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Staying connected: explaining parties' enduring connections to civil society

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ABSTRACT

The connections between political parties and civil society are central to parties' representative performance. Several explanations exist for cross-party variations in the strength of these connections. However, nobody has compared the explanatory power of rival theories. This article does just that, using a novel dataset covering 149 parties in 29 elections in 14 West European countries. It establishes that elites in parties with government experience and a left-wing ideological orientation have the strongest links to civil society. Parties at the far right are the least connected, in particular those that have no governing experience. Contrary to expectations, however, the study shows that, when controlling for party ideology and governing experience, the level of intra-party democracy and key components of party trajectory, such as party origin and strategy, are not significant in explaining the strength of party-society connections.

KEYWORDS Civil society; ideology; intra-party democracy; government; political parties

The connections between political parties and civil society are central to parties' performance on a number of key functions (Mair 2013; March and Olsen 2004; Panebianco 1988). Their links to civil society help parties articulate and aggregate social interests and translate these interests into public policy, engage citizens in the political process, and recruit candidates for public office. Through their dual role as representatives of society and agents capable of holding government institutions accountable, political parties constitute a 'crucial agency of institutional legitimation' (Wildemann 1986). However, some scholars have argued that political parties are failing in their representative role (e.g. Katz and Mair 1995; Mair 2013). They claim that parties have lost their connections with civil society and therefore experience difficulties channelling the concerns of groups of voters. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have likewise become more professionalised, resulting in a 'business' style of management and

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reduced membership involvement (Maier *et al.* 2016). The emptying of the space in which parties, interest organisations and citizens interact has led to a new form of democracy ‘in which the citizens stay at home while the parties get on with governing’ (Mair 2013: 98).

A recent revival of scholarly interest in the subject of party relationships with organised civil society suggests that this picture is more nuanced. Despite declining levels of their own membership (e.g. Van Biezen *et al.* 2012), political parties remain connected to civil society through their bonds with other membership organisations. And the growing professionalisation of CSOs has, perhaps surprisingly, been linked to higher influence of their members (Heylen 2020) and the adoption by CSOs of a wider repertoire of political influence strategies (Bolleyer 2021). Whilst formal statutory links between parties and CSOs are uncommon these days, more informal connections have developed (Allern *et al.* 2020; Allern and Verge 2017; Rasmussen and Lindeboom 2013). Through these connections, political parties diffuse their values, exchange ideas, information and resources, and mobilise their supporters. Importantly, links to civil society stabilise parties’ electoral support, parties with stronger links experiencing lower levels of electoral volatility (Martin *et al.* 2020; Mosimann *et al.* 2019; Poguntke 2002).

Given the importance of party-civil society linkages, it is essential to know which parties have strong ties to civil society and which parties are less well connected. The purpose of this study is to examine the determinants of linkages between parties and CSOs. The dominant focus in this field has been on single country studies (Allern 2010; Christiansen 2012; Jalali *et al.* 2012), or (comparative) studies of single party families (Allern *et al.* 2007; Tsakatika and Lisi 2013). Moreover, existing research usually focuses on particular kinds of explanations for the strength of ties between parties and organised civil society, concentrating, for example, on an analysis of associated costs and benefits (Allern 2010), parties historical closeness to particular social groups (Katz and Mair 1995; Panebianco 1988), or party ideology (Gunther 2005; Kitschelt 1989).¹ This literature provides many rich insights into the forms taken by ties between parties and civil society. Moreover, it has also pointed towards new explanations for the strength of such ties that have not yet been examined empirically, such as the variation in connections between party families (e.g. Berkhout *et al.* 2021).

We build on this literature by developing a novel measure of party-society connections to test rival explanations for the strength of such connections, covering a large number of West European countries and a broad timespan. This study is, to our knowledge, the first to conduct such a test. The dependent variable in our study is *connective density*, which is the strength of a party’s connections to CSOs. On the

basis of existing literature, we distinguish three types of party-level explanations for connective density: 1) intra-party democracy, 2) party trajectories (including party age, origins, goals, and government experience), and 3) ideology. To test these rival explanations, we create a data set with 242 observations of connective density, distributed over 149 different parties that participated in a total of 29 elections in 14 West European countries between 2005 and 2017. The dependent variable is measured on the basis of the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS 2016, 2019).

Among other things, our analyses demonstrate that party ideology and government experience are the strongest predictors of connective density. Left-wing parties have more dense connections with civil society than right-wing parties, as do parties with government experience. Contrary to expectations, the degree of intra-party democracy, as well as party origins, goals, and age, do not have a significant impact on parties' connective density, once ideology is taken into account.

We make two main contributions to the literature on parties and their relationship with civil society. First, we show that, even when controlling for country-level differences, the strength of parties' links to civil society varies greatly. The portrayal of parties retreating from society is too general as many parties still maintain strong ties with civil society. Second, we demonstrate that party characteristics, and especially parties' ideology and government experience, go a long way in explaining such variation.

This article is structured as follows. In the first section we conceptualise how party-level factors can explain variations in party connections to civil society. In the second section we operationalise our explanatory variables, identify controls, and specify various models for testing our hypotheses. The results of our analysis are presented in the third section and a final section discusses conclusions and identifies areas for future research.

Connecting to organised civil society

This study focuses on the closeness of parties to civil society organisations, by considering party candidates' memberships of different categories of these organisations. The strength of ties between party candidates and CSOs is a concept that we term *connective density* (Bekkers 2005; Martin *et al.* 2020). It is from this group of candidates that members of parliament and governments are drawn, while CSOs play key roles at various points in the electoral cycle including 'proactive electoral mobilisation' (Blings 2020) and signalling voter preferences to parties during coalition negotiations (Romeijn 2021). For these reasons we suggest that candidates'

membership of CSOs is a good indicator of how much party elites remain connected to, as opposed to detached from, civil society.²

CSOs are defined broadly, in order not to bias our results towards political parties with specific ideological leanings. They include religious organisations, business organisations, trade unions, environmental organisations, etc. We focus on measuring links to membership organisations only. We realise that candidates may also have connections to informal movements and networks in society, lacking any form of organisation or official membership, and to the extent that they do, the parties to which these candidates belong might appear to be less connected to society than they really are. We return to this in the concluding section.

The central question addressed in this article is thus what factors at the party level are associated with higher levels of connective density. We distinguish three such factors: 1) intra-party democracy, 2) party trajectories in terms of party age, origins, goals, and government experience and 3) party ideology. We discuss each of these in turn.

Intra-party democracy

Von Dem Burge and Poguntke (2017) distinguish two dimensions of intra-party democracy, which can both be expected to affect connective density: the distribution of formal *decision-making power* within parties and the process of party *candidate selection* for general elections.

The distribution of formal decision-making power within parties is also referred to as the inclusiveness of decision-making activities (Scharrow 2005). In inclusive parties decision-making power is decentralised with a large number of party members making the most important decisions. In centralised parties, key issues are decided by a small number of actors, such as the party leader or national executive body. Decisions on party policy programmes are of particular importance for a party's links to wider society, playing a core role in the aggregation of interests and preferences (Hennl and Franzmann 2017). Where activists and ordinary members hold power over policy formation and manifesto preparation, they act as constraints on policy changes sought by party elites (Hennl and Franzmann 2017; Meyer 2013). Hence, whether party members have a vote on the party manifesto, either directly or at a party congress, and whether there exist intra-party ballots on policy issues are important indicators of the distribution of decision-making power in parties (Von Dem Burge and Poguntke 2017: 153).

The selection of candidates to contest general elections is one of the defining functions of a political party, the electorate's choice of legislators at the ballot box determined largely by parties' decisions on who to present for election (Katz 2001; Müller 2000). The outcomes of candidate

selection processes, such as the diversity or representativeness of the candidates selected, is much studied (e.g. Gauja and Cross 2015; Pruyssers *et al.* 2017). There are two conceptually distinct aspects of a party's candidate selection process, the extent to which it is centralised on the one hand and its degree of inclusiveness on the other hand. A process, for example, may be decentralised *and* exclusive if decisions on candidates are taken locally, but without the involvement of ordinary party members (e.g. Pruyssers *et al.* 2017).

Our expectation is that candidates in parties where members hold sway over decisions on party programmes and candidate selection have strong incentives to join the CSOs to which party members belong, such links enhancing their position in internal policy debates and their prospects of selection for party lists. The type of CSOs to which candidates might belong will vary from party to party. For example, candidates for green parties can be expected to join and engage with environmental organisations backed by party members, whilst candidates for liberal parties may join organisations campaigning in the field of civil rights. However, the strength of the ties will depend not on the type of CSO, but primarily on the way in which candidates are selected within parties. Our first hypothesis is, therefore, that connections between party elites and organised civil society will be stronger in parties with decentralised organisation and open and inclusive candidate selection processes.

H1: Connective density is higher among parties with more decentralized decision-making structures and in parties with more open and inclusive procedures for selecting election candidates

Party trajectories

Among parties' trajectories we focus specifically on party age, origin, goals, and government experience. Mature parties are less likely to regard themselves as representatives of specific social interests and become focussed on sustaining the party as a valuable entity in its own right (e.g. Panebianco 1988). Concentrated on organisational survival, party elites adopt a 'logic of appropriateness' in their relations with organised interests (March and Olsen 1989), with connections becoming more diffuse and distant. However, the resilience of mature parties in the face of successive waves of new challengers (see De Vries and Hobolt 2020) may suggest that they remain embedded in extensive networks of links to civil society (Allern 2010) and that new challengers are less successful in establishing such links (Allern and Verge 2017). We follow this reasoning and hypothesise that older parties will have higher levels of connective density

H2a: Older parties have higher levels of connective density than newer parties.

The process by which parties created large membership organisations with strong organisational ties to articulate the cleavages brought into being by industrialisation and urbanisation in the early 20th century has been chronicled by Bartolini (2000). Parties with their origins in social movements (Gunther 2005) retain a ‘social structural anchoring’ unlike their programmatically flexible ‘electoralist’ competitors. Although social and economic change may have weakened the structural basis for such anchors, connections exhibit signs of ‘path-dependency’ (e.g. Gunther 2005; Rasmussen and Lindeboom 2013), persisting ‘irrespective of whether concrete cost-benefit calculations encourage them to do so’ (2013: 283). Parties formed in recent decades that articulate new issues and culturally based cleavages, such as radical right, ‘new’ left and green parties, share a logic of ‘constituency representation’ with the cleavage parties of the 20th century (Kitschelt 1989). A still more recent wave of ‘movement parties’ that emerged in response to the fall out of the financial crash of 2008 may be characterised as a fusion of parties and CSOs, the resulting links being particularly strong (Della Porta *et al.* 2017). Our hypothesis is:

H2b: Connective density is higher in parties with origins in social movements than in parties with different origins.

The political and electoral goals that parties pursue are an important element of their organisational trajectory, symbolising a party’s rationale for being (Panebianco 1988). The literature on party goals remains shaped by the seminal work of Strøm and Müller (1999). Parties seek to maximise one of three goals: they are either office seeking (aiming primarily to participate in government), policy seeking (aiming primarily to influence public policy), or vote seeking (aiming primarily to maximise vote share). The choice of primary goal will be shaped by the balance of power between ‘strategic’ actors in the party (Pedersen 2012; Schumacher 2012). Parties with strong internal democracy (activist dominated) tend to be more policy seeking, while parties that are leadership dominated, large and close to the ‘centre’ ground ideologically tend to be office seeking (Pedersen 2012: 901).

There are divergent views about the expected impact of a parties’ primary goals on the connections of party elites to organised civil society. On the one hand, parties that prioritise a governing role may aim to avoid alienating the median voter by associating closely with specific social interests represented by CSOs (Katz and Mair 1995), instead distancing ‘themselves from civil society and its social institutions’ (Mair

2013: 85). On the other hand, parties and interest groups may base decisions about connections on assessments of associated costs and benefits (Allern 2010). Where parties have less to offer in terms of access to office or policy influence, connections will be significantly weaker (Allern 2010: 82). Our expectation is that the mutual benefits of connections between party elites and CSOs will be stronger for parties that aspire to hold office or influence policy and expect this to translate into more dense connections in the case of office and policy-seeking parties.

H2c: Connective density is higher among parties that are primarily office or policy seeking than among parties that are primarily vote seeking.

Finally, in this second group of explanations at the party level we consider government experience as distinct from aspiration to office (Schumacher *et al.* 2015). Government experience can be regarded as key to calculations of the mutual benefit of ties to parties and groups. From an exchange theory perspective (Allern 2010) the strength of ties between parties and CSOs will vary systematically with the amount of resources offered to each other by both types of organisation. Governing parties control the parliamentary agenda, set budgets and are more likely to secure parliamentary majorities for legislation, all factors that make them more likely to fulfil promises (Mansergh and Thomson 2007). Thus, a party with greater access to government is more attractive to interest groups. Our expectation is that parties' government experience will thus be associated with higher connectivity to organised civil society, resources and power enhancing the attractiveness of parties to organised interests.

H2d: Parties with government experience have higher levels of connective density than parties without government experience.

Ideology

There is broad agreement in the literature that *ideology* matters. Political parties are established to realise specific goals and values, their ideologies representing an important part of party identity, structuring the strategic choices made by party elites about organisational alliances (Panebianco 1988).

While the literature is clear about the importance of ideology to the existence of connections between parties and civil society, it is less clear about the direction of the impact of ideology on the density of such connections. Otjes and Rasmussen (2017) suggest that interest groups focus on large parties in the ideological centre, given that such parties have a pivotal role in coalition formation (2017: 99). For three reasons, however, we expect left-wing parties to have denser connections to civil

society than parties of the right, after controlling for government experience. First, the construction of dense connections to social organisations is one of the defining characteristics of mass parties of the left (Bartolini 2000). Second, the connections established by left-wing parties in the 20th century have endured longer and exhibited greater path dependency than those of right-wing parties (Gunther 2005; Rasmussen and Lindeboom 2013). And third, newer parties of the left, such as green and radical left parties, have focussed on articulating neglected issues taken up initially by civil society (Della Porta *et al.* 2017). So, our final hypothesis is:

H3: Parties with a left-wing ideological orientation have higher levels of connective density than parties with a right-wing orientation

In line with Otjes and Rasmussen (2017), we will distinguish not just between left-wing and right-wing parties, but also between the centrist and radical parties on both sides of the ideological spectrum. As the left-right dimension reflects party positions on socio-economic as well as socio-cultural issues (e.g. De Vries *et al.* 2013; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009), we focus on a classification of parties based on this dimension in the main text. As a robustness check, we also conduct analyses focussing on other political oppositions (see below).

Data and model operationalisation

In order to test our hypotheses, we compiled an original dataset on elections in 14 West European countries. The unit of analysis in the data set is the political party per election year. The data set consists of 242 observations for a total of 149 parties at 29 elections in 14 countries. The countries, elections and parties included in the data set are those covered by the Comparative Candidates Survey (CCS 2016, 2019). The CCS is used to measure our dependent variable. Waves I and II of the CCS cover elections that took place between 2005 and 2017. Specifically, the elections included in our dataset are those in Austria (2008), Belgium (2007, 2010, 2014), Denmark (2011), Finland (2007, 2011, 2015), Germany (2005, 2009, 2013, 2017), Greece (2007, 2009, May 2012, January 2015), Ireland (2007), Italy (2013) the Netherlands (2006), Norway (2009, 2013), Portugal (2009, 2011, 2015), Sweden (2010, 2014), Switzerland (2007, 2011), and the United Kingdom (2010). For 2 of the 14 countries covered by our data set we have observations on our dependent variable at four elections, for 3 of the 14 countries on three and two elections respectively, and for 6 of the 14 countries at one election. In [online appendix A](#) we include details of the distribution of our observations of the dependent variable by country and election year.

Operationalisation of dependent and independent variables

We briefly discuss the operationalizations of our variables below (more detail on definitions, coding of variables, and sources used for coding is provided in [online Appendix B](#)). We operationalise our dependent and independent variables at the party level by election year, with our variables taking different values at each election in which a party participated.

Our dependent variable is *connective density*, which describes connections between party elites and CSOs relevant to parties' electoral ambitions. These connections are characterised by programmatic alignment and the mobilisation by groups, particularly in election periods, of pressure on parties to commit to shared policy positions (Blings 2020; McAdam and Tarrow 2010). We operationalise connective density by deploying the extensive dataset on candidates' memberships of categories of CSOs provided by the Comparative Candidates Survey (CCS). Waves I and II of the CCS asked candidates for details of their membership of a range of organisations in civil society. We sought to control for any potential left-right bias in the measure resulting from the ideological positioning of CSOs by giving equal weight to different civil society sectors – connections to business and religious groups being historically associated with right-wing parties, and connections to trade unions with parties of the left. We selected the relevant organisations included in the two waves: in Wave I Trade Unions, Professional Associations, Interest Groups and Religious Associations, and in Wave II Trade Unions, Business Associations, Human and Civil Rights Organisations, Environmental groups, and Religious Associations.³

To ensure consistency between the waves and correct for potentially higher reported values from Wave II as a result of a greater number of selected categories, we treated Professional Associations (in Wave I) and Business Associations (in Wave II) as equivalent and created a new category combining Civil Rights and Environmental Groups (both from Wave II). On the basis of this categorisation, we counted the total number of categories of organisations of which each candidate was a member. We then calculated the mean value of these memberships for all candidates in the survey and aggregated candidate values to generate estimates at the party level. The values for the measure of connective density show significant variation between parties. Connective density ranged from 0.0 for the *Lijst Dedecker* at the Belgian election of 2010 to 2.09 for the *Kristelig Folkeparti* at the Norwegian election of 2013.⁴

Our first two independent variables cover key aspects of intra-party democracy. The first variable *centralisation* measures the extent to which key party decisions are either centralised with party elites or decentralised to involve party members. Using a range of sources (e.g. Bolin *et al.*

2017; Poguntke *et al.* 2017) and consulting country experts we operationalise *centralisation* with a dummy variable taking the value 1 in the case of parties with centralised decision-making procedures and 0 in the case of parties with decentralised decision-making.

Our second measure of intra-party democracy, *candidate selection*, captures the openness and inclusiveness of the procedures used by parties to select candidates at each general election. We adopt a modified version of the six-point scale developed by Krouwel (2012). At one end of the scale – the most closed and centralised procedure – a party is coded 1 when party candidates are selected unilaterally by the party leadership. At the other end of the scale – the most decentralised and open procedure – a party is coded 6 when all party members have the right to select candidates in primaries or full member polls, with no provision for veto of the results by the party leadership or executive.

A second group of independent variables covers party trajectories. *Party age* reflects the number of years from the date of party formation to that of each election and takes values ranging from 1 for parties formed in the months immediately prior to an election to 176 years in the case of the UK *Conservative Party* at the general election of 2010. Our measure – *Party age (standardised)* – is a standardised Z-score for each measure of party age in our dataset.⁵ We measure the *social movement origin* of parties with a dummy variable with the value 1 denoting a party formed directly by, or out of, a social movement such as a trade union, environmental movement, or confederation of agrarian interests, and the value 0 for parties without an origin in such social movements.⁶ *Party goals* is operationalised by categorising the primary goals of each party at each election as either office, policy or vote maximising (Strøm and Müller 1999), and creating dummy variables for each type of party goal.⁷ Finally, the *government experience* of parties is also captured by a dummy variable. Parties that have governed any time prior to the election are coded 1, whilst parties with no government experience at the time of each election are coded 0. For more information on the primary and secondary sources used to operationalise these party trajectory variables, see [Appendix B](#).

In order to test hypothesis 3, which postulates that parties with a left-wing ideological orientation will have higher levels of *connective density*, we categorised all 149 parties in our dataset into four ideological groups – radical right, centre-right, centre-left, and radical left – on the basis of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) dataset (Bakker *et al.* 2015). On the basis of our categorisation, we construct dummy variables for each ideology group taking centre-right parties as our reference group.⁸

Model specification – country fixed effects

We choose linear regression with multilevel modelling and fixed effects to reflect the hierarchical structure of our panel data, which is nested within parties and countries, and allows us to control for any bias in our analysis due to omitted country variables. While our dependent variable is a count variable with limits on the range of values, the data is not overdispersed and the distribution of residual values is approximately normal. We conclude that multilevel modelling is more appropriate than alternatives, such as negative binomial regression. The resulting coefficients for our independent variables consequently estimate their average within-country effects.⁹ Supporting detail for this choice is included in [online Appendix A](#). However, we remain aware of the causal relationships that might exist between our independent variables (e.g. between party age and government experience). To disentangle these connections, we focus on specific blocks of variables separately, as well as in conjunction.

Results

[Table 1](#) displays the results of our regression analyses of *connective density*. In Models 1 to 3 we introduce each set of independent variables separately, starting with the variables measuring intra-party democracy in model 1, party trajectory in model 2, and party ideology in model 3. We combine all three sets of variables in Model 4, our full model.

In Model 1 we test for the impact of intra-party democracy on connective density. The effect of both our measures of intra-party democracy are significant and in the expected direction. Parties with centralised decision-making have lower connective density (-0.136, significant at the .05 level) compared to those parties with decentralised decision-making, and parties with open and inclusive procedures for candidate selection have higher connective density (0.49, significant at the .10 level). These results provide initial confirmation of hypothesis H1 that connective density will be higher in parties with decentralised decision-making structures and in parties with open and inclusive procedures for selecting election candidates. The within-country R^2 for Model 1 is .076.

In Model 2 we test the effect of five variables measuring important party trajectory characteristics. The effects of one of our independent variables is significant and in the expected direction: parties with government experience have higher levels of connective density than parties without governing experience (0.193, significant at the .01 level). The within-country R^2 is a little higher than in Model 1 reaching .102. These results provide initial support for hypothesis H2d that parties with

Table 1. Explaining variation in connective density.

IV's	Model 1 Intra-party democracy	Model 2 Party trajectory	Model 3 Ideology	Model 4 Full model
Intra-party democracy				
Centralisation	-.136** (.062)	–	–	-.012 (.058)
Candidate selection	.049* (.027)	–	–	-.007 (.027)
Party age (standardised)	–	.048 (.032)	–	.034 (.031)
Social movement origin	–	.093* (.053)	–	-.017 (.063)
Office-seeking	–	-.045 (.083)	–	-.104 (.084)
Policy-seeking	–	.116 (.072)	–	-.036 (.080)
Government experience	–	.193*** (.069)	–	.211*** (.073)
Ideology (ref centre-right)				
Radical right	–	–	-.358*** (.059)	-.166* (.090)
Centre-left	–	–	.199*** (.048)	.255*** (.065)
Radical left	–	–	.247*** (.059)	.371*** (.081)
Constant	.935	.930	1.06	.955
Within-country R ²	.076	.1015	.310	.327
N	191	227	235	190

* $p < .1$.** $p < .05$.*** $p < .01$, two sided.

government experience have higher levels of connective density. When controlling for government experience, the analyses do *not* support the expectations in hypotheses H2a that connective density will be higher for older parties, H2b that connective density will be higher in parties with an origin in social movements, and H2c that office and policy-seeking parties will have higher connections compared to vote-seeking parties.

The impact of party ideology is shown in Model 3. All three party families – radical right, centre-left, and radical left – have significantly different levels of connective density compared to our centre-right party reference group (-0.358, 0.199, and 0.247 respectively, all effects significant at the .01 level). Centre and radical left parties have significantly higher levels of connective density than centre-right parties, while radical right parties have significantly lower levels of connective density. The within-country R² of Model 3 is .310, some 20% higher than the R² of Model 2. We find initial support for hypothesis H3 that parties with a left-wing ideological orientation will have higher connective density than their right-wing counterparts.

Finally, in our full model (Model 4) we incorporate all our independent variables. Just two of our independent variables remain significant in our full model: government experience and ideology. The impact of government experience is significant at the .01 level and post-model estimation indicates that parties with government experience have a predictive mean level of connective density of 1.17 compared to a

predictive mean value of 0.96 for parties without government experience. Compared to parties of the centre right, both left party families have significantly higher levels of connective density (significant at the .01 level). Radical right parties, however, have significantly lower connective density than centre right parties (significant at the .05 level). This is likely to be explained by central aspects of their ideology, notably their populist focus on direct appeals to voters rather than mobilisation through intermediaries in society (Ruzza and Sanchez Salgado 2021). Given that connective density ranges between 0 and 2.09, the differences between the four groups of parties are remarkable. The predicted difference between the most connected (radical left) and least connected (radical right) is 0.64, which is nearly 1.6 standard deviations apart. With a within-country R^2 of .327 the full model explains most variation in connective density.

Since ideology and government experience are the two main drivers of connective density, we also look at the combined effect of these two factors in Figure 1. The figure shows that among parties with a similar ideology, those with government experience are always predicted to be better connected than those without government experience. Model 3 in Table 1 shows that there are hardly any differences between the levels of connective density of radical-left and centre-left parties. However, this is merely a result of the fact that most of the radical left parties in our study (82%) have no government experience. Once governing experience is fully accounted for in Figure 1, we see that it makes a significant difference to the connective density of radical parties of the left and the right. Radical left parties with government experience have the highest mean level of connective density of the four party families.

In sum, we find support for our hypotheses H2d and H3: parties with government experience, and parties with a left-wing ideological orientation have higher levels of connective density. However, we find no significant relationship between connective density and intra-party democracy (H1), party age (H2a), party origins (H2b) and party goals (H2c).

Robustness checks

We conducted extensive robustness checks and discuss some of them briefly here. The full checks are reported and discussed in more detail in the [online appendices](#).

In order to assess the robustness of our findings we first estimated Model 4 with country-level control variables and random effects instead of multilevel fixed effects. Controls were included individually for *party polarisation*, *party size*, *electoral and party systems*, the *system of government*, the *regulation of CSO's political activity* and for a country's *cultural*

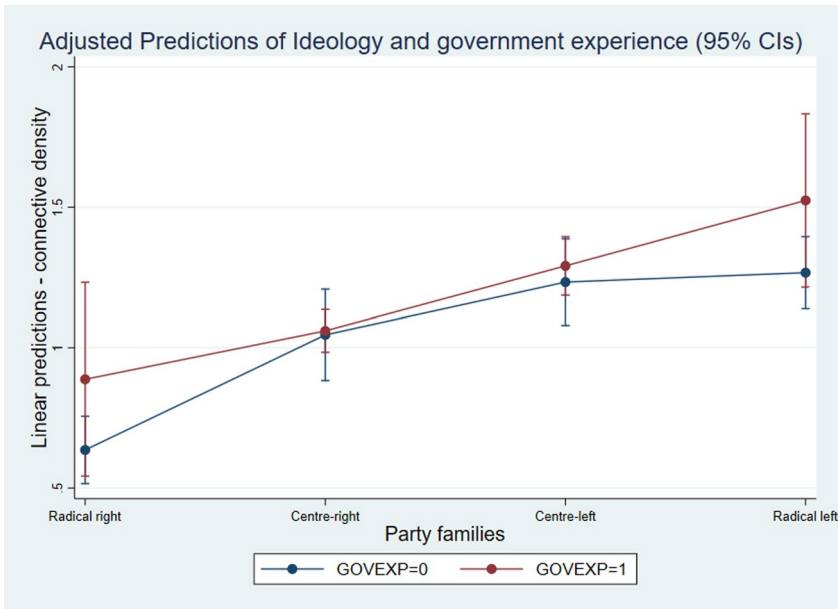


Figure 1. Adjusted predictions of party ideology and government experience.

diversity. Only the effects of the electoral system and regulation of CSO's political activity were significant when included individually in Model 4 and were included together in a regression of that model. The results are shown in Table C.1 in the online appendices. All substantive conclusions are robust to the inclusion of significant country-level control variables.

Second, we estimated our models 1) excluding outlying observations of connective density, and 2) only including observations of connective density based on elected candidates. The results of these checks are shown in Tables D.1 and A.4 in the online appendices. All substantive conclusions are robust to these checks.

Third, we estimated models using the GAL/TAN scale in place of the generalised left-right scale Irgen (Bakker 2015). We coded parties into four groups on the basis of scores on the GAL/TAN scale of between 0 and 2.49 (most alternative/libertarian), 2.5–4.99, 5.0–7.49, and 7.5 and above (most authoritarian/nationalistic) respectively. We created dummy variables for each category, with the third of these categories forming the reference category. The results of this check are shown in Table D.2 in the online appendices. Models with the GAL/TAN scale explained substantially less within-country variation in our dependent variable and substantive conclusions were highly similar: GAL parties tend to be more connected than TAN parties, particularly those at the far end of the TAN side of the scale. However, parties' government experience lost significance in these analyses probably because of the loss of 54 cases for which GAL/TAN positions were not available.

Finally, to facilitate a direct comparison of within-country R^2 , we ran all models on only those cases with data on all independent variables. All substantive effects were robust to this test. The results of this check are shown in Table D.3 in the [online appendices](#).

Discussion and conclusions

Why do some parties maintain stronger ties to civil society than others? Although existing research offers several explanations, the relative explanatory power of these different models has not yet been systematically assessed across countries and across time. We provide such a test on the basis of an original data set covering 149 parties participating in 29 elections in 14 Western European countries. We operationalise a new measure that captures the strength of the ties between political parties and CSOs in the 21st century, referred to as connective density, and measure it using the novel Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS).

While we took care to include a wide variety of CSOs in our measure in order not to bias our results towards either left or right-wing parties and organisation, it is important to mention that our focus is on membership of organisations. So, to the extent that candidates are connected to loosely organised groups, or are active in organisations without being a member, we might underestimate their connectiveness. Moreover, our study focussed on party-level explanations for variations in party-level connective density, while controlling for country-level explanations. Individual level explanations related to candidate characteristics were not included in our analyses and could be included in future research.

Our study shows that the strength of party connections to civil society varies greatly between parties, even when controlling for systematic variations between countries. We demonstrate that parties of the left and parties with government experience have the densest connections to CSOs. Controlling for these factors, we find no support for the argument that parties with higher levels of intra-party democracy, parties that are office or policy seeking, parties that are older, and parties with social movement origins have stronger ties to civil society.

Our findings have a number of important implications. First, parties with government experience, which are often but not exclusively mainstream parties, are connected to civil society despite the claim that they have become cartel parties (Katz and Mair 1995). We do not look specifically at trends in connections over time but find that governing parties have not (completely) withdrawn from society, instead continuing to maintain ties to organised civil society at the elite level. It is therefore conceivable that elites in mainstream parties recognise that strong connections can make them more resilient in the face of successive waves of challenger

parties. We do not find evidence of an anticipated counterreaction to the development of cartel parties (Katz and Mair 1995; Mair 2013), in the form of stronger societal links amongst challenger parties.

This finding also adds credence to resource exchange accounts of links between parties and civil society. For governing parties, dense connections to CSOs provide pathways to large numbers of voters, access to a wide range of resources including policy advice and expertise, and help parties to remain in touch with their support base when considering policy trade-offs in contexts such as coalition formation, stabilising their support amongst voters (Martin *et al.* 2020). And for CSOs who retain links to engaged memberships, connections to parties with government experience provide greater opportunities to access and influence the policy-making process, and thus to realise both their policy aims and the aspirations of their members.

Second, several scholars have suggested that strong links between left-wing parties and civil society reflect their origins as protest movements, pointing towards path dependency (Gunther 2005). Our findings, however, indicate that a strategy of connecting to civil society may be a constitutive element of left-wing party politics across Western Europe irrespective of party origins. Both established and newer parties of the left (i.e. green, radical left, and social democratic parties) have strong bonds with civil society, suggesting that a 'logic of constituency representation' (Kitschelt 1989) remains central to the identity and strategy of left-wing parties despite divergent electoral fortunes in recent years.

Third, when we operationalise connections between parties and CSOs with a measure – connective density – that is comparable across parties and party systems and over time, we find little support for several explanations of connectivity that have had a prominent place in the relevant literature. We show that the more internally democratic parties are indeed more connected to civil society. Yet, their level of connectivity is explained entirely by the left-wing ideology of these parties. Consequently, the effect of intra-party democracy disappears once ideology is included in our models. Furthermore, elites in parties that are either office or policy seeking are not more likely than those in vote-seeking parties to have dense connections with organised civil society. This finding points to an important distinction between parties' aspirations to office, which does not influence the density of party connections to civil society, and their government experience, which does.

Our findings suggest a number of fruitful avenues for further research. First, the importance of country effects in explaining variation in connective density chimes with conclusions reached by other scholars of comparative party organisation (e.g. Webb *et al.* 2017). Although not the subject of specific hypotheses in this article, we observe significant variations in connective density between countries that merit

further exploration. On the basis of our robustness checks, we believe that country differences are not only the result of variations in institutional context such as the electoral system, but could also be explained by other factors, such as the regulation of the political activity of CSOs.

Second, we find that, although there has been a trend towards greater intra-party democracy in recent decades (Krouwel 2012) and it is intuitive to think of more open parties being better connected to society, more internally democratic parties do not have stronger ties to civil society. This conclusion raises the question whether other aspects of party organisation should be investigated when examining connective density. Case studies could establish whether other forms of organising (e.g. through digital platforms) are more important than formal democratic procedures in linking parties to organised civil society.

Third, since dense connections to organised civil society appear to be a defining characteristic of all left-wing parties and not just of those established in the first half of the 20th century, detailed case studies of younger parties, for instance those parties that comprise the radical left party family, will provide insight on the evolving form of the connected party of the 21st century. How do parties of the radical left develop and implement strategies of connection to organised civil society and with what political outcomes? What are the key dimensions of these strategies? How do other factors such as the party system and the structure of civil society itself influence the form taken by strategies of connection? And how do the strategies of radical left parties compare to those of their competitors from the mainstream left?

The vivid account provided by Mair (2013) of a mutual parting of the ways of party elites and civil society needs to be nuanced. Our research suggests that party elites in Western Europe, including those in parties with government experience, remain strongly connected to organised civil society. If the story of party competition in Europe in the 21st century is, as De Vries and Hobolt (2020) suggest, one of both the resilience of mainstream parties and contestation from successive waves of challenger party, then governing parties enduring connectivity may be regarded as a key feature of this resilience. Parties' links to civil society are therefore fertile territory for researchers seeking to understand the nature of competitive political strategy in Western Europe.

Notes

1. Other studies approach the subject from the perspective of CSOs, examining why interest groups are interested in linking up with political parties (Allern *et al.* 2021; Berkhout 2013; Rasmussen and Lindeboom 2013).
2. An extended discussion of this point is included in [online Appendix A](#).

3. Following Bekkers (2005) the selection was made on the basis of an assessment of whether a type of membership was pertinent from the perspective of electoral mobilization. On the basis of this criterion membership of sports or cultural associations, for example, was not included in the measure.
4. A more detailed discussion of the concept of connective density, its measurement at the candidate and the party-level, its relationship to existing measures of party-society links, and country-level trends in the measure is provided in [online Appendix A](#).
5. Data on party age was sourced from the Party facts dataset (<https://partyfacts.herokuapp.com>).
6. We coded the origins of a party on its founding date. If a party emerged as the result of a split or merger, it was not coded as having movement origins. More details of the coding of parties' origins are provided in [online Appendix B](#).
7. We coded one *primary* goal for each party using two main sources: 1) the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project (Kitschelt 2013) and 2) expert accounts provided in academic publications. More details are given in [online Appendix B](#).
8. We operationalized ideology using the general left-right scale (labelled *Irgen* in the CHES dataset), because it has been shown to incorporate positions of political parties on socio-economic as well as socio-cultural positions. The general left-right scale ranges from 0 to 10, and we coded parties scoring less than 2.5 as radical left, parties between 2.5 and 4 as centre-left, parties between 5 and 7.5 as centre-right, and parties scoring above 7.5 as radical right. Parties scoring between 4 and 5 on the *Irgen* scale were assigned to the categories centre-left or centre-right on the basis of expert accounts in academic publications. We do, however, run robustness checks for our models using a classification based on the GAL/TAN scale rather than the *Irgen* scale. These checks are discussed in the results section and their results are reported in detail in [online Appendix D](#).
9. We show results for all of our models deploying a number of country-level control variables instead of country fixed effects in [online Appendix C](#). The substantive results are similar, but the fixed effects specification provides a more conservative test of our party-level hypotheses.

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