UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Past the saturation point

Why voters switch from mainstream to niche parties and vice-versa

van de Wardt, M.; Rooduijn, M.

Link to publication

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Past the saturation point: Why voters switch from mainstream to niche parties and vice-versa

Marc van de Wardt[1] ⬤ | **Matthijs Rooduijn**[2] ⬤

[1]School of Business and Economics, Department of Ethics Governance and Society, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

[2]Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam

Correspondence
Marc van de Wardt, School of Business and Economics, Department of Ethics, Governance and Society, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Email: m.p.vande.wardt@vu.nl

Abstract

When do voters switch from mainstream to niche parties and vice-versa? To understand these switches, we focus on the saturation of the party system. We theorize that when a party system is oversaturated – i.e. when a higher effective number of parties contests elections than predicted based on socio-political contextual characteristics (the system's 'carrying capacity') – it becomes increasingly likely that: (1) mainstream party voters defect to niche parties; and (2) niche party voters refrain from switching to mainstream parties. Based on vote-switching patterns in 15 countries and 53 elections, we find that oversaturation increases shifts from mainstream to niche parties. Further analyses show that this holds for shifts from mainstream to radical left and right parties, but not for shifts to green parties. This has important consequences for research on vote switching, the electoral consequences of policy differentiation and the competition between niche and mainstream parties.

Zusammenfassung

Wann wechseln Wähler von Mainstream- zu Nischenparteien und umgekehrt? Um dies zu verstehen, schauen wir auf die Sättigung des Parteiensystems. Wenn ein Parteiensystem übersättigt ist – d. h. wenn eine größere effektive Anzahl von Parteien an Wahlen teilnimmt als aufgrund gesellschaftspolitischer Kontextmerkmale ('Tragfähigkeit' des Systems) vorhergesagt – wird es immer wahrscheinlicher, dass (1) Wähler von Mainstream-Parteien zu Nischenparteien wechseln, und (2) Wähler von Nischenparteien nicht Mainstream-Parteien wechseln. Basierend auf einer Analyse von Stimmwechseln anlässlich von 53 Wahlen in 15 Ländern stellen wir fest, dass die

SPSR
Swiss Political Science Review
Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft
Revue Suisse de Science Politique
Rivista Svizzera di Scienza Politica

Übersättigung des Parteiensystem Stimmwechsel von Mainstream- zu Nischenparteien begünstigt. Zusätzlich zeigen wir, dass dies für Wechsel von Mainstreamparteien hin zu links- und rechtsradikalen Parteien gilt, nicht jedoch für Wechsel hin zu grünen Parteien. Dieses Ergebnis ist wichtig für die Forschung zu Stimmwechseln, den Wahlfolgen politischer Differenzierung und dem Wettbewerb zwischen Nischen- und Mainstream-Parteien.

Résumé

Quand les électeurs passent-ils des partis traditionnels aux partis de niche et vice versa? Pour répondre à cette question, nous nous concentrons sur la saturation du système partisan. Nous théorisons que lorsqu'un système de partis est sursaturé – c'est-à-dire lorsqu'un nombre effectif de partis en lice pour les élections est plus élevé que prévu sur la base des caractéristiques contextuelles sociopolitiques (la 'capacité de charge' du système) – il devient plus probable que (1) les électeurs des partis traditionnels se tournent vers des partis de niche, et (2) les électeurs des partis de niche s'abstiennent de se tourner vers les partis traditionnels. En nous basant sur les modèles de changement de vote dans 15 pays et 53 élections, nous constatons que la sursaturation augmente le passage des partis traditionnels aux partis de niche. Des analyses plus approfondies montrent que cela vaut pour le passage des partis traditionnels aux partis radicaux de gauche et de droite, mais pas pour le passage aux partis verts. Cela a des conséquences importantes pour la recherche sur le changement de vote, les conséquences électorales de la différenciation politique et la concurrence entre les partis de niche et les partis traditionnels.

Riassunto

Quando gli elettori passano dai partiti tradizionali a quelli di nicchia e viceversa? Per capire questo fenomeno l'articolo si focalizza sulla saturazione del sistema partitico. La nostra tesi è che quando un sistema partitico è sovrasaturo – cioè quando il numero effettivo di partiti che partecipano alle elezioni è più elevato di quanto previsto sulla base delle caratteristiche socio-politiche contestuali (la cosiddetta 'carying capacity' del sistema) – diventa sempre più probabile che (1) gli elettori dei partiti tradizionali passino ai partiti di nicchia, mentre (2) gli elettori dei partiti di nicchia tendano a non passare ai partiti tradizionali. Sulla base dei modelli di 'vote-switching' analizzati in 15 paesi e 53 elezioni, scopriamo che la sovrasaturazione aumenta lo spostamento dell'elettorato dai partiti tradizionali a quelli di nicchia. Ulteriori analisi mostrano che ciò vale per il passaggio dai partiti tradizionali ai partiti radicali di sinistra e di destra, ma non verso i partiti ecologisti. Tale risultato ha conseguenze importanti per la ricerca sul 'vote-switching', sulle conseguenze elettorali della differenziazione delle

politiche pubbliche e sulla competizione tra partiti di nicchia e quelli tradizionali.

INTRODUCTION

Voters increasingly switch to so-called political 'niches'. The 2019 elections to the European Parliament, for instance, resulted in unprecedented electoral losses for the two largest mainstream groups. The Christian democrats lost about 16 percent of their seat share and the social democrats about 17 percent. Simultaneously, left, right and centre populists increased their seat share from about 24 to 29 percent (Rankin, 2019). Similar developments can be observed in individual countries. In Italy, for instance, the general elections in 2018 resulted in a combined vote share loss of almost 16 percentage points for the two mainstream parties (the centre-left *Partito Democratico* and Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right *Forza Italia*). The populist *Movimento Cinque Stelle* and the *Lega*, on the other hand, received a combined vote share 21 percentage points larger compared to the previous election.

Why do people switch from mainstream to niche parties? Several recent studies have examined this question. Most of these investigations, however, have either focused on switching to and from a specific niche party family, like the radical right (Abou-Chadi et al., 2022; Krause et al., 2023), or have examined the (convergence of) ideological positions of parties or voters (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; Spoon & Klüver, 2019). In this paper, we take a different approach, and focus on a party system characteristic that so far has been only relatively little studied: party system saturation (PSS). As such, we shift attention to how relatively crowded the party system is. PSS is related to the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP), but, as we will argue and show below, it is more relevant when it comes to vote switching to niche parties. We conceptualize PSS as the difference between the present ENEP and the predicted ENEP based on the so-called 'carrying capacity' of the party system (Lowery et al., 2013; van de Wardt et al., 2020; van de Wardt & van Witteloostuijn, 2021). As explained below, the carrying capacity of party systems is determined by the electoral system, societal heterogeneity, diversity of the issues emphasized by parties, and the spread in voter preferences. A party system is oversaturated when the carrying capacity of the system is exceeded – thus, when the observed ENEP is higher than the predicted ENEP. While previous spatial theories and empirical research on the likelihood and benefits of ideological differentiation typically measure crowdedness based on the observed ENEP (Cox, 1990; Dow, 2001; Ezrow, 2008; Ezrow et al., 2014; Kitschelt, 1994; Merrill III & Adams, 2002), we argue that, to understand vote switches, it is important to view the observed ENEP relative to the carrying capacity of a party system. Whether an increase in the ENEP implies a competitive electoral market where voters have a lot to choose (and thus, to switch), depends on whether or not the party system is past its saturation point; thus, undersupplied or oversupplied with parties. Hence, what matters is not so much the *absolute* (effective) number of parties, but the *relative* 'crowdedness' of the system.

We theorize that in an 'oversaturated' party system, mainstream parties' weaker brands become a liability (also see Lupu, 2014, p. 568). Due to their emphasis on economic issues, their relatively centrist positions and catch-all strategies, their brands are weaker. Consequently, voters may perceive that mainstream parties are all one and the same. Niche parties, however, tend to have stronger brands because they either emphasize non-economic issues and/or have an extreme position on the economic dimension of competition. In case of intense competition in an oversaturated electoral market, voters with this luxury of choice might be well inclined to switch from weaker (mainstream) to stronger (niche) party brands (H1). Likewise, people already voting for

niche parties may be less likely to return to mainstream parties (H2). Furthermore, we theorize that radical left and right parties further distinguish themselves from the mainstream and other niche parties by their ideological radicalness and anti-establishment rhetoric. Green parties only distinguish themselves by means of emphasizing the environmental issue and could be perceived as relatively mainstream. Hence, we hypothesize that PSS sways mainstream voters to radical left and right, but not to green parties (H3) and induces radical voters to stay with their parties (H4).

We test our hypotheses based on vote-switching patterns in 15 countries and 53 elections (39 in the main model), with the earliest and latest election taking place in 1976 and 2015, respectively. To study vote switching, we rely on the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and the European Voter datasets, which often ask what party respondents voted for in both the previous and current elections. We find clear evidence that overcrowded party systems make switching to radical left and right niche parties likelier but not switching to green parties (H3). Because of this difference between radical and green parties, the effect of PSS on niche parties in general (H1) is only statistically significant at $p < 0.10$. We find no effect of PSS on the reverse transitions (H2 and H4). We also conducted additional analyses to confirm our core assumptions. Most importantly we demonstrate that voters indeed perceive radical left and right parties as increasingly differentiated and mainstream parties as increasingly the same if PSS increases.

In the concluding section, we discuss the implications of these findings for the literature on vote switching, party incentives and electoral consequences of ideological differentiation and party system saturation.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Defining niche and mainstream parties

Before developing our hypotheses about why voters switch from mainstream to niche parties and vice-versa, it is useful to clarify that we define agrarian, ethnic, green, radical left, radical right, regionalist and special issue parties as niche, and Christian democratic, conservative, liberal and social democratic parties as mainstream. Hence, we combine a saliency-based (Bischof, 2017; Meguid, 2008; Wagner, 2012a) conception of nicheness with a spatial one (Adams et al., 2006): Parties can mine a niche in a party system by focusing on other issues than economic left–right, but they can also accomplish this by taking an extreme position on the economic left/right dimension (also see van de Wardt et al., 2020).

We realize that there is controversy about whether niche and mainstream are to be operationalized based on their party family (Adams et al., 2006; Meguid, 2008; Spoon & Klüver, 2019) or based on concrete characteristics that can vary by elections (Bischof, 2017; Bischof & Wagner, 2017; Meyer & Wagner, 2013). As explained by Mair and Mudde (1998), the party family approach is useful if one wishes to focus on the ideological imprint of parties, thus, on what they *are* rather than what they *do*. This way of examining parties contrasts with the "policy approach" that focuses on what parties do in one specific election by examining time-variant characteristics like the nicheness or extremity of a party's profile in isolation (Bischof, 2017; Wagner, 2012b).

In this paper, our main emphasis will lie on party family, thus on what parties are, as we do not wish to detach ideological differentiation from the genetic imprint of a party. As argued by Downs (1957, p. 142), ideologies cannot be thrown off as if they were disguises. Even if a mainstream party entered a niche segment, the niche party already present in this niche would likely be more credible. There is evidence that parties cannot "steal" associative issue ownership (the spontaneous association by voters between issues and parties) from other parties (Tresch et al., 2015). Hence, the party family approach better gauges that niche parties enjoy an issue ownership

426 | PAST THE SATURATION POINT: WHY VOTERS SWITCH FROM
MAINSTREAM TO NICHE PARTIES AND VICE-VERSA

SPSR
Swiss Political Science Review
Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft
Revue Suisse de Science Politique
Rivista Svizzera di Scienza Politica

advantage on the niche segments of the electoral market. Consequently, voters will perceive niche parties as sending out a clearer signal and being a stronger brand than mainstream parties (also see Lupu, 2014). Below we also justify this empirically in the section on robustness tests.

Hypotheses

In explaining the ongoing electoral losses of mainstream parties, we took inspiration from extant work uncovering these losses by directly observing vote switches from mainstream to niche parties (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; Hong, 2015; Spoon & Klüver, 2019; Voogd & Dassonneville, 2020; Wurthmann et al., 2021). Yet, to gain the full picture, we also study the reverse switch from niche to mainstream parties.[1] Only two recent studies have examined vote switching in both directions between the mainstream right and radical right (Abou-Chadi et al., 2022; Krause et al., 2023). We extend this approach to mainstream and niche parties in general and specific niche party families – including, but not limited to, the radical right. To explain mainstream-niche switches, extant work has focused on the role of political dissatisfaction (Hong, 2015; Voogd & Dassonneville, 2020), ideological preferences (Wurthmann et al., 2021) and economic crisis (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016). More recently, Spoon and Klüver (2019) have applied spatial theory to vote switching by showing that mainstream party voters are swayed to the niches when mainstream parties converge on the left–right dimension. We focus on a new party system variable, namely PSS.

We also draw inspiration from spatial theory. Based on game theoretic models, it has been argued that to explain the likelihood and benefits of ideological differentiation (in our case: vote switching away from the mainstream), it is of essential importance to examine how crowded the party system is (Cox, 1990; Kitschelt, 1994; Merrill III & Adams, 2002). Empirical tests of such crowdedness typically measure it by the ENEP (e.g., Dow, 2001; Ezrow, 2008). Yet, to explain vote switches, we prefer the novel measure of PSS (van de Wardt & van Witteloostuijn, 2021). Our main reason for this is theoretical. While the ENEP simply focusses on the degree of electoral fragmentation, PSS captures to what extent this fragmentation is below or above the carrying capacity of a party system. In case a party system is undersaturated (the observed ENEP is below the predicted ENEP), there is still room for more viable parties in the system. Since the carrying capacity considers the heterogeneity of voter preferences and the ethnic heterogeneity of countries, this means that specific voter groups are being left unattended. In such an undersaturated, seller's market (to use an analogy from economics), voters have less parties on the menu to choose from, meaning that their freedom to switch to other parties is restricted. In turn, if a party system is heavily oversaturated (the observed ENEP is above the predicted ENEP), the supply of parties exceeds the carrying capacity. This implies a very competitive party system with voters having a lot to choose. In such a buyer's market (to again use the economics analogy), voters can be expected to regularly switch across parties. If we would simply rely on ENEP, we cannot capture this moment when a party system's carrying capacity is exceeded and party switching becomes a relevant phenomenon. The point where party systems come to be oversaturated differs across countries. For instance, a country could have a relatively high ENEP of 6; however, if different ethnic groups are present with diverse policy preferences, this number could still be below the carrying capacity. And it would still imply that voters have little to choose. So, while extant work exclusively focusses on how parties differentiate themselves and electorally benefit from this in response to ENEP, we believe that the carrying capacity of the system must also be considered to understand the switching behaviour of voters – what matters is the *relative* crowdedness of the party system. Below we further illustrate these ideas empirically.

---

[1]For switching between the US Republicans and Democrats see Leny et al. (2019).

Notwithstanding our focus on PSS rather than ENEP, we still draw inspiration from the argument of spatial models that parties will spread out and be electorally rewarded for doing so on a competitive electoral market (Cox, 1990; Kitschelt, 1994; Merrill III & Adams, 2002). This is because parties need to avoid voter overlap with their competitors (Kitschelt, 1994, p. 123). As for the first part that parties will spread out, it is interesting that empirical studies testing whether parties adopt more distinct positions when ENEP increases (Ezrow, 2008; Wagner, 2012b; but see Dow, 2001), or whether they increase the nicheness of their platform in response to PSS (van de Wardt & van Witteloostuijn, 2021), report non-findings.

In this paper, we exclusively focus on the second part of the argument that differentiated parties will be rewarded by voters. We propose that the effectiveness of being differentiated (i.e., being a niche party) depends on the saturation of the party system. Building on Lupu's (2014) theory of brand dilution, party brands can be strong or weak, depending on how precisely voters can pinpoint them. If voters have a clearer image of a party's proto-typical partisan, this strengthens the party brand. Voters will feel more attached to these parties, which increases their propensity to keep voting for them (ibid.). We propose that mainstream parties will have weaker brands than niche parties due to their relatively centrist positions (Ezrow et al., 2010), emphasis of economic issues (Meguid, 2008) and catch-all electoral strategies (Karreth et al., 2013; Kirchheimer, 1966) where they run with an ambiguous policy platform (thereby sending out ambiguous signals) so as to attract multiple segments of the electorate (Somer-Topcu, 2015). We expect that having a weaker brand (i.e., being a mainstream party) especially becomes an electoral liability in a highly competitive, oversaturated electoral market where voters have the luxury to choose between several parties. This introduces complexity and requires voters to invest more cognitive resources in their voting decision. Studies have shown that under such circumstances, parties providing clearer policy platforms (in our case: niche parties) are rewarded by voters (e.g., Lachat & Wagner, 2018).

While mainstream parties may have differentiated their policy platforms in response to these competitive pressures, we assume that due to niche parties' prolonged emphasis of extreme positions and/or ownership of specific issues like immigration and European integration, voters will remain to see niche parties as better ideologically differentiated. In addition to the argument that weaker party brands especially become a weakness in a competitive market, we also expect that mainstream parties' brands can become further "diluted" on an oversaturated market.

In his seminal study, Lupu (2014) argues that party brands become diluted in two main ways. First, this can happen if a party sends out inconsistent signals. If this is the case, voters receive conflicting messages from a party, and, as a result, become more uncertain about what this party stands for. Second, party brand dilution can also take place if parties converge by adopting similar issue positions. If this is the case, voters will find it difficult to distinguish the different party brands from each other. The mechanism that we propose, and which we also confirm empirically (see Figure 5 below), holds that a changing party-political context can also lead to a changed *perception* among voters regarding how (dis)similar parties are. An oversaturated party system implies that they have a lot to choose. This will make those that already looked more alike, i.e., mainstream parties, look even more alike. Simultaneously, this will make the niche supply more attractive. Hence, we hypothesize:

H1. Voters will be more likely to switch from mainstream to niche parties when party system saturation is higher.

H2. Voters will be less likely to switch from niche to mainstream parties when party system saturation is higher.

Differences across niche party families

Thus far, we have assumed that niche parties are well differentiated from their competitors because they emphasize other issues and/or because they hold extreme positions. Hence, also green parties that are not renowned for their extreme policy positions but for their continued emphasis on the environment are regarded as niche. Yet, the spatial theories cited above assume that parties are differentiated from competitors because of the distinctiveness of their policy positions rather than by the issues they emphasize. Hence, this suggests that policy extremity is a necessary condition for differentiation strategies to work. This may be because policy positions are more closely linked to a party's public identity and electoral core support than issue salience, and as such, it would be easier to acquire issue ownership if one takes up an extreme position on an issue (Wagner, 2012b). Whereas the radical left and right clearly do this on some of their core issues (e.g., European integration and immigration), the environmental issue has a high valence component (van der Brug, 2004). That is, all parties agree on the goal of having a clean environment. Hence, this could make it more difficult for a green party to distinguish itself.

Even if the environment was a positional issue to the same extent as immigration and European integration, empirical evidence indicates that green parties have moderated their radicalism on the environmental issue and that the issue has gradually been integrated in the dominant left–right dimension of political contestation (Dalton, 2009). Hence, green parties can no longer benefit from cross-pressured mainstream party voters that stand close to the mainstream parties on left–right issues, but only close to green parties on the environmental issue. In turn, one of the core issues of radical right and left parties, the EU issue (e.g., Marks & Wilson, 2000; van der Brug & van Spanje, 2009), has clearly not been integrated in the left–right dimension: radical left and radical right parties mobilize clearly outspoken positions against the EU, while most mainstream parties support the EU. Hence, they can expect to sway cross-pressured mainstream voters.

What also distinguishes most radical left and right parties from their mainstream and green counterparts is their fierce anti-establishment rhetoric (Abedi, 2002; Schedler, 1996). Many of these parties distinguish themselves from the political mainstream (and other niche parties) by arguing that the political establishment is unresponsive, condescending, exploitative and corrupt (Barr, 2009). Although anti-establishment messages can also be encountered among non-radical parties (e.g. the Five Star Movement in Italy), it is safe to claim that almost all radical parties are at least to some extent anti-establishment (Schedler, 1996). This is because an ideologically radical position is very well compatible with the message that the mainstream establishment has lost touch with ordinary voters. In general, green (and mainstream) parties employ such an anti-establishment discourse to a much lesser extent (Rooduijn et al., 2014), most likely because they generally present themselves as ideologically moderate and reasonable political actors with whom it is perfectly possible to compromise.

Finally, we acknowledge that in their early days, green parties were more distinctive in being the first-movers on the environmental issue and that they were anti-establishment in the non-instrumental way in which they organized their party. With principles like rotation of office, parties were built as vehicles to express the ideological convictions of their members rather than bringing political elites into office (Burchell, 2001). Yet, also with regard to party organization, green parties have increasingly become more like mainstream parties (ibid.).

H3. Higher party system saturation will increase the likelihood that voters switch from mainstream parties to radical (left and right) parties (hence, not to green parties).

H4. Higher party system saturation will decrease the likelihood that voters switch from radical (left and right) parties to mainstream parties (hence, not from green parties).

van de WARDT and ROODUIJN

SPSR
Swiss Political Science Review
Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft
Revue Suisse de Science Politique
Rivista Svizzera di Scienza Politica

429

DATA AND METHODS
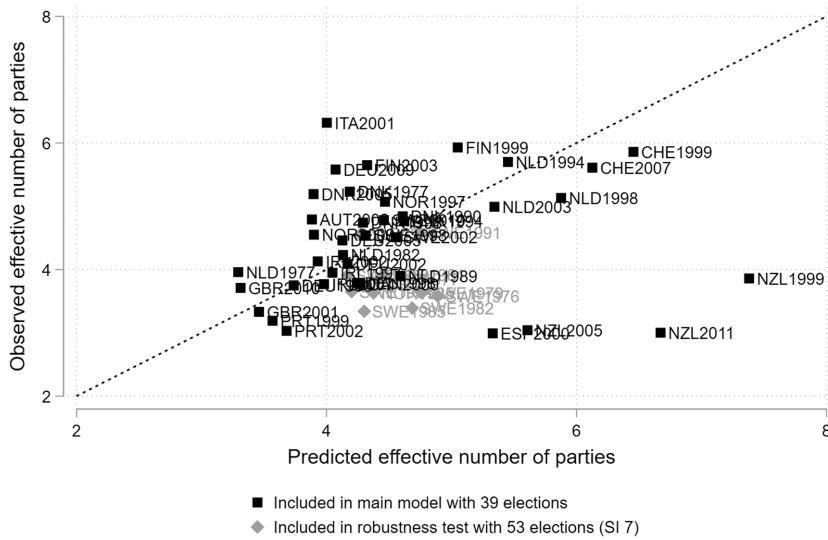
Party system saturation

We define PSS as the difference between the predicted ENEP based on the 'carrying capacity' of the party system and the observed ENEP (Lowery et al., 2013; van de Wardt et al., 2020; van de Wardt & van Witteloostuijn, 2021). If, for instance, five effective parties contest an election, while only four effective parties were predicted based on the carrying capacity, the party system is oversaturated by one party. To measure PSS, we need the residuals from a model that regresses the ENEP on a party system's characteristics. A positive residual implies that more effective parties contest elections than predicted, while a negative residual indicates the reverse. We rely on the model of the ENEP published in van de Wardt (2017). The ENEP, or the carrying capacity of the party system, is determined by societal heterogeneity (measured on the basis of the cleavage that is seen as most consequential within a country) (Clark & Golder, 2006), the diversity of the political supply side in terms of the dimensionality (Stoll, 2011) and fractionalization (Lowery et al., 2010) of the party system agenda and the spread of voter preferences along the left–right dimension (van de Wardt, 2017). Each of these explanations is interacted with the permissiveness of the electoral system to capture that the latter may act as a brake or catalyst (Clark & Golder, 2006). For more information on measurement see van de Wardt (2017). We also provide a detailed explanation of the model in the Supplementary Information (SI 3).

Figure 1 depicts the degree of PSS for all elections included in this study. In total, we could include 53 elections from the 15 countries listed in Table A2 of the SI. The selection of these elections was driven by availability of data on the party system's carrying capacity and availability of vote switching and other data from the European Voter (EV) and Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). As explained below, of these 53 elections, 39 could be retained in the main models presented in the paper that also include individual-level political dissatisfaction. Yet, in the SI (SI 7), we demonstrate that we reach the same conclusions if we omit dissatisfaction and run our models on 53 elections.

As shown, there is sufficient variation on our main independent variable: some elections are oversaturated, some undersaturated and others about saturated. The heavy undersaturation of New Zealand's party system, for instance, could be due to the discrepancy between its low ENEP and proportional electoral system. Interestingly, the 1996 elections were the first in which first-past-the-post voting was exchanged for a mixed member proportional system. That the party system was still undersaturated in 1999 and 2005 denotes that it may take time before previously marginalized or new parties exploit a widened carrying capacity to expand the luxury of the electoral choice and voters' propensity to switch.

In terms of causality, vote shifts from mainstream to niche parties at t could feed back into the degree of PSS at $t + 1$. Here we address this potential endogeneity problem both methodologically and theoretically. First, in terms of methods, we lag the PSS variable. Hence, we study how PSS in the previous election (time t-1) affects vote switches at time t. Logically, these vote switches cannot influence the degree of PSS of the past. Additionally, in the SI (SI 20), we present the results from an instrumental variable (IV) probit regression where we use the degree of corporatism as an instrument for PSS. Using an IV approach, one can carve out the variation in the potentially endogenous independent variable (in our case: PSS) that is exogenous and to use only that in the estimation of the causal impact on the outcome (i.e., the propensity of niche and mainstream party voters to vote for niche parties) (Hernán & Robins, 2020). Nonetheless, IV analysis also depends on the two empirically unverifiable assumptions of exclusion restriction and exchangeability. Hence, to make a case for causality, we must do more than only this IV analysis.

Therefore, we would also like to stress that our independent and dependent variables can be clearly separated conceptually. Even if the net result of vote switches from and to niche

FIGURE 1   Party system saturation scores included in the analyses.
Notes: The distance to the diagonal line indicates the degree of under- or oversaturation.

parties increases electoral fragmentation (as we argue below: this is not necessarily the case) or ENEP, PSS also considers the carrying capacity and the latter is unrelated to vote switches. PSS will still *decrease* if the carrying capacity for parties is widened at the same time: for instance, if electoral institutions are being made more permissive, or voter preferences become more fractionalized. Furthermore, even with a constant carrying capacity, vote switches from and to niche parties do *not* necessarily increase ENEP and thereby PSS. This only happens if the vote switching is such that the fragmentation in the party system is increased. In a system where voters switch from smaller to bigger parties, vote switching would actually *decrease* fragmentation. In our specific case, switches from mainstream to niche parties would only increase fragmentation and thereby PSS at $t + 1$ if: (1) higher support for niche parties increases electoral fragmentation, and (2) niche parties do not lose the same amount of voters won to mainstream parties (the reverse transition) or other (electorally strong) niche parties.

In sum, we acknowledge that under certain conditions vote switches can increase PSS. We believe, however, that we presented plausible arguments about how the competitiveness of the electoral market affects vote switching between niche and mainstream party voters. Moreover, we bring order in time by lagging the PSS variable and an IV analysis continues to support our conclusions. All of this should increase confidence in the validity of our argument.

Other variables

For data on vote switching and individual-level controls, we rely on the EV and CSES. These are cross-national and longitudinal datasets combining national post-election surveys. They contain information on the party respondents voted for in the current and previous elections, allowing us to identify switches from niche to mainstream parties and vice-versa (also see Spoon & Klüver, 2019).

Regarding H1 and H2, we study two transitions: from mainstream to niche and from niche to mainstream. Hence, the dependent variable captures whether someone voted for a niche party in the current elections (1 = niche party; 0 = mainstream party). However, since we focus on *vote switches* between mainstream and niche parties and vice-versa, we use the

van de WARDT and ROODUIJN

SPSR Swiss Political Science Review
Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft
Revue Suisse de Science Politique
Rivista Svizzera di Scienza Politica

431

lagged dependent variable to make all coefficients conditional on whether someone voted for a mainstream or a niche party in the previous elections. As argued above, agrarian, radical left, green, regional, radical right and special issue parties are coded as niche, while Christian democratic, conservative, liberal and social democratic parties are coded as mainstream. Party family data are derived from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Volkens et al., 2013).

To test H3 and H4, we model transitions based on whether a person voted for radical (both left and right) parties (1 = voted for a radical party; 0 = voted for a mainstream party) and green parties (1 = voted for a green party; 0 = voted for a mainstream party) in the current and previous election. Unfortunately we could not separately study switches from and to agrarian, regional and special issue parties, as due to the low number of cases the models fail to converge. In (SI 8), we assert the robustness of our results by assessing radical left and right parties separately (i.e., radical right vs mainstream and radical left vs mainstream left).

At the party system level, we control for: (1) the degree of ideological polarization among mainstream parties and (2) the vote share at t-1 of the party category of interest. At the individual level we included: (3) the absolute distance between the respondent's left–right self-placement and the left–right position of the party she voted for a t-1; (4) whether they feel close to a specific political party; (5) whether the party voted for in the previous elections was in government or not; and (6) how politically dissatisfied they were.[2] Finally, we also included several demographic controls: (7) gender; (8) age; (9) education; and (10) income. See SI 4 for more information on why we included these control variables and the descriptive statistics.

Finally, combining the PSS data from van de Wardt (2017) with the CSES and EV and information about the party voted for yielded considerable list-wise deletion. The most common causes were missing data on PSS, missing data on the party voted for in the previous elections, or missingness on controls. As shown in SI 2 the CSES and EV jointly offered a pool of 103 elections. Yet, only for 39 elections we have all the data needed to conduct the analysis. If we discard political dissatisfaction, we can raise this to 53 elections.

Statistical approach

We model our dependent variables with transition models (Jackman, 2000). These are logistic regressions in which the effects of all independent variables are being made conditional upon the respondent's score on the lagged dependent variable; thus, on whether someone voted for a niche or a mainstream party in the past elections. When studying the transition from mainstream to niche, we only include people that voted for a mainstream party at t-1 (to predict whether they voted for a mainstream or niche party at t) and when considering the opposite transition, we only select respondents that voted for a niche party at t-1 (to predict whether they voted for a mainstream or niche party at t).

The maximum number of elections that we can consider is 53; however, as individual-level political dissatisfaction is only occasionally included in earlier election data, this model cannot consider this dissatisfaction, and therewith, the protest vote. Hence, in the paper we only present the results from our main models that include all independent variables with a higher-level N of 39 at the election-level. However, we only accept a hypothesis in case the effect is

---

[2]Unfortunately CSES asks about dissatisfaction with democracy, while EV focusses on dissatisfaction with government policy. Since we did want to gauge the effect of political dissatisfaction in some way, we created a dummy variable capturing whether respondents were dissatisfied with one of the two or not.
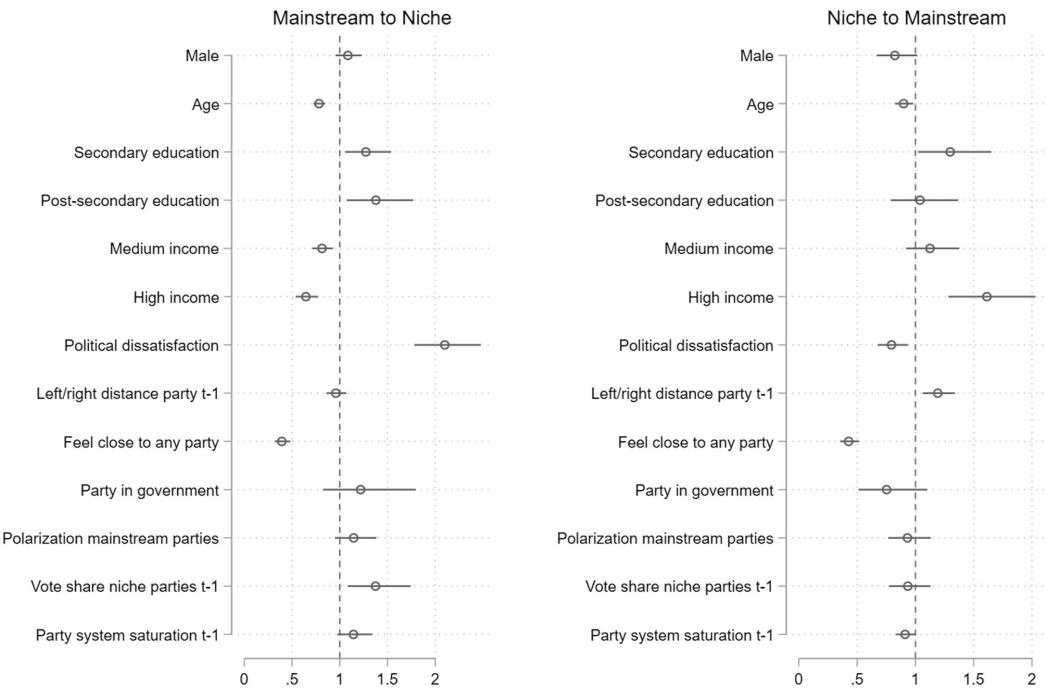
FIGURE 2 Multilevel logistic regression models estimating transitions from mainstream to niche parties and vice versa (see SI 5 for regression output).

Notes: N = 25872 for mainstream to niche transition, N = 4515 for niche to mainstream transition. We standardized the non-dichotomous independent variables around their mean to make the size of the effects comparable. The coefficients are odds ratios and the bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.
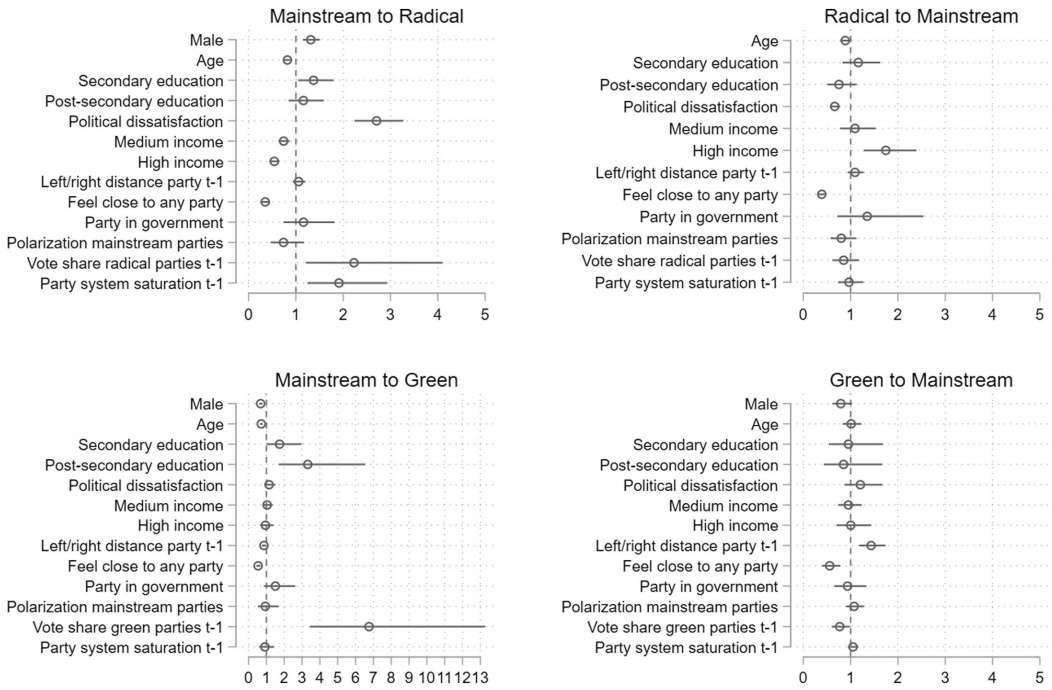
statistically significant in each of the two specifications with political dissatisfaction (Higher-level N is 39) and without (Higher-level N = 53).

We specify multilevel models with robust standard errors, where voter/election observations are nested in elections. We arrive at the same findings with alternative specifications where we nest voters in countries and include election fixed effects (SI 18), or when we nest individuals in elections and elections in countries (SI 19).

RESULTS

In SI 1, we depict the parties included in the analysis. Figure 2 shows the results of our main analyses. The left panel displays the regression coefficients (95% confidence intervals) regarding the mainstream to niche transition, whereas the right panel reports the effects vis-à-vis the niche to mainstream switch. We standardized the continuous independent variables around their mean to make the size of the effects comparable. As shown, at a lower level of significance ($p < .10$) PSS is significantly related to vote switching: the positive effect indicates that PSS makes it likelier that voters switch from a mainstream to a niche party. Also if we maximize the number of elections (SI 7), this effect is only significant at this lower level. Nonetheless, there is some evidence for H1.

Figure 2's right panel displays the results vis-à-vis switching from niche to mainstream parties. In line with H2, in more saturated party systems, voters are less likely to switch from a niche to a mainstream party. Yet, again the effect is only significant at a lower confidence level ($p < .10$). Still, it reaches a .05 significance level in our analysis maximizing the number

van de WARDT and ROODUIJN

SPSR
Swiss Political Science Review
Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft
Revue Suisse de Science Politique
Rivista Svizzera di Scienza Politica

433

FIGURE 3 Multilevel logistic regression models estimating transitions from mainstream to niche parties and vice versa for specific party categories (see SI 5 for regression output).
*Notes: N = 25042 for mainstream to radical transition, N = 2716 for radical to mainstream transition, N = 24275 for mainstream to green transition and N = 1045 for green to mainstream transition. We standardized the non-dichotomous independent variables around their mean to make the size of the effects comparable. The coefficients are odds ratios and the bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.*

of elections (SI 7). Hence, so far we find moderate support (i.e., at a lower level of statistical significance) for H1 and H2.

Our tests of H3 and H4 can be found in Figure 3. The upper left panel concerns the switch from mainstream to radical parties. Most importantly, PSS exerts a substantially strong effect on voting for radical parties at a conventional level of statistical significance ($p < .05$). In response to a one standard deviation increase in PSS, the chance of switching to a radical party increases with a factor of 1.893. Additional analyses show that this pattern holds for both the radical right and left (see SI 8). Also we replicate this effect in our model that maximizes the number of elections (SI 7).

The upper right panel in Figure 3 presents the results of the radical to mainstream transition. The effect of PSS is in the expected direction (negative), but fails to reach statistical significance. This remains true if we maximize the number of elections (SI 7). Further analyses show that if we further decompose the radical party family in radical left and radical right categories, we also fail to find statistically significant effects (see SI 8). Hence, the fact that the niche to mainstream transition effect is not robust for the two biggest niche party families, implies that our previous support for H2 is not robust.

In Figure 4 we depict the predictive probabilities of switching from mainstream to radical parties (left-hand figure) and from radical to mainstream (right-hand figure) for the observed range of PSS. If PSS increases from its minimum (−4) to its maximum (2.5), the propensity (on a scale from 0 to 1) to switch from a mainstream to a radical party increases from 0 to 0.17. This is a sizable effect. In turn, as reflected by the rather flat line (and as we already knew from
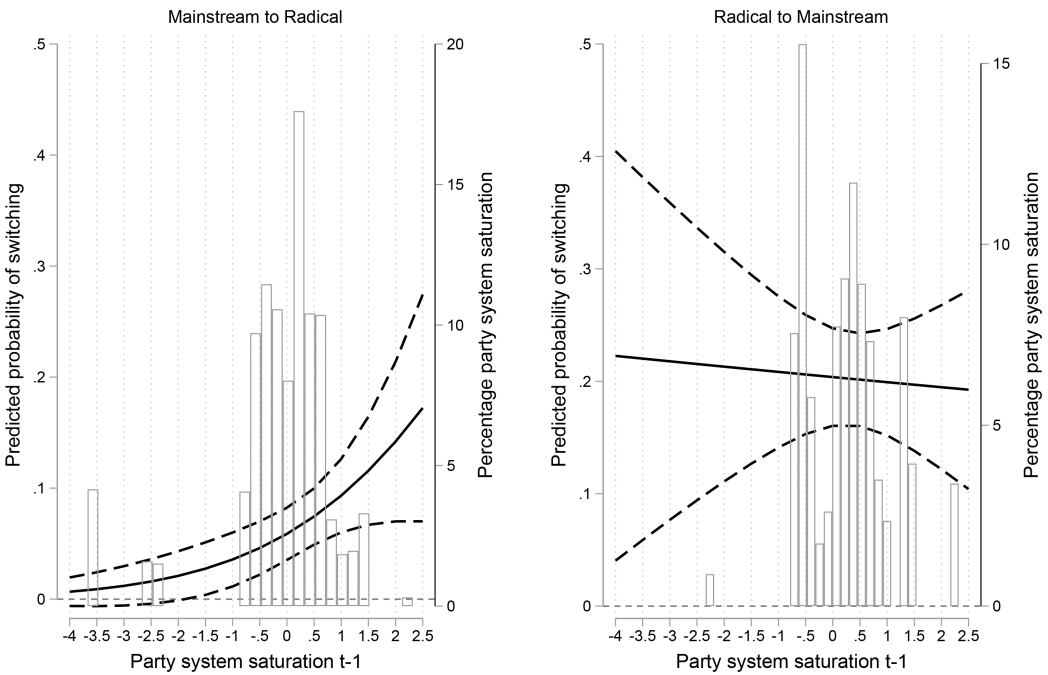
FIGURE 4 Predicted probabilities of switching from mainstream to radical parties and vice versa for different levels of party system saturation (see SI 5 for regression output).
Notes: 95% confidence intervals. The histograms in the back display the distribution of party system saturation for the cases included in the model.

the insignificant effect in Figure 3), PSS does not meaningfully decrease the chance of radical voters switching to mainstream parties.

One must realize that the two transitions are based on two different pools of respondents (i.e., mainstream party supporters at t-1 or niche party supporters at t-1). Hence, unlike recent work by Krause et al. (2023), we cannot directly relate PSS to dyadic net gains (or losses) between niche and mainstream parties over the two transitions. Still, we can cast some light on this. Over all elections on which Figure 4 is based, the average proportion of mainstream party voters at t-1 relative to the total of both mainstream and radical parties equals 0.89 (yielding a pool of 0.11 for radical parties). Relating this to the predicted probabilities in Figure 4, at the lowest observed value of PSS (−4), mainstream parties' net balance would be a gain of 0.018.[3] But when PSS increases to its maximum (2.5), this converts into a net loss of 0.132, making radical parties net winners over the two transitions.[4] However, in the hypothetical scenario where the pool of mainstream and radical voters is equal (0.5 and 0.5), this PSS min-max increase would only imply that mainstream party net gains decrease from 0.108 to 0.011.[5] Also under this scenario increasing PSS is beneficial for radical parties as they see their net loss decrease. However, they never become net winners, illustrating the importance of considering the relative size of different voter pools in party switching research. That being said, in our sample we observe an average pool of 0.89 for mainstream parties with a relatively small standard deviation of 0.107, suggesting that the hypothetical scenario where mainstream parties remain net winners is rather unrealistic.

---

[3] (0.11*0.222)-(0.89*0.007)=0.018
[4] (0.11*0.193)-(0.89*0.172)=−0.132
[5] (0.5*0.222)-(0.5*0.007)=0.108 and (0.5*0.193)-(0.5*0.172)=0.011
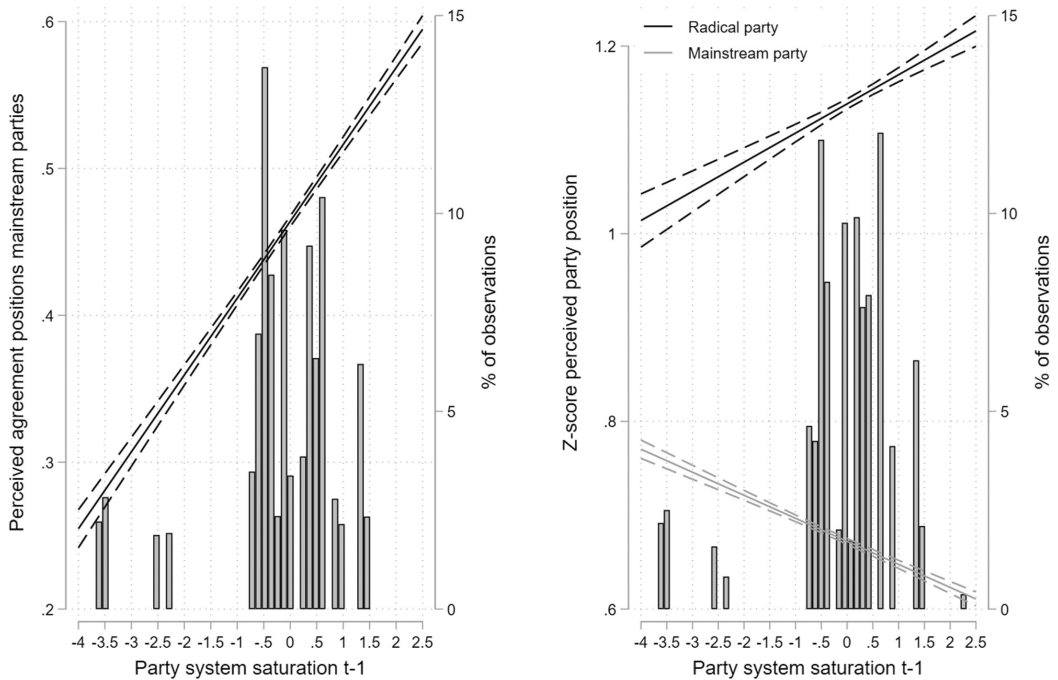
FIGURE 5 Perceived ideological differentiation against increasing levels of party system saturation. *Notes: In both models we control for the respondent's gender, age, education level, political information and party identification. In the left-hand graph, the y-axis depicts the agreement score across all mainstream parties that respondents had to place, N = 22635. In the right-hand graph, the y-axis depicts the z-score of each party that had to be placed, N = 109357. The histograms in the back display the distribution of party system saturation for the cases included in the model. 95% confidence intervals.*

Now we shift our attention to the transition from mainstream parties to green parties. In line with our expectations, the lower left panel of Figure 3 shows that higher PSS does not induce mainstream voters to switch to green parties or to stay with them. In SI 9, we disentangled this pattern by distinguishing between, on the one hand, switches between the mainstream right (i.e., conservatives, Christian democrats and liberals) and green parties and, on the other hand, switches between the mainstream left (social democrats) and green parties. Strikingly, higher PSS even significantly ($p < .10$) decreases the chance that mainstream left voters will switch to green parties and increase ($p < .05$) the chance that green party voters will switch to the mainstream left. We have already argued that as compared to radical parties, green parties have become less clearly differentiated ideologically from mainstream parties. In a highly competitive, oversaturated system, social democrats could also enjoy a valence advantage over them where voters perceive social democrats to be in a better position to implement green/progressive policies than green parties (e.g., Adams & Merrill III, 2009), for instance, due to their higher experience in government. Nonetheless, this is only a tentative explanation and the effect is only significant at the .10 level.

To sum up, our findings indicate that when it comes to the transition from mainstream to niche parties, higher levels of PSS increase the likelihood of switching (H1). This effect, however, pertains to radical parties but not to greens (H3). Hence, overall, our findings are most in line with H3.

Regarding our controls, two interesting findings stand out. First, as shown in Figure 3, political dissatisfaction causes mainstream party voters to switch to radical parties and radical parties' supporters not to switch back to mainstream parties (see also Voogd &

Dassonneville, 2020). Yet, dissatisfaction plays no role in explaining voter volatility between green and mainstream parties. This also confirms one of this study's micro-level mechanisms that the radical left and right carve out niches for themselves with their fierce anti-establishment rhetoric (Abedi, 2002; Schedler, 1996). Protest attitudes thus play an important role in swaying mainstream voters to radical parties and keeping them there. As explained above, green parties have generally lost their radicalness over time. Second, we expected that polarization among mainstream parties would decrease the likelihood of switching to niche parties. Yet, the regression coefficient fails to reach statistical significance in Figures 2 and 3. Insofar, our results differ from Spoon and Klüver (2019). One reason might be that these authors include Central and Eastern European countries, while we do not. Lastly, it is important to note that the effect of PSS holds regardless of the vote share of (radical) niche parties. This signals that mainstream party voters defect to (radical) niche parties regardless of whether the oversaturation is due to a surplus of niche or mainstream parties.

Additional tests

We have carried out many additional analyses, all depicted in the SI. Three merit further attention here.

First, as explained in the theory section, we prefer to explain party switching with PSS rather than the ENEP. A higher ENEP does not necessarily entail that voters in that party system have more options to choose from (and thereby to switch parties) than voters in another party system with a lower ENEP - not, at least, if the system with the higher ENEP also has a higher carrying capacity (e.g., more issues on the party system agenda, more fractionalized voter preferences, etc.). Nonetheless, we re-ran our models using ENEP instead of PSS based on the model that maximizes the number of elections up to 53 (SI 16) and the model presented in the paper that considers political dissatisfaction with a higher-level N of 39 (SI 15). If we compare the coefficients of ENEP with their equivalents based on PSS (SI 6 and 7), we find that the effects of ENEP and PSS are in the same direction. ENEP also produces several statistically significant effects. This is unsurprising. ENEP should be correlated with PSS, as PSS considers the difference between the predicted ENEP and the observed ENEP. That being said, in terms of statistical significance, the findings are much more convincing based on our PSS indicator. That is, in our main model with 39 elections (that does consider the important effect of political dissatisfaction), H3 (our core finding) is only confirmed at a lower level of statistical significance ($p < .10$) if we relied on ENEP (SI 15). Moreover, the effect of ENEP becomes statistically insignificant if we maximize the higher-level N (SI 16). So, besides our theoretical arguments why PSS is a more useful concept than ENEP to relate to vote switching, PSS also outperforms ENEP as a predictor of vote switching.

Second, we further explored our proposed causal mechanism according to which due to the high PSS, mainstream party "brands" become diluted (see Lupu, 2014). The CSES asks respondents to place the main parties contesting the election on a left–right dimension. We calculated van der Eijk's (2001) agreement coefficient across each respondent's placements of mainstream parties. As shown in Figure 5 (left-hand graph), the perceived agreement of their positions increases with PSS. Hence, they are increasingly perceived as all one and the same. This does not necessarily imply that the positions of radical parties are perceived as standing out. So, we also calculated the z-scores of the perceived positions of both radical and mainstream parties. As depicted in the right-hand graph, the z-scores of perceived mainstream party positions decrease (they are perceived as being closer to the mean position), while the z-scores of radical parties increase with PSS. Thus, in oversaturated systems radical parties
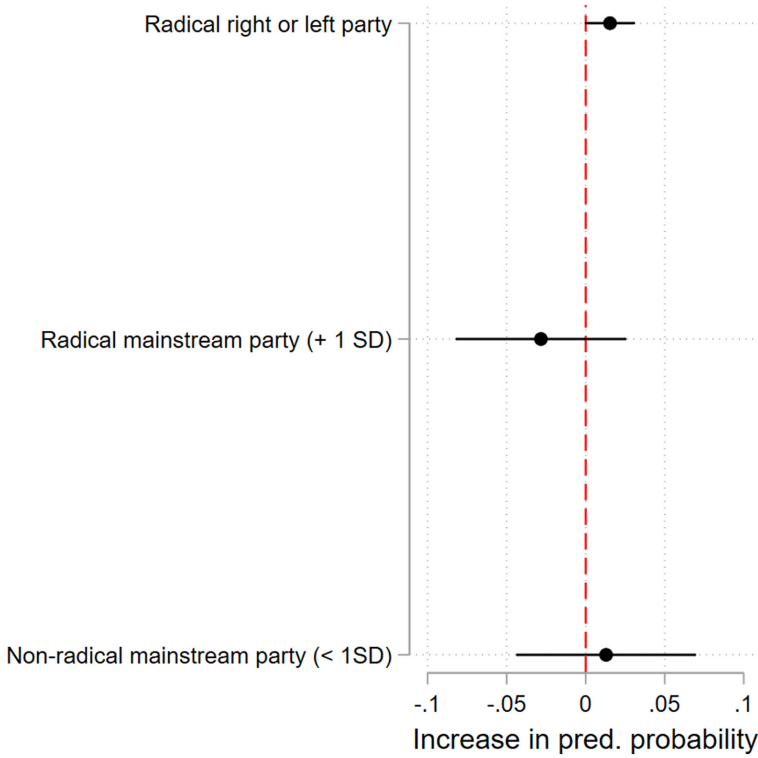
FIGURE 6 Party family versus policy radicalness (see SI 21 for full regression output).
Notes: Marginal effect of an interquartile range increase in PSS on the propensity of voting for a radical right or left party vis-à-vis a mainstream party with either a radical or non-radical platform. 95% confidence intervals.

come to be perceived as increasingly better ideologically differentiated and mainstream parties as increasingly similar. This is clear evidence in favour of our causal mechanism.

Third, we validated our "party family approach" (Mair & Mudde, 1998). It contrasts with the "policy approach" that examines time-variant characteristics like the nicheness or extremity of a party's profile in one particular election (e.g., Bischof, 2017; Wagner, 2012a). Although the policy approach can be appropriate vis-à-vis many different research questions, we adopt the party family approach because it betters taps into a party's genetic imprint (and thereby into their party brand) rather than what they *do* in one specific election. However, we did examine whether mainstream parties (defined based on party family) can update their party brand by adopting an extreme left–right position (i.e., at least one absolute z-score across the mean party position) in one election. As shown in Figure 6 this is not the case. If PSS increases, mainstream party voters are more likely to vote for a radical right or left party but *not* for a mainstream party with an extreme position. This suggests that we cannot discard the genetic identity of parties. For all other robustness tests we refer to the SI.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In many countries mainstream parties are confronted with electoral losses owing to niche parties. We seek to explain this by studying why voters defect from mainstream to niche parties and vice-versa. Based on a cross-national dataset, we show that mainstream party voters are significantly more likely to switch to a niche party when PSS is higher. Decomposing the

rather broad niche party category, we discovered that PSS increases the likelihood that voters switch from mainstream to *radical* (left and right) parties; however, the found pattern does not hold for *green* parties. Our explanation holds that radical parties distinguish themselves from the political mainstream with their radical ideological positions and fierce anti-establishment rhetoric, whereas green parties only distinguish themselves by emphasizing a specific issue. We did not find robust evidence that higher PSS deters niche party voters (including radical) from defecting to mainstream parties. This is an interesting asymmetry, suggesting that whereas a more competitive electoral market sways mainstream party voters to the flanks, there is no reason why a competitive market would prevent mainstream parties from winning back their voters.

Our findings first speak to the controversy in the literature regarding the electoral consequences of ideological differentiation. One body of literature points to the benefits of centrist or ambiguous positions as they allow to catch more voters and maximize a party's vote-shares (Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009; Somer-Topcu, 2015). Other studies have, however, argued that in order to gain votes, ideological differentiation from competitors is important (Kitschelt, 1994; Lupu, 2014). We show that the importance of ideological differentiation depends on the saturation of the party system. In an oversaturated electoral market mainstream voters will defect to radical parties that are better distinguished ideologically. Interestingly, previous work does not provide much evidence of parties actually engaging in ideological differentiation when crowdedness increases (Ezrow, 2008; Wagner, 2012b; but see Dow, 2001). We provide a potential explanation for this discrepancy, namely that niche parties already stand out and have no incentive to further differentiate their platform. Mainstream parties, in turn, could anticipate that efforts to differentiate themselves will likely lack credibility. Among others, we show above that they are unable to sway niche party voters or to retain mainstream party voters by differentiating themselves from other mainstream parties.

Second, we have several recommendations for scholars interested in party switching (B.N. Bakker et al., 2016; R. Bakker et al., 2018; Dassonneville et al., 2015; Geers & Bos, 2017; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; Hong, 2015; Marsh, 2009; Mellon et al., 2018; Reny et al., 2019; Spoon & Klüver, 2019; Voogd & Dassonneville, 2020; Wurthmann et al., 2021). These studies are innovative in that they do not simply assess whether respondents vote for (various types of) parties, but they actually observe the switching patterns between parties. While we drew inspiration from studies that examine switches from mainstream to niche or challenger parties (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; Spoon & Klüver, 2019; Wurthmann et al., 2021), we were one of the first who also assessed the opposite transition from niche parties to mainstream parties (also see Abou-Chadi et al., 2022; Krause et al., 2023). This is important: as revealed in our analyses, independent variables (for instance, political dissatisfaction, but also our main PSS variable) can have different effects on the two transitions. Additionally, we show that it is of essential importance to decompose the broad niche party category (also see Hobolt & Tilley, 2016). Regarding the effect of PSS, the found pattern holds for radical left and right parties that express anti-establishment messages and distinguish themselves ideologically from the mainstream. The findings do not hold for green parties. Hence, studies on the competition between niche and mainstream parties are well advised to not just assume that both concepts can be treated as empirical commonalities (also see Wagner, 2012a).

Finally, our results complement previous research on the effects of PSS. We already know that mainstream parties will not increase the nicheness of their platform when PSS increases (van de Wardt & van Witteloostuijn, 2021), while PSS does drive mainstream parties out of business (van de Wardt et al., 2020). We provide evidence for one of the micro-level causal mechanisms that voters defect to niche parties when the system is oversaturated.

Our findings also have societal implications. The public debate is replete with analyses on the rise of outsider parties and the so-called "Dutchification" (read: fragmentation) of politics. We have clearly shown that overcrowded political spaces can push voters to the fringes

of the political spectrum, and thereby contribute to the demise of the political mainstream in many countries. A case in point is the country where the term "Dutchification" was born; in the Netherlands the vote share of the traditional mainstream has plummeted from about 80 per cent two decades ago to only 35 per cent now. A further spiral of mainstream voter defection might have huge implications for government formation processes in multiparty democracies. After all, fragmented and polarized party systems will make negotiations increasingly difficult.

Despite these contributions, this study also has limitations. First, since we had to combine different data sources, it was challenging to develop a model that covers the full breadth of vote switching determinants while also including sufficient elections at the higher-level. Therefore, we opted for a parsimonious model containing only the standard controls. Consequently, only the respondent's ideological distance to their previous party based on the left–right dimension could be considered, whereas niche parties may also distinguish themselves on issues like the environment, immigration or European integration. While most issues can be subsumed in the left–right dimension that we do consider (e.g., De Vries et al., 2013), we hope that future election studies will keep including multi-dimensional ideological preferences. Data limitations also prevented us from including the deterioration of a respondent's economic situation (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016), even though we have income in our model. Last, owing to frequently missing data on either PSS, the party voted for in the previous elections, or a control and a limited number of countries in the EV to increase the temporal variation, we ended up with unbalanced time-series data with gaps at the election-level. This is unfortunate, as it prevented us from evaluating the effect of changes in PSS on vote switching.

In spite of data limitations, we study a complex macro–micro relationship, namely how macro-level PSS affects the switching patterns of individual voters. Yet, these micro-level switching patterns can again shape macro-level PSS as these switches can either increase or decrease the ENEP. Thus, the process that we study involves different levels of aggregation and multiple causal pathways. Here we only asses one of them. We believe that our findings are plausible: We theorized how PSS conceptually differs from vote switches, we presented plausible causal mechanisms for why the competitiveness of the electoral market would affect vote switching dynamics and also an IV analysis continues to support our conclusions. Nonetheless, future studies may want to explore the relationship between the structure of the electoral market and vote switching utilizing alternative designs. We hope that our study will be a source of inspiration for such endeavours.

OPEN RESEARCH BADGES

This article has earned an Open Data badge for making publicly available the digitally-shareable data necessary to reproduce the reported results. The data is available at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZH0QLC.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZH0QLC

ORCID

Marc van de Wardt https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7302-7640
Matthijs Rooduijn https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5880-4819

REFERENCES

Abedi, A. (2002). Challenges to established parties: The effects of party system features on the electoral fortunes of anti-political-establishment parties. *European Journal of Political Research 41*(4): 551–583.

Abou-Chadi, T., Cohen, D. & Wagner, M. (2022). The centre-right versus the radical right: the role of migration issues and economic grievances. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 48*(2): 366–384.

Adams, J., Clark, M., Ezrow, L. & Glasgow, G. (2006). Are niche parties fundamentally different from mainstream parties? The causes and the electoral consequences of Western European parties' policy shifts, 1976–1998. *American Journal of Political Science 50*(3): 513–529.

Adams, J. & Merrill III, S. (2009). Policy-seeking parties in a parliamentary democracy with proportional representation: A valence-uncertainty model. *British Journal of Political Science 39*(3): 539–558.

Adams, J. & Somer-Topcu, Z. (2009). Moderate now, win votes later: The electoral consequences of parties' policy shifts in 25 postwar democracies. *The Journal of Politics 71*(02): 678–692.

Bakker, B.N., Klemmensen, R., Nørgaard, A.S. & Schumacher, G. (2016). Stay loyal or exit the party? How openness to experience and extroversion explain vote switching. *Political psychology 37*(3): 419–429.

Bakker, R., Jolly, S. & Polk, J. (2018). Multidimensional incongruence and vote switching in Europe. *Public Choice 176*(1): 267–296.

Barr, R.R. (2009). Populists, outsiders and anti-establishment politics. *Party politics 15*(1): 29–48.

Bischof, D. (2017). Towards a renewal of the niche party concept: Parties, market shares and condensed offers. *Party politics 23*(3): 220–235.

Bischof, D. & Wagner, M. (2017). What makes parties adapt to voter preferences? The role of party organization, goals and ideology. *British Journal of Political Science 50*(1): 1–11.

Burchell, J. (2001). Evolving or conforming? Assessing organisational reform within European green parties. *West European Politics 24*(3): 113–134.

Clark, W.R. & Golder, M. (2006). Rehabilitating Duverger's Theory: Testing the Mechanical and Strategic Modifying Effects of Electoral Laws. *Comparative Political Studies 39*(6): 679–708.

Cox, G.W. (1990). Centripetal and centrifugal incentives in electoral systems. *American Journal of Political Science 34*(4): 903–935.

Dalton, R.J. (2009). Economics, environmentalism and party alignments: A note on partisan change in advanced industrial democracies. *European Journal of Political Research 48*(2): 161–175.

Dassonneville, R., Blais, A. & Dejaeghere, Y. (2015). Staying with the party, switching or exiting? A comparative analysis of determinants of party switching and abstaining. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties 25*(3): 387–405.

De Vries, C.E., Hakhverdian, A. & Lancee, B. (2013). The dynamics of voters' left/right identification: The role of economic and cultural attitudes. *Political Science Research and Methods 1*(2): 223–238.

Dow, J.K. (2001). A comparative spatial analysis of majoritarian and proportional elections. *Electoral Studies 20*(1): 109–125.

Downs, A. (1957). An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy. *Journal of Political Economy 65*(2): 135–150.

Ezrow, L. (2008). Parties' policy programmes and the dog that didn't bark: No evidence that proportional systems promote extreme party positioning. *British Journal of Political Science 38*(3): 479–497.

Ezrow, L., De Vries, C.E., Steenbergen, M.R. & Edwards, E.E. (2010). Mean voter representation and partisan constituency representation: Do parties respond to the mean voter position or to their supporters? *Party politics 17*(3): 275–301.

Ezrow, L., Homola, J. & Tavits, M. (2014). When extremism pays: Policy positions, voter certainty, and party support in postcommunist Europe. *The Journal of Politics 76*(2): 535–547.

Geers, S. & Bos, L. (2017). Priming issues, party visibility, and party evaluations: The impact on vote switching. *Political Communication 34*(3): 344–366.

Hernán, M.A. & Robins, J.M. (2020). *Causal inference: what if*. Boca Raton: Chapman & Hall/CRC.

Hobolt, S.B. & Tilley, J. (2016). Fleeing the centre: the rise of challenger parties in the aftermath of the euro crisis. *West European Politics 39*(5): 971–991.

Hong, G. (2015). Explaining vote switching to niche parties in the 2009 European Parliament elections. *European Union Politics 16*(4): 514–535.

Jackman, S. (2000). *In and out of war and peace: Transitional models of international conflict.* Department of Political Science, Stanford University.

Karreth, J., Polk, J.T. & Allen, C.S. (2013). Catchall or catch and release? The electoral consequences of social democratic parties' march to the middle in Western Europe. *Comparative Political Studies 46*(7): 791–822.

Kirchheimer, O. (1966). The transformation of the Western European party systems. In J. La Palombara & M. Weiner (eds.), *Political parties and political development*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kitschelt, H. (1994). *The transformation of European social democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Krause, W., Cohen, D. & Abou-Chadi, T. (2023). Does accommodation work? Mainstream party strategies and the success of radical right parties. *Political Science Research and Methods 11*(1): 172–179.

Lachat, R. & Wagner, A. (2018). How party characteristics drive voters' evaluation criteria. *Electoral Studies 55*: 11–20.

Lowery, D., Otjes, S., Gherghina, S., van Witteloostuijn, A., Peli, G. & Brasher, H. (2010). Unpacking LogM: Towards a More General Theory of Party System Density. *American Journal of Political Science 54*(4): 921–935.

Lowery, D., van Witteloostuijn, A., Péli, G., Brasher, H., Otjes, S. & Gherghina, S. (2013). Policy agendas and births and deaths of political parties. *Party politics 19*(3): 381–407.

Lupu, N. (2014). Brand dilution and the breakdown of political parties in Latin America. *World Politics 66*(4): 561–602.

Mair, P. & Mudde, C. (1998). The party family and its study. *Annual review of political science 1*(1): 211–229.

Marks, G. & Wilson, C.J. (2000). The past in the present: A cleavage theory of party response to European integration. *British Journal of Political Science 30*(3): 433–459.

Marsh, M. (2009). Vote switching in European Parliament elections: evidence from June 2004. *European Integration 31*(5): 627–644.

Meguid, B.M. (2008). *Party competition between unequals. Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mellon, J., Evans, G., Fieldhouse, E., Green, J. & Prosser, C. (2018). Brexit or Corbyn? Campaign and inter-election vote switching in the 2017 UK general election. *Parliamentary Affairs 71*(4): 719–737.

Merrill III, S. & Adams, J. (2002). Centrifugal incentives in multi-candidate elections. *Journal of Theoretical Politics 14*(3): 275–300.

Meyer, T.M. & Wagner, M. (2013). Mainstream or niche? Vote-seeking incentives and the programmatic strategies of political parties. *Comparative Political Studies 46*(10): 1246–1272.

Rankin, J. (2019, May 28). Why populists could struggle to capitalise on EU elections success. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/28/why-populists-could-struggle-to-capitalise-on-eu-elections-success

Reny, T.T., Collingwood, L. & Valenzuela, A.A. (2019). Vote switching in the 2016 election: How racial and immigration attitudes, not economics, explain shifts in white voting. *Public Opinion Quarterly 83*(1): 91–113.

Rooduijn, M., De Lange, S.L. & Van der Brug, W. (2014). A populist Zeitgeist? Programmatic contagion by populist parties in Western Europe. *Party politics 20*(4): 563–575.

Schedler, A. (1996). Anti-political-establishment parties. *Party politics 2*(3): 291–312.

Somer-Topcu, Z. (2015). Everything to Everyone: The Electoral Consequences of the Broad-Appeal Strategy in Europe. *American Journal of Political Science 59*(4): 841–854.

Spoon, J.-J. & Klüver, H. (2019). Party convergence and vote switching: Explaining mainstream party decline across Europe. *European Journal of Political Research 58*(4): 1021–1042.

Stoll, H. (2011). Dimensionality and the number of parties in legislative elections. *Party politics 17*(3): 405–429.

Tresch, A., Lefevere, J. & Walgrave, S. (2015). 'Steal me if you can!' The impact of campaign messages on associative issue ownership. *Party Politics 21*(2): 198–208.

van de Wardt, M. (2017). Explaining the effective number of parties: Beyond the standard model. *Electoral Studies 45*: 44–54.

van de Wardt, M., Berkhout, J. & Vermeulen, F. (2020). Survival of the fittest. Comparing entry and exit among niche and mainstream parties in advanced democracies, 1945–2011. *Electoral Studies 69*, 102261. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102261

van de Wardt, M. & van Witteloostuijn, A. (2021). Adapt or perish? How parties respond to party system saturation in 21 Western democracies, 1945-2011. *British Journal of Political Science 51*(1): 16–38.

van der Brug, W. (2004). Issue ownership and party choice. *Electoral Studies 23*(2): 209–233.

van der Brug, W. & van Spanje, J. (2009). Immigration, Europe and the 'new' cultural dimension. *European Journal of Political Research 48*(3): 309–334.

Van der Eijk, C. (2001). Measuring agreement in ordered rating scales. *Quality and Quantity 35*(3): 325–341.

Volkens, A., Lehmann, P., Merz, N., Regel, S. & Werner, A. (2013). *The Manifesto Data Collection. Manifesto Project (MRG/CMP/MARPOR)*. Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB).

Voogd, R. & Dassonneville, R. (2020). Are the supporters of populist parties loyal voters? Dissatisfaction and stable voting for populist parties. *Government and Opposition 55*(3): 349–370.

Wagner, M. (2012a). Defining and measuring niche parties. *Party politics 18*(6): 845–864.

Wagner, M. (2012b). When do parties emphasise extreme positions? How strategic incentives for policy differentiation influence issue importance. *European Journal of Political Research 51*(1): 64–88.

Wurthmann, L.C., Marschall, S., Triga, V. & Manavopoulos, V. (2021). Many losers–One winner? An examination of vote switching to the AfD in the 2017 German federal election using VAA data. *Party Politics 27*(5): 870–882.

[dataset] van de Wardt, M. & Rooduijn, M. (2023). Replication Data for: Past the saturation point: Why voters switch from mainstream to niche parties and vice-versa. https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZH0QLC: Harvard Dataverse.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Marc van de Wardt is Associate Professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His research focusses on party competition, the entry and survival of political parties and the selection process of politicians. Here he is particularly interested in the role of their personality traits.

Matthijs Rooduijn is Associate Professor at the University of Amsterdam. His research focusses on the rise of populist and far left/right parties and its causes and consequences – in particular regarding public opinion and voting behaviour.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.