

## **Why Parties Narrow their Representative Profile: Evidence from Six European Democracies**

In this paper, we analyse under which conditions political parties narrow their representative profile defined by the scope of the issues or the constituencies they represent. This strategy has been neglected in the party literature mainly focused on the adoption of catch all strategies among mainstream parties or the tendency to stick to core issues among niche parties. In this paper, we develop a theoretical framework that includes central external and internal drivers of party change and we empirically test it using novel survey data covering 121 parties across six European democracies: United Kingdom, Norway, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Ireland. Our findings highlight that adopting a narrow strategy is more likely after an electoral defeat and less likely among parties that give members a say over policy and among niche parties.

## Introduction

Despite their much debated decline, in virtually all long-lived democracies political parties still are central vehicles for citizen representation and the channelling of citizen demands into the political process. Following prominent discussions about ‘party decline’ or ‘failure’ (e.g. Rose and Mackie 1988; Dalton and Weldon 2005; Mack 2010), more and more party scholars have indicated that claims about the demise of parties as central actors in democratic politics might have been premature. By now, an assessment of *how parties have adapted and transformed* in long-lived democracies is by many perceived as a more fruitful starting-point to try understanding parties’ role in modern democracy (e.g. Dalton et al 2011).

This paper starts out from this perspective studying the conditions under which *political parties narrow down their ‘representative profile’ defined by the scope of the issues or the constituencies they represent as one neglected party strategy to stabilize party support* in increasingly volatile political environments. This contrasts with themes that have preoccupied party scholars to a much greater extent, such as how parties reconcile central (often conflicting) party goals, most notably votes, office and policy (Müller and Strøm 1999). This by now vast literature has generated impressive and important insights into party strategic behaviour (e.g. Adams et al 2004; Schumacher et al 2013; Klüver and Spoon 2016). However, once considering the full range of parties participating in elections (not just those constitutive for parliamentary party systems), for most of these parties the goals office and policy are of limited relevance to the extent that most have never have parliamentary seats, let alone substantive influence on public policy. *Which constituency and which issues parties decide to represent*, in contrast, is doubtlessly central to any party, as participation in elections is what distinguishes parties from other organizations, hence, defines them in the first place (Sartori 1976), whether they ever have access to office or policy-making influence or not.

The study of parties narrowing their representative profile as one so far neglected party strategy is empirically important as parties’ ability to stabilize a support base can have fundamental repercussions for party survival. This, in turn, is crucial as only parties that contest more than a few elections can broaden the offer of party systems (e.g. Meguid 2005). Meanwhile, for party research to go beyond the study of long-established, major parties or more successful new entries<sup>1</sup> gains importance as support for mainstream parties has been suffering over the last decades (e.g. Dalton

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<sup>1</sup> Major datasets widely used in the field – for instance the Manifesto Project Dataset – tend to focus on parties with parliamentary representation or significant vote shares. Similarly, cross-national studies on new parties tend to focus on those parties that win a minimum share of the national vote or, alternatively, achieve parliamentary representation (e.g. Kitschelt 1989; Krouwel and Lucardie 2008; Rose and Mackie 1988; but see Hug 2001). See for a detailed review Bolleyer (2013: Chapter 2).

and Wattenberg 2002). It has also important normative implications that differ depending on whether looked at from the perspective of society as a whole or from the relationship that parties' build with their particular core supporters: the narrowing of a parties' representative profile can mean the party becomes relevant to fewer citizens, hence, less relevant to society as a whole. It can also mean that parties match the preferences of a narrow group of citizens better, thereby strengthening their ties to these citizens and improving representation of the latter qualitatively. As will be detailed below, the literature has taken little notice of the narrowing of parties' representative profile, even though – as we will see later – a number of parties in the democracies studied in this paper have chosen this strategy in recent years.

Based on a framework that theorizes a number of central external and intra-organizational, *party-level* drivers that the literature considers crucial for party change, this paper empirically examines the drivers of parties' decision to strategically narrow their profile. As parties are our unit of analysis, we use a new dataset based on online party surveys conducted in the six European democracies Germany, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, which allows us to examine the role of party-level factors that – while often highlighted in theoretical work – are rarely included in large-N studies such as leadership change or members' say on party policy. The fact that these surveys covered all *nationally active* parties<sup>2</sup>, which include minor parties that often do not gain representation, will also allow us to generate broader conclusions about drivers of party change than earlier studies that tended to be restricted to the main parliamentary parties.

The paper is structured as follows: Having laid out why the narrowing of parties' representative profiles has not been a central consideration in party research so far, we build on the rich research on party change to theorize a set of conditions under which parties can be expected to narrow their representative profile, distinguishing central external factors (electoral loss, funding access) from intra-organizational factors (leadership change, member control over party policy). This is followed by a justification of the case selection on the country and party level, both of which follow the logic of a 'most different cases design'. We then present the surveys and operationalization of main variables. A first descriptive analysis not only highlights the representativeness of our survey data, it also gives insights in the variety of parties participating in national elections and how this differs across six European democracies, which – due to a focus of the party literature on 'success' or 'relevant cases' - we have surprisingly little information about. This is followed by an overview of which parties within and across country narrow their profile and the typical properties of the parties

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<sup>2</sup> All have participated in the last national election and were active when the survey was launched.

choosing this strategy. The main part of the empirical section tests our hypotheses using logistic regression techniques. Our results show that parties in a weak strategic position after suffering from an external shock – namely a decline in their electoral support - are more likely to adopt a narrowing strategy. Furthermore, those parties who give members a say over policy and niche parties are less likely to narrow their representative profile. We conclude with the broader implications of our findings and avenues for future research.

### Why a Neglect of a ‘Narrowing Strategy’ in Party Research?

Talking about the nature of parties’ ‘representative profile’ the narrowing of such profiles as one possible party strategy has received surprisingly little attention in the literature. Instead, building on classical work, most notably by Kirchheimer (1966), scholarship has been much preoccupied with the opposite, namely political parties in long-lived democracies tending towards ‘catch-all strategies’, defined by the broadening of party profiles to attract support from increasingly diverse parts of the electorate, contrasting with classical ‘mass party strategies’ of building stable ties to clearly defined societal groups (Katz and Mair 2009). As important as these insights are, the notion of the catch-all party has been developed with regard to the big ‘people’s parties’ (*Volksparteien*). It predominantly has been examined with regard to major mainstream parties that adopt catch-all strategies to assemble a broad enough support base to enter government in contexts of increased societal volatility (e.g. Williams 2009).

The literature on parties challenging the mainstream, especially work on niche parties - defined as parties that do not compete on the conventional left-right axis<sup>3</sup> such as Green, anti-immigrant parties (Meguid 2005) - has highlighted that catch-all strategies might be less helpful to understand the behaviour of minor players. Small, often relatively young, niche parties are more likely to *maintain and defend their distinct profile* as a core strategy to assure their survival and defend their niche in the party system against mainstream parties’ attempts to hijack their core issues (Meguid 2005; Spoon 2009; 2011). Echoing this, niche parties have been shown to be less responsive to shifts in public opinion than other parties (Adams et al 2006). Thus, this literature does not consider the narrowing of parties’ representative profiles as a likely option either.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the concept of niche party is distinct from the concept of single-issue party. While directly contradicting the definition of niche party as used by Meguid (2005), the definition of single-issue party by Mudde as “(1) having an electorate with no particular social structure; (2) being supported predominantly on the basis of one single issue; (3) lacking an ideological programme; and (4) addressing only one all-encompassing issue” (1999: 182) is too specific for our purposes (as Mudde shows it does not suitably describe extreme right parties that are commonly subsumed under the niche party concept together with Green and regional parties, for instance). More importantly, as single-issue parties are commonly considered very short-lived, they have not been theorized in terms of programmatic adaptation which is the focus of this paper.

These two contrasting pictures on the strategic behaviour of major and minor parties regarding the evolution of their representative profiles painted by these two literatures – one expecting a broadening of profiles, one expecting their maintenance - explains why the *conditions under which parties decide to narrow their representative profile defined by the scope of the constituency and issues they aim to represent is rarely examined*. Once covering *all* parties operating in the electoral market it becomes clear that neither of the two approaches necessarily apply. Most of these parties are by definition minor and not major players, hence, catch-all strategies usually make little sense to them. At the same time, only a minority of electorally active minor parties are niche parties.<sup>4</sup> As Lucardie (2000) points out, many emulate mainstream ideologies instead ('purifiers'), focus on single issues ('prolocutors') or are personalist vehicles instead (see also Krouwel and Lucardie 2008; Bolleyer 2013).

#### Why Parties Narrow their Representative Profile: A Theoretical Framework

##### *Definition*

Parties can narrow their representative profile in two ways. First, they can target a more specific constituency, i.e. try to speak on behalf of a narrower clientele at election time and recruit members from more narrowly defined groups in society. Second, they can adapt their programmatic profile, in terms of representing more specific or a narrower range of issues that match the concerns of their 'new' constituency. While these two processes can be linked, they are not necessarily related as a party might narrow its programme to highlight core issues more effectively, to strengthen the linkage to its traditional constituency caring particularly strongly about these core issues. Vice versa, a narrower constituency can still be internally diverse, caring about a range of complex issues, making a narrowing down of a party's issue profile unsuitable to appeal to it. Consequently, the *narrowing of a party's constituency and of its issues are best understood as two expressions of the same type of strategic change constituting equivalent attempts to more effectively attach its core support base to the party*, both suggesting a 'narrowing of a party's representative profile'.

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<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the concept of small party is most usefully conceptualized in relative terms, in the context of its party system, meaning parties of the same absolute size can enjoy advantages in one type of party system but not in another (Bolleyer 2007). Being a niche party as a party-level property is expected to have the same consequences irrespective of their systemic context.

### *Hypotheses – External and Intra-Organizational Drivers of Party Strategic Change*

Under which conditions can we expect parties to narrow their representative profiles, facing two prominent theories, one applicable to major parties (the ‘catch-all approach’), one to minor parties (the ‘niche party approach’), none of which leads us to expect parties to make this particular choice? The basic risk associated with catch-all strategies is the party loosening its ties to its traditional clienteles, reinforcing the volatility of its support base that is already getting more fluid due to the decline of group affiliations in increasingly individualized societies (Biezen et al 2011). If so, narrowing one’s representative profile can be considered as a ‘counterstrategy’ to stabilize party core support base by aligning party goals and behaviour more tightly to the latter’s interests (in the case of the narrowing of issues) or, alternatively, by prioritizing certain parts of the party’s support base in the attempt to enhance these followers’ confidence in the party (in the case of the narrowing of the party constituency). Both can be expected to reassure core followers that the party is committed to representing them and their interests.

Theorizing factors conducive to making such a choice, we start from prominent theories of party change distinguishing between *exogenous* and *endogenous* sources of change both of which need to be examined alongside each other (Harmel and Janda 1994). In terms of exogenous sources of change, we expect that party elites are likely to adapt their representative profiles when receiving clear external signals that their support base is at risk or when alternative sources stabilizing their party are in decline, reinforcing their dependency on this support base. Meanwhile, intra-organizational characteristics can function as either barriers or facilitators of such changes (Schumacher et al 2013). We discuss both sets of factors in turn.

As indicated earlier, participation in election is the feature that distinguishes parties from other organizations and electoral inactivity is generally considered as a sign of a party’s demise (Sartori 1976; Pedersen 1982). Given the centrality of electoral participation for parties of any size or ideological orientation, electoral losses can be expected to be one central external signal to elites that core supporters need reassurance. Tailoring the parties’ profile to these supporters’ interests or targeting a more specific group of supporters is a strategy to do so. Electoral loss can be the result of supporters not going to the polls, or supporting a competitor instead. Narrowing their representative profiles can further help parties to ‘sharpen’ their profile and thus constitutes a strategy to present themselves as more distinct from competitors. Doing so can have significant internal costs, as a party’s profile is often central to its identity and its change might face considerable resistance of members (Janda et al 1995). Consequently, the more pronounced the

electoral loss, the easier it will be for the (usually more pragmatic) party elite to defend a change and implement the strategy against intra-organizational resistance. This leads to our first hypothesis.

**H1:** The more votes a party has lost at the last election compared to the election prior, the more likely it will narrow its representative profile.

One resource that makes parties less dependent on members and supporters – both in terms of financial and volunteer support - is state funding. For many parties, including relatively minor ones, it can constitute an important income source, whose relevance has significantly increased over the last decades in many long-lived democracies (e.g. Biezen and Kopecky 2014). More specifically, state funding tends to be considered by organizational leaders a more reliable income source than societal support, especially as competition for members and donors has intensified (Katz and Mair 1995; Nassmacher 2009). To the extent that changing one's party's profile is likely to face at least some intra-organizational resistance, as long as a party has access to this important income source central to assure organizational self-maintenance, costly strategic change might be avoided. Consequently access to state funding is expected to make it less likely that a party engages in change, including those narrowing its profile.

**H2:** Parties with access to state funding are less likely to narrow their representative profile than parties without such access.

While the ability to rely on funding as a 'stability-inducing' income source is one counterincentive against intra-organizational change, the ultimate locus of power and prestige in political systems is national government. For ambitious politicians, the take-over of ministries is often ultimate reward not only in terms of prestige but also regarding the possibility to implement party policies, which for policy- (rather than office-) driven elites can be equally – if not more – important (Deschouwer 2008; Spoon 2011). Occupying government positions reduces the incentives to engage in a 'narrowing strategy' for several reasons, both for major and minor parties: first, major government parties face stronger incentives to present themselves as competent across the core policy and issue areas and appeal to a wider range of constituencies than opposition parties (Kirchheimer 1966), which discourages the narrowing of parties' representative profile, both in terms of issues highlighted and constituencies targeted. Second, both for major and minor parties government take-over constitutes a major success, indicating that whatever strategy was pursued to achieve it was successful, which reduces incentives for strategic change or reform in general (Müller and Strøm 1999; Cross and Blais 2011). Third, especially minor coalition partners might take over ministerial portfolios that lie

outside their core issue areas as more often than not they are unable to dictate which ministries they end up with (Bolleyer 2007). Meanwhile, coalition partners are embedded in a cabinet in which coalition partners need – to some extent - take joint responsibility for all government policies agreed upon and passed across policy areas (Müller and Strøm 2003). These aspects create pressures on parties towards broadening their policy focus beyond core issues and towards expanding their expertise during their time in government, pushing parties – if anything – away from a ‘narrowing’ strategy.<sup>5</sup>

**H3:** Government parties are less likely to narrow their representative profile than opposition parties.

Moving to internal party characteristics we theorize three aspects in turn. Leadership change is often an attempt towards party renewal, especially in terms of a party’s strategic outlook (which is easier to change than entrenched organizational features). New leaders often face pressures to demonstrate their ability to reinvent the party. For once, leadership change is more likely following dissatisfaction with the new leader’s predecessor (e.g. after suffering electoral defeat), which makes continuing well-established strategies less attractive (Gauja 2017). Furthermore, in cases of competitive leadership contests, candidates usually promise to turn the fate of the party around by introducing beneficial change (Cross and Blais 2011). Once in office, if leaders favour a narrowing of the party’s profile as a strategy to stabilize its core support, they are more likely to be able to implement these plans, as long as still in a “honeymoon period”, which makes it easier to overcome internal resistance against his or her initiatives. This leads us to our next hypothesis:

**H4:** Parties that underwent recent leadership change are more likely to narrow their representative profile than parties that did not.

While new leaders might be more able to implement their new agenda against intra-organizational opposition, doing so is naturally easiest when leaders have formal control over the formulation of the party’s policy priorities. Schumacher et al (2013) have convincingly shown that the extent to which party organizations are activist- rather than leadership-dominated restricts parties’ ability to respond to pressures towards embracing policy change, a finding with implications for strategic

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<sup>5</sup> Support party status is usually restricted to specific policy areas in which a party is willing to provide legislative support to a minority government, while still opposing the government in policy areas outside the agreement, which is why expect this rationale to hold only for parties holding ministries and forming part of the cabinet.



party change generally. When members rather than leaders control such decisions (or allowing members to veto leadership proposals in that area), changes become more difficult, particularly those that can be considered as compromising a party's identity for pragmatic considerations directed towards maximizing party performance (e.g. in terms of votes or funding access). This is because leaders are usually considered more pragmatic, eager to maintain their own status position (which requires assuring their party's success), while activists, especially those that actively participate in internal decision-making, are more concerned about organizational values and therefore might less willingly agree to changes in their party's profile for strategic reasons (Panebianco 1988; Katz 2001).<sup>6</sup>

**H5:** Parties which give members a say over party policy are less likely to narrow their representative profile than those that do not.

So far we dealt with structural features affecting parties' propensity towards change related to the role of central intra-party actors. We now move to ideological constraints, which brings us back to the niche party literature. Being defined as parties that compete on a different ideological axis from the socio-economic one such as Green, anti-immigrant or regional parties (Meguid 2005), niche parties have been shown to be resilient towards change: To defend their 'niche' in the party system, that they often (though not necessarily) entered after the major parties are already well established, it is constitutive for those niche parties' identity to 'be different' from other parties already in the system (minor or major), an attribute party elites are eager to preserve. As Spoon (2009: 618) has argued regarding Green parties, for instance, these formations have an inclination to keep presenting themselves as distinct, even as other parties start to 'objectively' assimilate them by integrating their issues into their own programmes. This is underlined by niche parties' line unwillingness to dilute their position as response to changes in public opinion (Adams et al 2006) but also suggests their disinclination to change their representative profile, which underpins our last hypothesis:

**H6:** Parties that are niche parties are less likely to narrow their representative profile than parties that are not.

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that there can be situations in which certain group of activists might favour more extreme forms of change (including policy change) than leaders. However, to the extent that members have been recruited into the party based on and are committed to the party with a given profile, the general expectation can be formulated that they are less open to strategic alterations to a party's profile than (success-oriented) leaders are.

## Case Selection and Data

Both the criteria for the inclusion of parties (our unit of analysis) as well as the selection of countries in which the surveys were conducted was directed towards covering a wide variety of contexts and party cases. We ran online surveys in six European democracies Germany, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, which have different party and electoral systems, include unitary, devolved and federal regimes, impose different degrees of legal constraints on political parties and provide different types and levels of public funding. Constituting a 'most different cases design', if common party-level factors driving parties' strategic change as theorized above can be identified in the later analysis despite parties operating in most different systemic contexts, this enhances confidence in the robustness of the findings.

Furthermore, rather than focusing on the major parties in each democracy, we identified the population of nationally active parties for each country starting out from party registers or, if such register did not exist, the electoral registers for the last national election. For the United Kingdom we used the *Register of Political Parties of The Electoral Commission*, in Switzerland the *Swiss Parteienregister*, for Norway the electoral party register (*Partiregisteret*), Germany the list of authorized electoral participants (*Zugelassene Parteien und Wahlbewerber*), for Ireland the Political Party Register and for Italy the National Party Register (*Registro nazionale dei partiti politici*) combined with the electoral register. We then selected those parties as survey participants that nominated candidates at the last national election<sup>7</sup> and had active websites as an indication that parties are still in operation.<sup>8</sup>

The six on-line surveys were launched between April and October 2016 and the last survey was closed in March 2017. We compiled the emails and surveyed those individuals in charge of the day-to-day running of the party knowledgeable about membership, procedures and resources (e.g. party secretary, chairman, leader). The questionnaire consisted of 36 questions covering aspects about the

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<sup>7</sup> To assure comparability across first past the post/mixed and list PR systems, in electoral systems with single-member constituencies we only included parties that run in more than one constituency (or in mixed systems also run with a list) to assure all parties were active beyond one single locality.

<sup>8</sup> Deregistration from formal registers is an unreliable indication of parties' dissolution as not all registers require parties to run regular elections or update information to stay registered and therefore often contain inactive parties.

party organization, parties' resources, their core activities and their challenges. The response rates range from 38% to 78% as illustrated in table 1<sup>9</sup>. The overall Parties dataset contains 121 parties.

Table 1. Information about the Parties dataset

	Population	Survey responses	Response rates
United Kingdom	71	27	38.03
Norway	22	16	72.72
Germany	29	20	68.97
Switzerland	37	29	78.38
Italy	45	21	46.67
Ireland	20	8	40

All country samples show considerable variation in central party properties. They include major and minor parties and cover a wide range of electoral support from 0% to at least 19% of the national vote.<sup>10</sup> The overall dataset includes 28% of parties with at least one seat in their national parliament. Among those who have seats in national parliament, a quarter of the parties gain more than 16% of the seats of their national parliament, and 12% of the parties gain at least 30% of the national seats. Our sample is not only representative in terms of major/minor parties but also in terms of ideology. All country samples include parties from all the main party families (see for more details the overview below).

### Operationalization of Variables

#### *Dependent variable*

We measure the *narrowing of a party's representative profile* using a dichotomous variable constructed based on two indicators from a survey question in which participants had to indicate if they have implemented different strategies to enhance their survival prospects in the past five years. Overall, more parties signalled that they had implemented strategies to enhance their survival prospects (91%) than not (8%). Among the different strategies, more parties implemented changes

<sup>9</sup> Our sample is representative of the party population in terms of parliamentary representation (parliamentary parties represent 23% of the population, and they represent 28% of our sample) and ideological representativeness (including parties from all party families).

<sup>10</sup> This is the case of Switzerland, the rest of the country samples include parties with electoral support higher than 24% of the national vote.

to enhance the opportunities for their members to participate (64%) or to enhance efficiency (52%), and less parties opted for changing their name (14%) or mission (22%). The index used to measure narrowing of a party's representative profile as one of these strategies has been constructed based on the following two items from the survey: "We have narrowed the constituency we seek to represent" and "We have narrowed the range of issues upon which we focus". The variable takes the value 1 when parties undertaken at least one of the two strategies and 0 when they did not implement any of them.<sup>11</sup>

### *Independent variables*

Starting with the external factors expected to affect the choice of party strategy, to capture *Electoral change*, we have created a variable capturing the difference between the vote share won by each party at the most recent national election and the vote share obtained by the party in the election previous, with negative values indicating an electoral loss. We have used various data sources such as official electoral records and the Constituency Level Electoral Archive. *Funding access* is captured by a dichotomous variable that takes the value 1 if a party won enough votes or seats to obtain state funding made available by the party finance regime in the last elections and 0 otherwise. To determine the eligibility criteria, we have consulted the SIEPOL and IDEA databases. Based on the ParlGov Database, we have coded a *Government access* variable capturing whether a party was part of the national government (hence held cabinet positions) at the time of the survey coded as 1 and coded as 0 if the party was in opposition (Döring and Manow, 2016).

Moving on to the intra-organizational factors driving the adoption of a narrowing strategy, we include three variables: *Leadership change*, *Member control over policy* and *Niche party*. *Leadership change* is a dichotomous variable that takes the value 0 if the same leadership stayed in office in a political party in the period between 2011 and 2016 (prior to launching the survey) and 1 if the party experienced a leadership change in that period.<sup>12</sup> Leadership change takes place when one of the two following figures are replaced in the relevant period: the party leader as the party official in charge of managing the party's relations and communications with the general public and/or the leading official who runs a party's day-to-day operations (often called the party secretary or

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<sup>11</sup> Descriptive statistics on all variables used in the analysis including a correlation table can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>12</sup> This period is suitable as a leader needs to get established in office before being able to implement reforms which is usually a slow process.

chairman).<sup>13</sup> We have relied on various data sources to code this variable, mainly party websites and news reports. *Member control over policy* is a dichotomous variable constructed based on a survey question in which participants had to indicate how their party takes decisions in different areas, we selected the area “Establishing your organization’s policy/programmatic positions” and coded as 1 those parties who indicated that the decision is taken either by consensus among members or by voting among members (indicating members’ control over these decisions), and 0 when the decision is made otherwise (e.g. by the board, by staff). *Niche party* is a dichotomous variable coded in two steps. In a first step, we have identified the different party families following the Chapel Hill Expert Survey classification (Polk et al 2017). In the second step, we have identified those party families that can be considered as niche parties. Building on Meguid’s seminal classification (2005), we considered as niche parties all those parties that are not competing in the traditional left-right axis: Far-right, Religious, Regionalist, Green and Pirate parties. Our variable takes the value 1 if a party is considered a niche party and 0 otherwise.

### *Control Variables*

To assess the robustness of our findings, we controlled for party age and parliamentary parties. The former is based on a survey question asking for the year of the party’s foundation. This variable has a right-skewed distribution, thus, we include the logarithmic of this variable in our model. We further added a dummy variable distinguishing between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary parties (hence between parties that held seats in national parliament at the time of the survey and those that did not) considering these two groups’ very distinct resource access and visibility. As with electoral change, we have used as sources official electoral records and the Constituency Level Electoral Archive.

### Political Parties Competing at National Elections: An Overview

The first set of data that we present here summarizes the main features of the political parties competing at national elections in the six European democracies analysed: the United Kingdom,

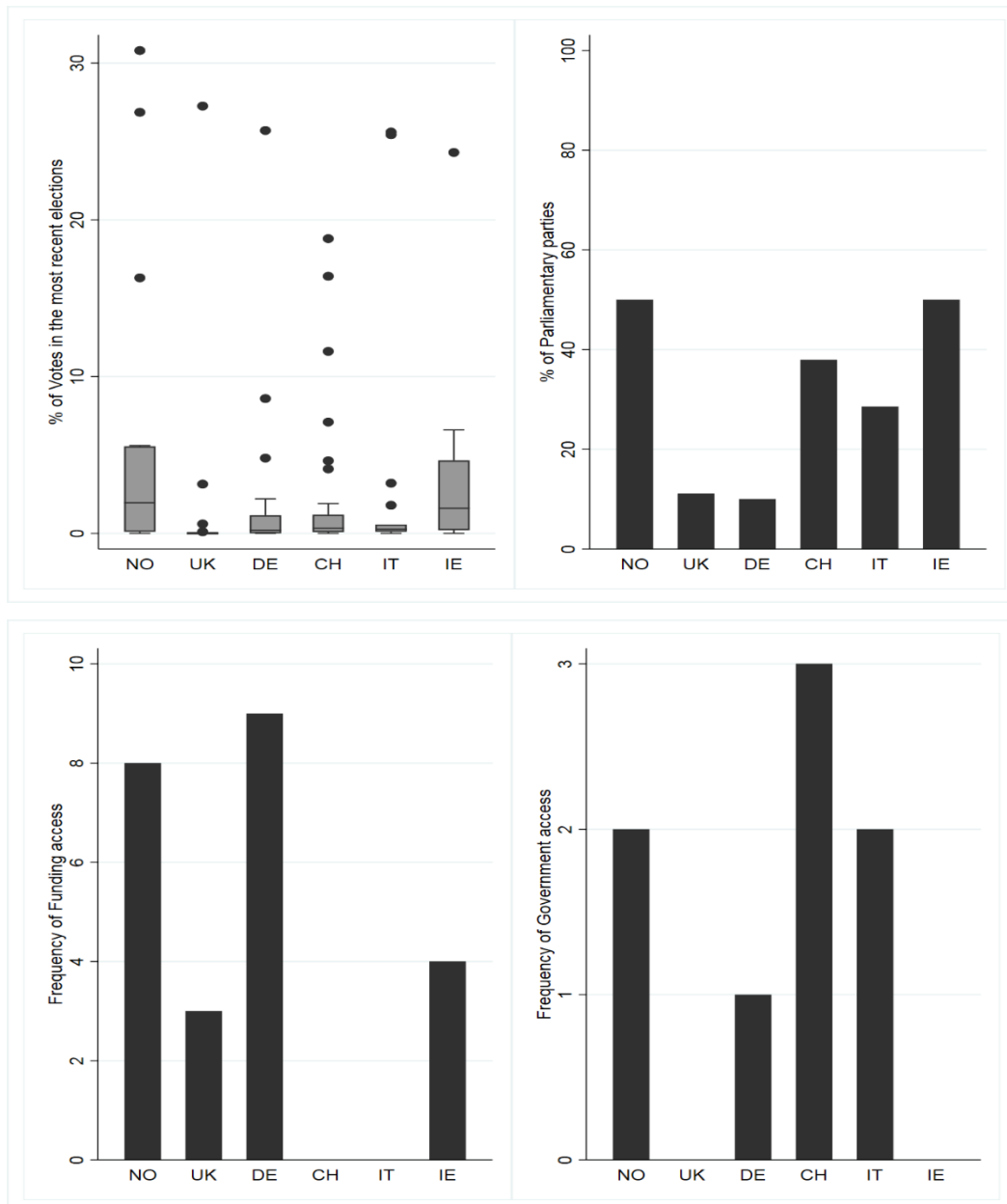
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<sup>13</sup> In parties with collective leadership structures we considered as sufficient the replacement of one core figure. This avoided a bias in favour of finding leadership change in centralized, leader-centred parties had we required in parties with several leadership figures for all of them to be replaced. In cases of parties that refused to have a formal leader, we considered the party spokesperson as functionally equivalent role. In the few cases where there were neither leaders nor formal spokespeople, we consulted party publications and available case study literature regarding who belonged to the core leadership and whether any of them was replaced in the relevant period (see Bolleyer and Bytzek 2017).

Norway, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Ireland. The importance of this data relies in its broad coverage, including not only the group of major parties constituting their parliamentary party systems but parties operating in the electoral market more broadly, hence minor parties that tend to be left aside in most studies.

Figure 1 shows that our country samples include parties with very different electoral support. Considering the results of the most recent elections (upper-left graph), our sample includes parties obtaining over 20% of the votes and parties obtaining less than 2% of the votes. The average electoral support is 2.84% of the votes with a standard deviation of 6.71%. When we compare the electoral results of the most recent election with the previous one our results show that in all countries there are parties that experienced either positive or negative change. The distribution of electoral support in the previous election ranges from 0% to 35% of votes, with an average percentage of votes of 2.86 and a standard deviation of 6.79. The upper-right graph illustrates the percentage of parliamentary parties country by country. Overall, 28% of the parties in our sample are parliamentary while 72% of them are extra-parliamentary. In all the countries, we have parties with parliamentary representation. The lower-left graph shows the amount of parties in each country that had access to state funding in the last elections. All the country samples have parties with access to state funding except Switzerland and Italy, in which there is no direct state funding available for political parties. Germany and Norway are the two countries where a bigger number of parties have continuous access to state funding, the German system has a very low threshold which requires only 0.5% of the votes in the latest Bundestag elections. Even though in Norway the threshold is higher (2.5% of the votes or 1 seat), half of the parties in our sample obtained electoral results above the 2.5% threshold in the last two elections. Finally, the lower-right graph shows the number of parties that were part of the national government at the time of our survey, with Switzerland being the country with most parties with government access in our sample.

Figure 1. Electoral performance, parliamentary parties, funding access and government access among parties (by country)



Moving on to intra-organizational aspects, we also find considerable variation. On the one hand, many parties analysed have experienced a leadership change in the past five years. The left graph in Figure 2 shows that Norway, Germany, Switzerland are the countries with more parties that have changed their leader recently, however this does not imply necessarily any changes in the party strategy as we will see later in our analysis. The right graph shows that Norway is the case with fewer parties that grant members control over policy, in contrast with Germany and the United Kingdom.

Figure 2. Leadership change and members control over policy across parties (by country)

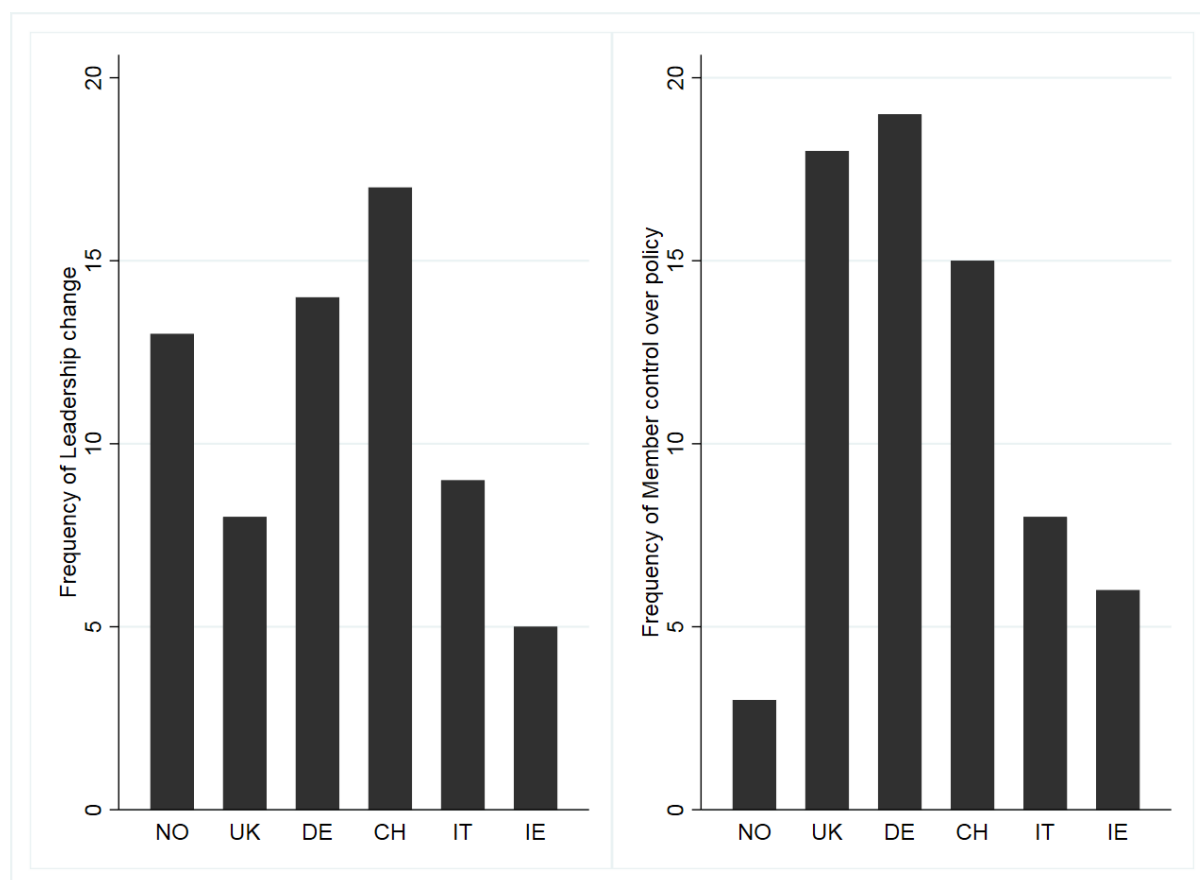
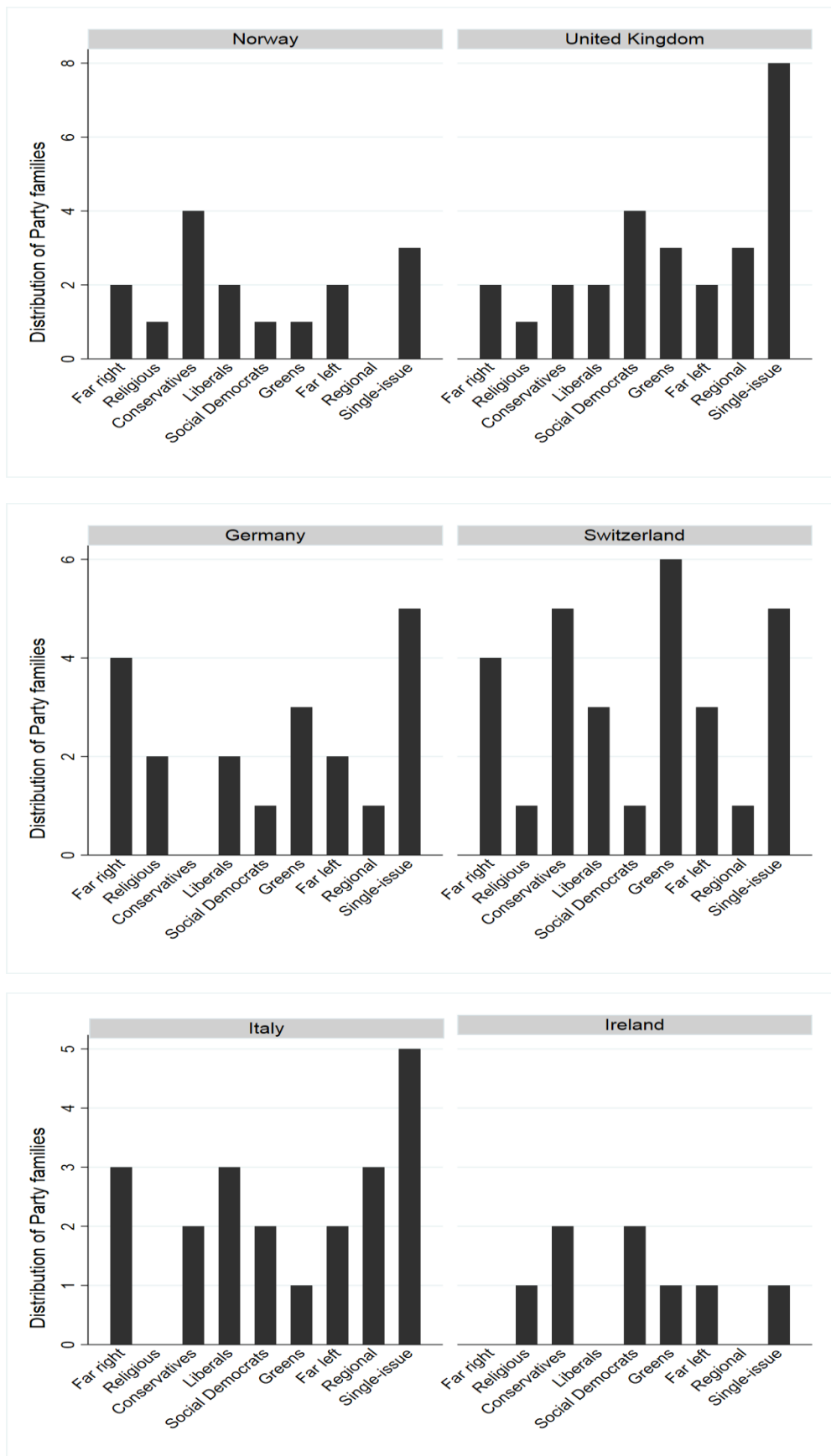


Figure 3 illustrates the diversity of party families among the parties competing at national elections in the six countries analysed. As party research has pointed out, the issues and ideologies among political parties across the world have diversified as societies face new problems and new political debates (Vassallo and Wilcox 2006). In addition to the traditional party families like far left (communist and socialist parties), social democrats, conservatives or liberals, we observe the presence of new party families like far right, greens or regionalists among others. Our data shows how even though the traditional families are still relevant (they represent the 46% of the sample), we find a significant percentage of parties belonging to new party families (54% of the parties). Our data shows that the number of conservative parties is higher in Switzerland and Norway, while social democrats are more popular in the United Kingdom, Italy and Ireland. Italy and Switzerland are the two countries with more liberal parties running for elections and also in Switzerland there are more far left parties running for elections at the national level. Regarding new party families, we find a



higher presence of green parties in Switzerland, Germany and the United Kingdom. We find more far-right parties in Germany, Switzerland and Italy than in other countries.

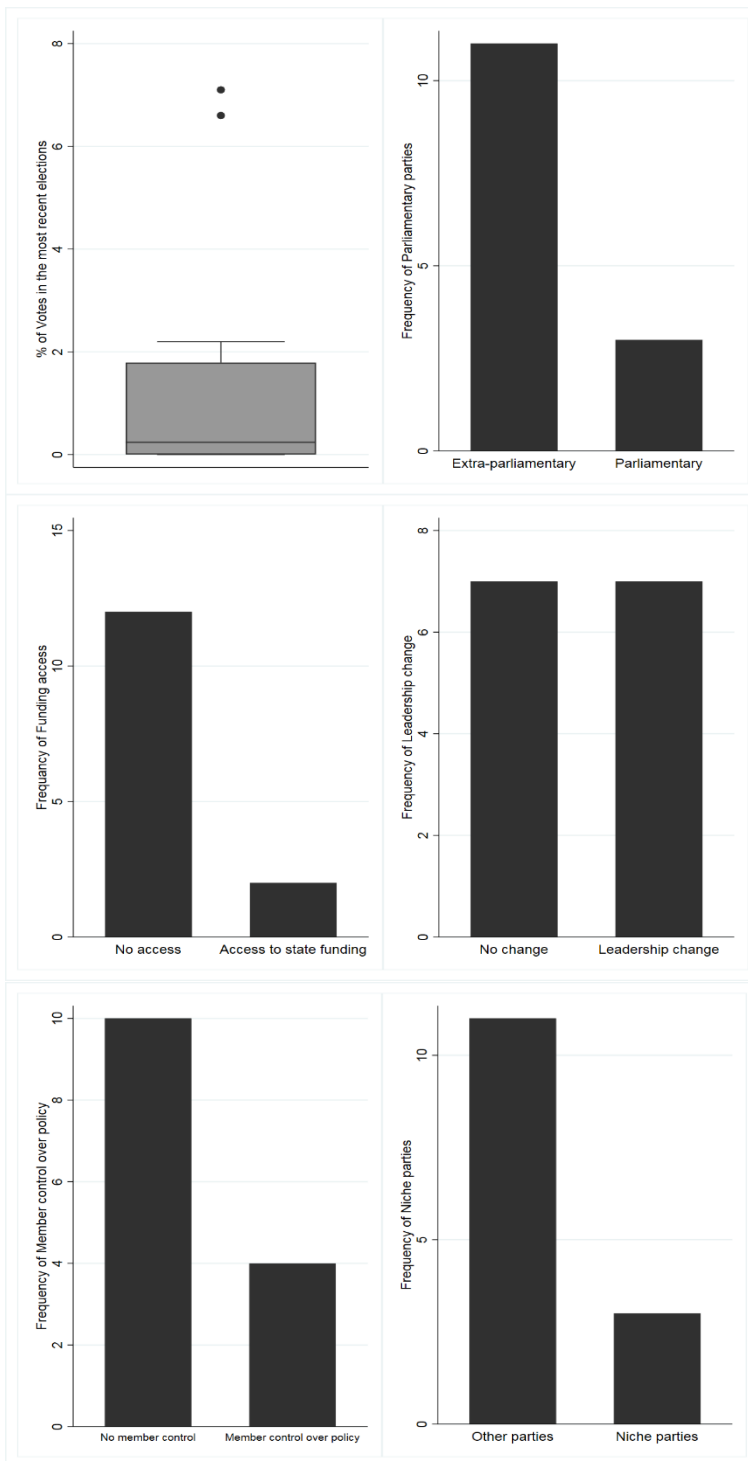
Figure 3. Distribution of parties by party family and country



### Description of Parties that Narrow their Representative Profile

The second set of data that we present summarizes the main features of those parties who decided to adopt a narrowing strategy in the past five years. Our dataset displays that 13% of the parties applied a narrowing strategy and that all country samples include at least one party narrowing its representative profile. As party research points out, parties are, in general, reluctant to change their organization, but they have adapted their strategies and moderated (or radicalized) their programmatic views if necessary to accomplish their goals (Sartori 1976; Panebianco 1988; Krouwel 2006). Figure 4 shows in the upper left box plot that parties which have changed their strategy towards narrowing their representative profile are not very successful electorally, they mainly obtained percentages of votes below 2%. Indeed, most of these parties either maintained the same levels of electoral support or suffered electoral losses. Most of the parties that applied a narrowing strategy are extra-parliamentary, which emphasizes the relevance of gaining votes as main goal of the parties. Furthermore, they tended to fail to gain access to state funding as the middle left bar graph shows. Moreover, over 90% of the parties that narrowed their representative profile did not participate in the national government.

Figure 4. Features of parties that narrow their representative profile



The next three bar charts show the distribution of intra-organizational features in the group of parties that narrowed their profile. The middle right bar chart shows the number of parties that changed their leader recently among the parties that narrowed their representative profile. The number of parties that experienced a change in their leadership is equivalent to the number of

parties who did not. The lower left bar chart shows that more parties in which the control over policy remains in the hands of the organizational elites applied a narrowing strategy, in comparison to those that give their members control over policy. Finally, the last bar chart shows the distribution of niche parties and other types of parties. Interestingly, our data shows that we find parties in both categories that narrowed their representative profile challenging previous party research on catch-all strategies in the former and stability in the niche profile in the latter type (Kirchheimer 1966; Meguid 2005).

To sum up, parties adopting a narrowing strategy tend to experience poor electoral results, do not have any access to state funding or the national government and are extra-parliamentary. Furthermore, they do not tend to be niche parties or grant members a say over policy.

### Method Choice

In order to assess the impact of the different independent variables in the likelihood of adopting a narrowing strategy, we employ a logistic regression analysis as the most appropriate technique for a dichotomous dependent variable (Fox, 2008). In addition, we include robust standard errors clustered by country to control for unobserved variance.

Table 2 shows the results of our logistic regression. As our model shows, in line with theoretical expectations, the adoption of a narrowing strategy is negatively affected by the electoral change of the party, the control of members over policy and being a niche party.<sup>1415</sup> We now discuss the results in detail.

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<sup>14</sup> Note that diagnostic tests indicate that collinearity is not a problem.

<sup>15</sup> As a robustness check we have rerun our analysis modifying the temporal sequence between the independent and dependent variables. Accordingly, we have included values capturing the situation two elections ago for Funding access, Government access, and Parliamentary parties. For Member control over policy we have included the values from a survey question asking for the situation five years prior the survey was launched. The significance of these variables remains the same.

Table.2. Logistic model for Parties Narrowing their Representative Profile

<b><u>NARROWING STRATEGY MODEL</u></b>		
Main effects	Odds ratio	Robust standard errors
<b><u>EXTERNAL DRIVERS</u></b>		
Electoral change	0.761514**	0.0822947
Funding access	0.6179839	0.8292597
Government access	0.7101321	0.6464236
<b><u>INTERNAL DRIVERS</u></b>		
Leadership change	1.314813	1.260509
Member control over policy	0.1964413***	0.086502
Niche party	0.2967291*	0.2121605
<b><u>CONTROLS</u></b>		
Parliamentary parties	0.8629296	0.6286244
Age	0.6086337	0.2435797
_Cons	1.359586	1.319761
N	108	
*p<0.1   **p<0.05   ***p<0.001		

Our model substantiates a range of hypotheses in our framework, echoing a range features associated with the more common treats of parties adopting a narrowing strategy as portrayed in the descriptive analysis. Starting with external factors expected to drive a change in the strategy, our findings show that parties are more likely to adopt a narrowing strategy if they have suffered an electoral loss. As predicted in our first hypotheses, we observe that the odds of parties adopting a narrowing strategy are 24% lower for each unit of increase in electoral change. Electoral losses are a symptom of poor efficacy of the electoral strategy of the party, either because the party was not able to mobilize its own members or because its electoral base found other political options more attractive (Mair et al 2004). This failure motivates an assessment of options on how to improve performance in the next election, and one of these options is the narrowing of a party's representative profile, a finding in line with previous research suggesting a change in parties' programmatic profile after poor electoral performance (Janda et al 1995; Meyer and Wagner 2013). Neither government nor funding access have a significant effect stressing the centrality of electoral performance in our analysis of parties operating in the electoral markets of the six democracies

analysed, most of which never enter government and only few of which manage to access party funding.

Moving on to the intra-organizational factors affecting the likelihood of change and with it, of the adoption of a 'narrowing strategy', we find a significant negative relationship between member control over policy and being a niche party respectively. Concretely, the odds of parties with direct control of members over programmatic issues to adopt a narrowing strategy are 80% lower than for parties with centralized structures. Centralization not only makes the implementation of a new strategy easier for organizational elites, it also avoids possible conflict among different views within the membership, which also facilitates the selection of the issues or constituencies on which a party's strategy should be focused (Duverger 1954; Katz and Mair 2002). In contrast, leadership change does not shape the adoption of a 'narrowing strategy' challenging the previous literature that linked party change to the presence of a new leader expected to be more willing and able to intervene or remodel a party's strategy (Wilson 1980; Harmel et al 1995; Müller 1997). But as these authors also point out not all leadership changes imply a rupture of the status quo or come with enough support within the organization to legitimize a change of strategy, which could explain why we do not find any effect for leadership change (Harmel et al 1995; Harmel and Tan 2003). Similarly, new leaders might favour other changes than narrowing their party's profile, thereby off-setting any effect on our dependent variable.

Finally, regarding the type of party, as theoretically expected, niche parties are less likely to narrow (hence alter) their constituency or their issues profile. Concretely, we observe that the odds for a niche party to adopt a narrowing strategy are 70% lower than for a mainstream or other kind of party. These results go in line with previous research arguing that niche parties benefit from their distinct profiles, which serves as an identity base for their members and followers and assures their on-going support (Meguid 2005; Spoon 2009). Furthermore, echoing our findings, recent research points to the willingness of mainstream parties to change to a narrower representative profile if that improves their electoral prospects (Meyer and Wagner 2013).

Overall our findings emphasize the need of new approaches to understand change of parties' representative profile beyond broadening strategies or maintenance strategies as developed by the catch-all party and niche parties' literatures (e.g. Kirscheimer 1966; Meguid 2005). Indeed, our results show that studying 'narrowing strategies' might be helpful to understand better the behaviour of some minor parties and some mainstream parties willing to adopt different strategies

beyond catch-all (Meyer and Wagner 2013). Our electoral change and member control over policy findings echo classical works highlighting the importance of considering both external and internal factors when analysing party change. Importantly, our results suggest the inclusion of other intra-organizational factors different from party leadership to assess how party strategies are shaped and changed.

## Conclusion

While plenty party literature has been focused on strategic party behaviour and party change, and in that literature the tendency of parties to develop 'catch-all strategies' has been much discussed and examined, the adoption of the opposite move - a narrowing strategy either by focusing on a more targeted constituency or a more targeted set of issues - has been so far overlooked in the party literature. This paper theorizes conditions towards adopting this strategy and examines it empirically based on new survey data covering parties constituting six democracies' electoral markets (hence participating in national elections) rather than focusing on the 'usual suspects' represented in parliament.

In essence, our results stress the importance of considering *both* external and intra-organizational factors, much in line with theoretical work on party change (Harmel and Janda 1994; Harmel et al 1995). Concretely, suffering electoral loss makes it more likely that parties narrow their representative profile which is important as being able to successfully adapt to environmental changes while maintaining the support of the core base can be essential for party survival (Rose and Mackie 1988; Bolleyer 2013). Government and funding access as well as being a parliamentary party, in contrast, did not have significant effects stressing the centrality of electoral drivers of change for parties that in their majority have remained outside public institutions throughout their life cycles. Meanwhile two intra-organizational factors motivated a narrowing of parties' representative profiles: member control over policy decisions and a party's ideological make-up. Member control over policy decisions make it more difficult for more pragmatic organizational elites to pursue a strategy towards narrowing their representative profile. This finding underlines the need to consider the role of membership not only as the focus of party change but also as the driver of party change (Gauja 2017). Finally, our results support previous research emphasizing the disinclination of niche parties – eager to protect their distinct identity - to adapt their representative profile.

In future research, our framework on the conditions under which parties narrow their representative profile will greatly profit from a broader empirical application, not only covering more country



settings but also examining a wider range of external and internal drivers of party change. Research on party strategy generally might profit from conceptualizing, theorizing and examining 'catch-all strategies' (hence the broadening of party profiles), parties' resilience against any change of profile and a narrowing strategy as three alternative options parties can choose from. While doing so goes beyond the scope of this paper, our approach on when parties narrow their profile provides one pillar towards a more encompassing approach.

**Acknowledgements:** This research has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) / ERC grant agreement n° 335890 STATORG. This support is gratefully acknowledged.

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## Appendix

### Summary statistics and correlation table

Table 1. Summary statistics of all the variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum	N
Narrowing strategy	0.1296296	0.3374615	0	1	108
Electoral change	-0.0201841	3.257804	-12.9	25.6	121
Funding access	0.1983471	0.400413	0	1	121
Government access	0.0661157	0.2495174	0	1	121
Leadership change	0.5454545	0.5	0	1	121
Member control over policy	0.5702479	0.497099	0	1	121
Niche party	0.3801653	0.4874457	0	1	121
Parliamentary party	0.2809917	0.4513524	0	1	121
Age	31.56198	37.56059	1	141	121

Table 2. Correlation table and variance inflation factor for all the variables

	Narrowing strategy	Electoral change	Funding access	Government access	Leadership change	Member control over policy	Niche party	Age (log)	Parliamentary parties	VIF
Narrowing strategy	1									1.14
Electoral change	-0.1265	1								1.12
Funding access	-0.0583	-0.0832	1							1.41
Government access	0.0104	-0.0679	0.147	1						1.24
Leadership change	-0.0431	-0.1558	0.4061	0.2355	1					1.63
Member control over policy	-0.2173	-0.1516	0.0266	0.0035	0.0793	1				1.18
Niche party	-0.1247	-0.0267	-0.1023	-0.0462	0.1072	-0.1003	1			1.1
Age (log)	-0.165	-0.0878	0.4087	0.2593	0.4136	0.1538	-0.0799	1		1.53
Parliamentary parties	-0.0621	0.0509	0.4414	0.4149	0.5263	-0.1036	-0.0204	0.4755	1	1.98