period between elections *t-1* and *t* (*Government*); a dummy variable for whether the leader was elected by party members (*Member Vote),* and a dummy variable for whether the leader was elected with unanimous support or by acclamation (*Unanimous_Acclamation)*. We also control for two additional variables in these models. First, we consider the number of months a new leader has been in office and count the months between the leadership change and election day (*Time In Office*). We expect that, as the time passes, the potential positive effects of a leadership change might weaken and disappear, since the new leader uses her novelty, and hence media and voters might pay less attention to her. Second, we also control for the time between the announcement of the previous leader's resignation and the appointment of the new leader (*Time In Between Leaders*), with the expectation that as the period in between two leaders gets longer, that would signal a divided party and may hurt the party's electoral performance. Figures 4 and 5 show no longer-term electoral effects of leadership changes and no conditional effects for the social democrats.

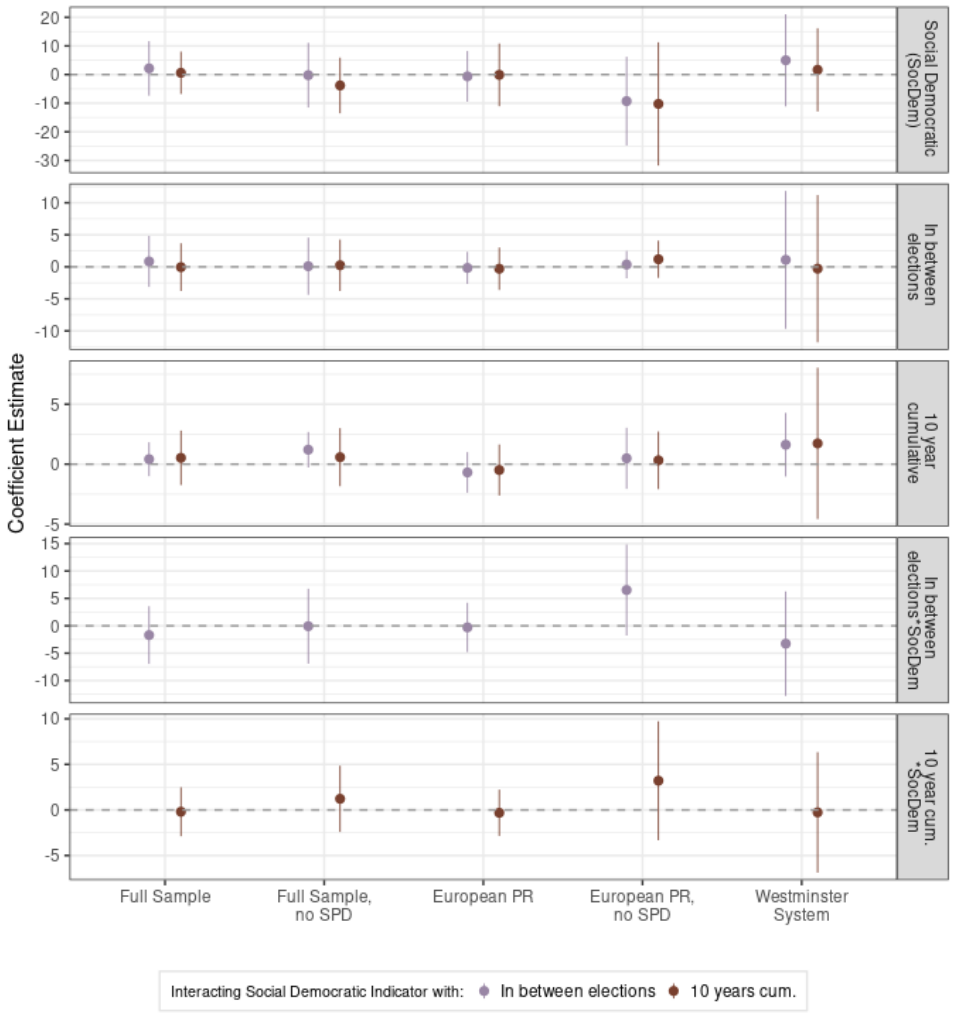
Figure 4: The Electoral Effects of Leadership Changes and the Frequency of Leadership Changes



Note: Figure shows coefficients and robust standard errors of models testing the effect of leader replacement on electoral performance for three different samples. Models are fully specified but the additional coefficients are not presented for space saving purposes.

To sum up the performance results, there are no long-term election effects of leadership changes or frequency of leadership changes. This result is consistent with the existing work by Pedersen and Schumacher (2015) and Cozza and Somer-Topcu (2021), which showed no electoral effects of leadership changes. Short-term polling effects exist, and there are a few interesting conditional effects for social democratic parties (the frequency of leadership changes appears to affect them more than other party families, for instance). Still, the magnitudes of the effects are quite small, and as we showed, the effects do not last very long. Therefore, we cannot confidently conclude that leadership changes matter for party performance or that leadership changes are especially consequential for the social democrats. There is no evidence for social democratic exceptionalism.

Figure 5: The Electoral Effects of Leadership Changes and the Frequency of Leadership Changes Conditional on Party Family



Note: Figure shows coefficients and robust standard errors of models testing the effect of leader replacement on electoral performance. Each column shows the regression results using different samples. For instance, the first column of results shows the effects for the full sample, the second column shows the effects for the full sample excluding SPD, etc. Each row shows the coefficients for the variables specified on the right-hand side. The first row shows the coefficients for the social democratic dummy variable. The second row shows the coefficients for the number of in-between elections changes variable. The third row shows the effects of the number of 10-year leadership changes. The final two rows show the interaction coefficients for the number of in-between elections and social democracy, and the number of 10-year changes and social democracy, respectively. Models are fully specified but the additional coefficients are not presented for space saving purposes.

(5) Discussion and Conclusion

Do leaders of social democratic parties last shorter in office? How does their duration in office and frequency of leadership changes affect their performance? Have these party leadership changes played any role in the decline of social democratic parties in advanced democracies? This chapter
empirically analyzed these questions using a novel dataset on party leadership changes across ten advanced democracies. Our results show that there are no party family differences and not social democratic exceptionalism. The German SPD notwithstanding, party leaders across party families have stayed in office for similar periods; similar variables explain leader durations in office across different party families; party leadership changes and the frequencies of leadership changes do not have different effects on parties' short-term polling performance or longer-term electoral performance.

These results have important implications and contributions. First, our finding that there is no social democratic exceptionalism suggests that party leadership changes or the frequency of those changes are not the culprits for the social democratic decline. To understand the social democratic decline, we should look into other factors than the turnover in party leadership, as the many exemplary contributions to this edited volume suggest.

Second, our leader duration models show that many of the variables that have been shown to affect leader duration in office continue to be important. However, for the first time, we established that there are electoral system differences about which variables determine a leaders' time in office. While vote share changes and opinion poll performances matter more in the proportional representation systems, government loss is detrimental for the continued tenure of party leaders in Westminster/plurality systems.

Third, the results of the minimal effects of leader changes and the frequency of leader changes on performance are similar to the small number of work on the question (Pedersen and Schumacher 2015, Cozza and Somer-Topcu 2021). But we note that these results do not necessarily imply that leaders are not crucial for the performance of their political parties. As the growing literature shows, leaders, their campaigns, their personal characteristics, and traits affect people's perceptions and vote choice (Butler and Stokes 1974, LeDuc 2001, McAllister 2007, Aarts et al. 2011, Bittner 2011). Nevertheless, our results also question the presidentialization thesis to some extent (Poguntke and Webb 2005). According to the thesis, party leaders across parliamentary systems have become more autonomous of their parties and dominate politics (Webb, Poguntke, and Kolodny 2012). One implication of this argument is that we should see more consistent and considerable effects of leadership changes on party performance across all our cases. Based on the null results, we propose instead that information processing about political parties and reactions to party behavior are not overwhelmed by party leaders and instead are likely affected by messages produced by a variety of party voices. Party leaders might become increasingly central and even extend their control over the organization like a "part-time autocrat" (as Kister (2018) described Sigmar Gabriel's grip over the SPD), but public perception and short- as well as the long-term performance of political parties appears to depend on more than just the leader. We suggest that the party's public image, its representation in the media, and the voters' minds might be more complex than currently theorized.

Future research, therefore, should move beyond the influence of party leadership on party performance, possibly more toward the political composition of party organizations and the changes in the numbers and compositions of party members and activists who set the tone and

shape the agenda inside parties. Given that most social democratic parties have increasingly included party members and activists into party decision-making, whether it is about leadership election, candidate selection, or decisions on manifesto content (Cozza and Somer-Topcu 2021), one question that still needs to be answered is whether party organizational inclusiveness has any consequences for social democratic parties. We leave this interesting question to future research.

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