

The party (un)faithful: explaining disloyal party members' voting behaviour in Belgium and the United Kingdom

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1. Introduction¹

During the last few decades, political parties in Western democracies have been undergoing a crisis. Particularly the party branches that are more in contact with civil society, i.e. the ‘party on the ground’ (Katz & Mair, 1993), appear to encounter difficulties. This becomes apparent, among others, from citizens’ decline of trust in parties (Dalton & Weldon, 2005) and reduced levels of party identification (Dalton, 2002), which have led to increased levels of partisan disloyalties and electoral volatility (Drummond, 2006). As such, the linkage function of parties is put under pressure: an increasing number of citizens no longer recognises parties as trustworthy intermediaries that channel their demands to government officials, and consequently they do not always remain faithful to a party in the ballot box.

In this context, party members are sometimes seen as means of protection for parties in crisis. Despite the fact that the number of people who are full members of political parties has also been steadily declining in the last few decades (Van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014; Whiteley, 2011), members keep playing a vital role for parties and for the health of representative democracies, particularly during election times. Although they can be a cost to some extent (e.g. membership administration has a financial cost and freedom of manoeuvre is typically hampered by members’ ideological firmness), party members are mainly an asset for parties. Not only do they provide the party with financial resources by paying a membership fee, they constitute a pool of potential candidates, staff members and office-holders and occasionally contribute to intra-party policy-making, but they also represent a stable voting base for the party (Scarrow, 1994). This last function is not only limited to the actual party members, but, to a certain extent, it is affecting also people in their networks. Members are known for providing a good deal of voluntary work for the party.² This is not only essential for party functioning, but it also allows to transmit a party’s political values and ideas to those interacting with party members and, most importantly, to mobilize electoral support for the party during election campaigns. Even members who are not very active within

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² Although not necessarily the bulk (see: Fisher, Fieldhouse, & Cutts, 2014; Scarrow, 2014, pp. 103-109; Webb, Poletti, & Bale, 2017).

the party can still act as ‘party ambassadors’, spreading the party message and indirectly convincing others to vote for their party (Ponce & Scarrow, 2016).

Because of their formal commitment to the party and their strong partisan identification, however, it is often taken for granted that party members *always* vote for the party they belong to. Yet, recent research suggests that small but potentially relevant segments of party membership bases occasionally behave disloyally by casting a vote for another party (Polk & Kölln, 2016). This is certainly something worth paying attention to because, on the one hand, it is reasonable to assume that party members tend to provide a ‘vote-multiplying’ effect to parties (Scarrow, 1994) only to the extent that they actually decide to vote for the party they are member of. On the other hand, if even the most committed of party supporters occasionally cast a disloyal vote, it is not surprising that less formally committed supporters end up doing the same. In both instances, understanding the underlying motivations of party members’ decision to vote disloyally, helps to indirectly understand a much larger phenomenon, tackling the issue of increased voter volatility from which parties across Europe are heavily suffering (e.g. Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002; Drummond, 2006).

This is precisely what we will explore in this paper. After introducing the problem of electoral volatility, we look at intra-party cohesion at the level of the ‘party on the ground’ by mapping out the share of party members who cast a defecting vote in European national elections, and assessing to what extent disloyal voting behaviour is used as a temporary ‘exit option’ (Hirschman, 1970) for party members dissatisfied with their party’s functioning. We try to understand the factors that might lead party members to being disloyal and formulate hypotheses that take into account three types of factors: *party leadership evaluations*, *strategic considerations* and *programmatic concerns*, approached both as ‘push factors’ - referring to dissatisfaction with one’s own party - and as ‘pull factors’ - referring to ‘attractiveness’ of competing parties.

In order to uncover conditional effects of the political structure, we look at party members’ vote defection in comparative perspective, focusing on two countries with very different party and electoral systems: Belgium, with a multi-party, highly proportional electoral system, and Britain, with a (still predominantly) two-party, majoritarian electoral system. More specifically, we expect that *programmatic concerns* are of higher importance in Belgium, as its highly fragmented multi-party system decreases the ideological distance

between parties, whereas we expect *strategic considerations* to be of more importance in Britain, as its FPTP electoral system decreases the chance for small parties to win seats. After describing our original broad-scale surveys, we test our expectations on party members of five of the largest parties in Flanders (Belgium) and the six largest parties in Britain.

As such, our research helps disentangle the commonalities and differences between party members in these two countries, making it a first contribution that tries to explain and understand party members' disloyal voting behaviour – and volatility more broadly – in international-comparative perspective.

2. Electoral volatility and party members

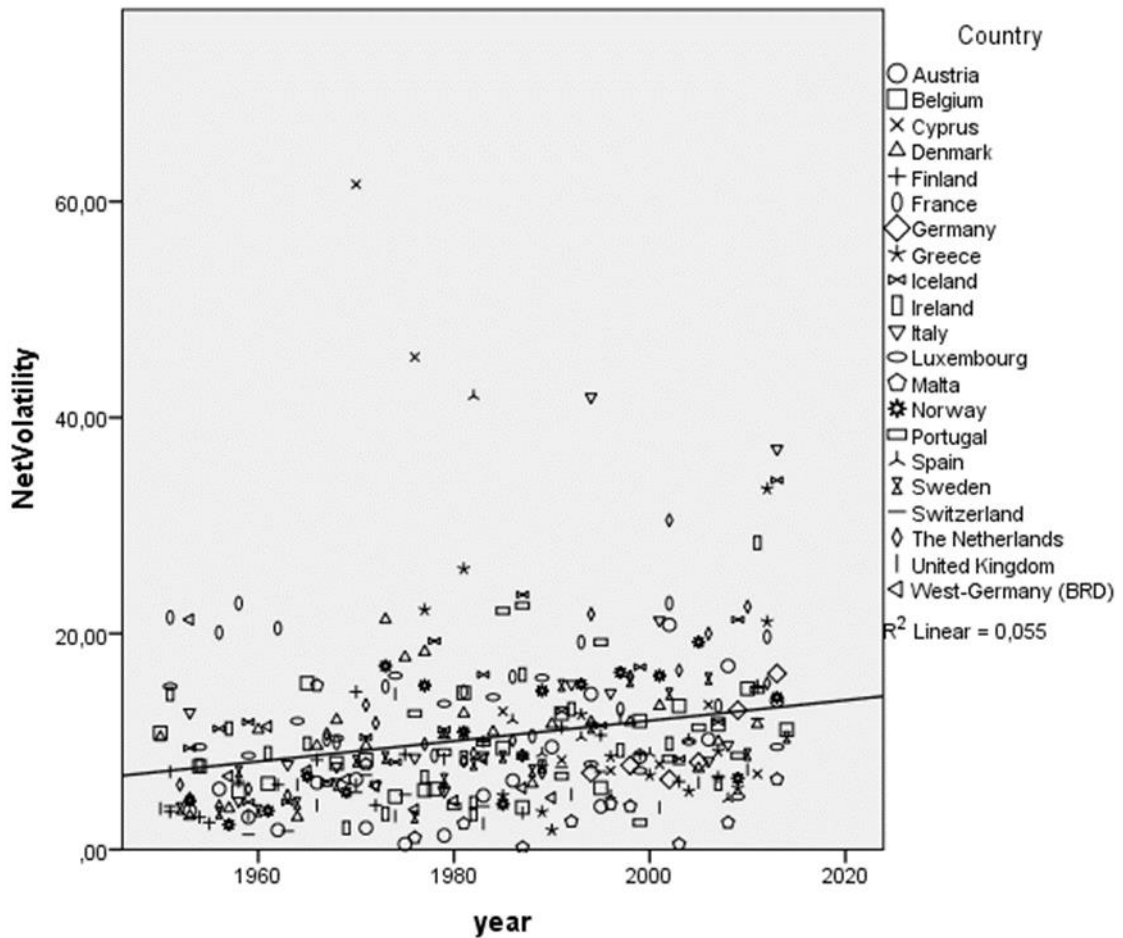
One of the main indicators of political parties' eroding bonds with the broader society is that they are suffering from high levels of electoral volatility (Dassonneville, 2012; Drummond, 2006). Voters no longer remain loyal to one single party but instead become more 'volatile' by voting for different parties in consecutive, or even in simultaneous elections. This constitutes a major challenge for parties since they have to win their voters back every election, and because it becomes unclear which voters they actually represent and whose needs they have to take along in political debates (Andeweg, 2012).

The most common indicator of electoral volatility, the Pedersen (1979) index, calculates the net percentage of voters who changed their vote compared with the previous elections³. Although the index has been criticised for not taking into account mutual fluctuations at the individual level⁴ (Katz, Rattinger, & Pedersen, 1997), an important advantage is that it provides a clear view of the evolution of volatility over time, allowing for cross-national comparisons. As shown in Figure 1, aggregate-levels of net-volatility are steadily rising in the large majority of European countries.

³ For each party, the absolute difference between current and previous election result is calculated. All these differences are summed and divided by 2.

⁴ A trend of increasing voter volatility across Europe has, however, also been suggested by individual-level survey-based measures (Dalton, McAllistar, & Wattenberg, 2002).

Figure 1: Net volatility (Pedersen index) over time in a number of European countries



Source: Dassonneville (2015)

Both contextual factors related to the electoral and party system (e.g. the sheer number of parties and the degree of ideological polarization within a party system) (Bartolini & Mair, 2007; Dejaeghere & Dassonneville, 2015; Tavits, 2008), as well as individual-level variables influence voter volatility. One of these factors at the individual level is party identification or partisanship: the extent to which citizens identify themselves with a particular party. It is believed that party identification - and party membership as a very strong form of party identification - protects parties against this increased voter volatility. One of the earliest research traditions on voting behaviour, that of the Michigan School, focused on party identification as the most important explanation for the choice of a party in elections (Bartels, 2000; Campbell et al., 1960). The basic idea is that a large share of citizens identify themselves as a supporter of a party and remain loyal to that party and its candidates when casting a vote.

Partisanship could here be considered as group belonging, comparable with social or religious identity.

Although there is scholarly controversy on whether levels of party identification have actually decreased over time (Bartels, 2000; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002; Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2016; Rosema, 2006), there is increasing consensus that, possibly also due to enhanced citizens' critical concerns towards parties following rising levels of education and cognitive mobilisation (Dalton, 2007), partisanship is no longer the main factor for the explanation of voting behaviour. This has been at least partially replaced by more short-time considerations such as opinions on current topics and candidate evaluations. Thus, rather than exclusively relying on long-term identifications and party socialisation, citizens now tend to decide for which party to vote for more autonomously than in the past (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002; Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2016).

Party membership can be considered as a formal and far-reaching form of party identification. It is *formal* because people formally register to become a member, pay a membership fee and receive a membership card, which goes beyond just identifying oneself with a particular party. It is also *far-reaching*, in the sense that party members are not only expected to vote for their own party, but also to encourage others to follow their lead, performing a 'vote multiplying' function (Scarrow, 1994). Van Aelst, van Holsteyn, and Koole (2012) labelled party members as *part-time marketeers* for the party. They can do so by canvassing people in their community in the run-up to the election, by distributing leaflets and other campaigning material, by expressing their support through poster display and social media, or by becoming a candidate themselves (Bale & Webb, 2015). In this sense, party members are not only relied upon for their own votes, but also for the votes of those in their personal and geographic environment. Moreover, although those who identify with a party without formally joining it can also be involved in electoral campaign activities, party members are much more likely to engage in 'high intensity' and more costly (in terms of time and energy) type of activities, such as face-to-face and phone canvassing, as opposed to 'medium' or 'low' intensity ones, such as leafletting or social media support (Webb, Poletti, et al., 2017).

Research has shown that people join parties for different reasons (Bruter & Harrison, 2009; Whiteley & Seyd, 1996, 1998) and that not all party members are active in the same way in party politics (Seyd & Whiteley, 2004; Whiteley & Seyd, 1998). However, it could be argued that, in general, their contribution to politics tends to go further than occasionally

turning out to vote, the only significant political contribution that most citizens make to democratic politics. Even members that are not active *within* the party can play a significant ‘ambassadorial’ role in ‘spreading the party message’ by personally convincing their friends and relatives to vote for their party (Ponce & Scarrow, 2016, pp. 684-685). These are non-trivial contributions considering that previous empirical studies have suggested that a small but nonetheless significant association exists between parties’ electoral activity and their electoral performance (André & Depauw, 2016; Fisher & Denver, 2009; Johnston & Pattie, 2003; Karp, Banducci, & Bowler, 2008). Party members, in particular, are thought to make a difference. In Belgium, for instance, the share of party members belonging to a party the year before the elections appears to be a good predictor for the election result of that party in the subsequent year (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2012). A similar phenomenon was observed in the UK, although a straightforward relationship between members and obtained votes could not be found for all parties (Fisher, Denver, & Hands, 2006). This suggests that, although this stable reservoir of votes appears to be under pressure, with party membership decline being the major threat (Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012), party members continue to function as an important linkage mechanism between parties and voters, and still have a considerable influence on voting behaviour.

As mentioned, however, it cannot be taken for granted that party members always vote for their own party. As Katz suggested a few decades ago (Katz, 1990, p. 151): although members tend to be more loyal than non-members, the cause of party loyalty is not membership *per se*: members are rather a ‘self-selected sample of the most loyal supporters of a party’. Looking at the European Social Survey (ESS) data, Polk and Kölln (2016) calculated that between 3 % (Finland) and 16 % (Israel) of the party members cast a disloyal vote in elections (see also Kenig and Rahat (2014)). The fact that a relevant share of their members appears to be disloyal is an additional threat for parties. Not only average voters, but even party members might use cues different from their partisan affiliation when deciding on which party to vote for. Determinants of electoral volatility among party members, the most committed of the voters, are therefore a topic worth of investigation.

3. The determinants of members voting disloyalty

Why do party members decide to cast a vote for another party at general elections? We put forward three possible type of factors: *programmatic concerns*, *party leadership evaluations* and *strategic considerations*.

A choice for a particular party at the ballot box is, first of all, influenced by **programmatic concerns**. People vote for a party because the points of view and/or the issues that a party emphasizes correspond with their own views and priorities (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989). Although it could be assumed that party members share the opinions of their party, this is not necessarily always the case. May's law of curvilinear disparity (1973), for instance, posits that party members tend to be more extreme than the party elite (but see: Norris, 1995).

Moreover, parties are not unitary organizations and are often informally divided in factions, whose influence within the party might vary at specific elections (Boucek, 2009). This suggests that it is not uncommon for party members to have policy preferences that diverge from those of the party (elite). In their empirical analysis of Canadian and Belgian party members, van Haute and Carty (2012) estimated the share of 'ideological misfits' in each party between 10 and 25 %. Party members with diverging views have a choice to either 'exit' the party, to remain loyal despite the divergence ('loyalty') or to raise their voice in order to try and change things ('voice') (Hirschman, 1970). The *exit* option could be realized by leaving the party, i.e. by giving up one's membership, which happens indeed because of ideological disagreement (Wagner, 2016). It could, however, also be realized through a more temporary option: voting for another party, perhaps as a first step towards considering whether to leave the party for good.

The distinction made by Polk and Kölln (2016) between '*push*' and '*pull*' factors is particularly useful for analysing the effect of *programmatic concerns* on vote defection of party members. Using a proximity-based understanding of spatial voting (Downs, 1957; Enelow & Hinich, 1984), when the 'ideological incongruence' (or distance) between a party member and his or her party is large, that party member might be pushed to vote for another party running in the election ('*push*' factor). But it might also be the case that a party member is highly attracted by another party since its programme corresponds quite closely with his or her policy preferences, leading the member to cast a disloyal vote ('*pull*' factor). Unlike Polk

and Kölln (2016), who only take anti-migrant attitudes into account as pull factors, we use a general left-right scale, looking at the absolute distance between a member's perceived position and the perceived position of their own party (push factor) as well as between a members self-position and the perceived position of what he or she considers the most ideologically closer party (pull factor). We formulate two hypotheses:

H1a: *Party members with a large perceived distance to their own party on a left-right scale are more likely to cast a defecting vote ('push' factor)*

H1b: *Party members with a small perceived distance to another party on a left-right scale are more likely to cast a defecting vote ('pull' factor)*

The process of personalisation of politics in contemporary democracies has received considerable attention in the last few decades, raising the question of whether **evaluations of individual candidates** and, more specifically, **party leadership evaluations** have become more important for voting decisions compared to the past. Empirical evidence on the effect of the leadership on individual vote choice has, however, been mixed. On the one hand, a number of studies have found support for the personalization hypothesis (Bean & Mughan, 1989; Cain, Ferejohn, & Fiorina, 1987; Clarke, 2004; Garzia, 2013; Lobo, 2006). Party leaders have been found to be particularly important in this perspective as they are often automatically associated with the party and, as such, have an impact on its electoral result (Balmas et al., 2014; Wauters et al., forthcoming). On the other hand, however, traditional interpretations of voting behaviour in comparative studies have reached far from unequivocal conclusions on party leadership effects. In these studies, short-term party leaders effects have often been explained in terms of prior strength of party identification (Aarts, Blais, & Schmitt, 2013; Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002; Thomassen, 2005) concluding that leaders tend to matter more only where parties matter less (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2011, p. 50)

In the case of party members, the expectation on leadership effects might be somewhere in the middle. Party members are by definition those who strongly identify with their party, and are therefore less likely to be attracted by party leader effects. But casting a defecting vote might also be a tempting option, as members are more likely to be directly affected by a leader's performance than average citizens and since party leaders are only temporarily in charge of the party. It is in any case a less radical option than leaving the party as member:

party members remain to some extent loyal to the party by staying on board as members (in the hope that one day the party leader will resign), but might once (or as long as the party leader is in function) cast a defecting vote (e.g. Webb, Bale, & Poletti, 2017).

Aarts and Blais (2011) showed that it is not negative, but only positive leader evaluations that are likely to matter more for voting behaviour. Thus, focusing on one's own party leader evaluation, we posit that the more positive party members evaluate their party leader, the less likely it will be that they cast a defecting vote.

H2: *The more positively party members evaluate their party leader, the less likely they will cast a defecting vote*

Finally, we discuss **strategic considerations**. Voters might cast their vote for the party they prefer, irrespective of any other considerations. However, we know that *sincere voting* is not the only option. Sometimes, voters might prefer to cast their vote for a party with a better chance of being pivotal and influential, rather than to vote for their preferred party. They might do so because they believe that their preferred party will not obtain any seats, or because they aim to bring a particular government majority to power (Gschwend, 2007). This is what is usually called a strategic or *tactical voting* (Alvarez & Nagler, 2000; Fisher, 2004). We expect party members to behave in similar ways.

Although scholars often assume that strategic voting only occurs in majority electoral systems in order not to 'waste' votes, it has recently been demonstrated that strategic votes can be cast also in systems of Proportional Representation (PR) (Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2012). Whereas in majoritarian system voters tend to strategically defect from their preferred small party because it is unlikely to win seats, strategic voters in PR systems mainly aim to influence the coalition formation by voting for large parties who have a better chance of ending up in government (and to weigh on the decision-making while in power). The consequence is the same, as in both cases smaller parties tend to be victims of strategic behaviour. We therefore expect members of smaller parties to be more likely to cast a defecting vote than members of larger parties.

H3: *Members of smaller parties are more likely to cast a defecting vote than members of larger parties*

Individual-level variables are not the only factors influencing party switching. Institutional factors related to the broader political system should be taken into account as well. We consider two institutional aspects that are relevant for explaining disloyal voting behaviour of party members in particular: the party system and the electoral system. As we explain below, Belgium and the UK differ on both aspects, allowing us to estimate and analyse the conditional effects of these political system variables on the chance to cast a disloyal vote, looking at programmatic concerns, strategic considerations and leadership evaluations.

We first address differences in **party systems** between the two countries. In a cross-national study, Dejaeghere and Dassonneville (2015) have shown how the number of parties and the degree of ideological polarisation in a party system have an impact on the chance of voters to switch parties at election time. While the former factor has a positive effect on vote switching, the latter has a negative one. The reasoning behind the positive effect of the number of parties is that the chance to find another party that deserves a vote is higher when there are more parties available. Another argument is that the ideological distance between parties tend to be lower in systems with many parties, making vote switching more likely (Tavits, 2005).

In Belgium's highly proportional electoral system many parties compete for voters' support and hence it is reasonable to expect that substantive and ideological party differences are smaller here than in a majoritarian country such as the UK (Bouteca, 2011; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). When we look at the 'effective number of parties', an indicator introduced by Laakso and Taagepera (1979) taking into account both the number and the strength of parties in a party system, we see that in the last UK General Election in 2015, the effective number of parties that obtained votes is 3.9, and this figure is reduced to 2.5 if we only take into account parties that obtained seats. In Belgium (as a whole), in the 2014 election these figures are 9.6 and 7.8 respectively, much higher than in the UK (Döring & Manow, 2016). Even when we calculate only the effective number of parties for the regional Flemish Parliament, these are clearly higher than in the UK with 5.1 and 4.5 respectively. In sum, the 'effective number of parties' is larger in Flanders than in the UK, and hence we could expect that ideological differences with neighbouring parties are smaller. Thus, we expect that ideological considerations will play a more limited role in Britain than in Belgium

H4: Ideological concerns are less important for party members disloyalty in Britain compared to Belgium

Belgium and the UK also differ in the **electoral system** they use. While Belgium uses a flexible list PR-system, the UK has a single-member plurality system, also known as first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. This has consequences in terms of proportionality between vote shares and seat shares. While in a PR system the explicit purpose is to maximise correspondence between both shares, a plurality system first and foremost aims to create a clear and stable government majority based on territorial representativeness (Duverger, 1954; Lijphart, 1990).

As a consequence, the level of disproportionality is much larger in plurality systems than in PR systems. This is confirmed when looking at the Gallagher (1991) index of disproportionality. For the most recent elections in Belgium (2014) this index is 4.7, while in the UK the score of this index is 15.0 (Döring & Manow, 2016). Larger disproportionality creates higher disadvantage for smaller parties and makes strategic voting more likely (Crisp, Olivella, & Potter, 2012; Gschwend, 2007). Moreover, a tactical vote in PR systems (which is rather about coalition formation) is less likely since it presupposes more voters' knowledge: government and coalition formation are harder to understand and require more information (Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2012).⁵ Thus, we expect that members of smaller parties will tend to vote strategically more in Britain than in Belgium.

H5: Strategic considerations are less important for party members disloyalty in Britain compared to Belgium

Finally, an expectation based on the electoral system can be made also regarding party leaders evaluation effect on party members vote. When looking at citizens' voting behaviour, research has suggested that party leader effects exist in all systems, but they are more clearly visible in countries using first-past-the-post voting rules than proportional rules (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2011). This is because majoritarian systems tend to put more emphasis on individual representatives, and specifically on leaders, whereas proportional systems are designed to promote parties rather than individual candidates. Moreover, contrarily to

⁵ See, however, also (Abramson et al., 2010)

proportional systems, in majoritarian parliamentary systems it is very likely that the most popular party will secure an overall majority, without the need to engage in post-election coalition negotiations (Lijphart, 1999). Ensuring that the leader of the party with most votes will become the next prime minister might work as an incentive to focus more on the leader in the voting calculus. We expect this may also be the case for party members voting behaviour.

H6: *Evaluations of party leaders are more important for party members' disloyalty in Britain compared to Belgium*

4. Data

In order to test our hypotheses, we rely on broad-scale surveys conducted among party members of five parties in Flanders (Belgium) and six parties in the United Kingdom. In contrast with public opinion or national election surveys, which are conducted among the entire (voting) population and only contain a small number of party members in the sample, - when it is even possible to identify them at all - our surveys allow us to investigate party members opinions and voting behaviour in detail.

In Belgium, in the course of 2012, we conducted a postal survey among party members of the Flemish-regionalist party *N-VA* and the liberal-democratic *OpenVLD*, using the Total Design-method (TDM) of Dilman (1978). The same method was used one year later to survey party members of the Christian-democratic party *CD&V* and the ecologist party *Groen*, and again in 2015 for the social-democratic *sp.a*⁶ (See Table 1). Despite following the same method, response rates varied from one party to another (see Table 1). *N-VA* members recorded the highest response rate with 65.5%, whereas for *OpenVLD* (whose membership files suffered from several inaccuracies) we obtained a response rate of only 28.9%. In order to control for underrepresentation, the data were weighted according to sex and age category.

⁶ Apart from these five parties, there is one other Flemish party represented in parliament, i.e. the extreme right *Vlaams Belang*, but they refused to cooperate in a survey.

Table 1. Party members survey details, five Flemish parties

Party	Type of party	N	Total response rate	Period: start	Period: end
Groen	Ecologist	931	62.0 %	23 April 2013	16 June 2013
Sp.a	Social-democratic	583	38.9 %	10 June 2015	14 October 2015
CD&V	Christian-democratic	666	44.3 %	21 March 2013	12 June 2013
OpenVLD	Liberal-democratic	430	28.9 %	9 May 2012	9 September 2012
N-VA	Regionalist (Flanders)	990	65.5 %	3 April 2012	14 September 2012

In Britain, one week after the May 2015 UK's General Election, we conducted an online survey with British⁷ party members of the *Conservative* party, the *Labour* party, the *Liberal Democrats*, the *United Kingdom Independence Party* (UKIP), the *Greens* and the *Scottish Nationalist Party* (SNP) (see Table 2). *YouGov*, an international internet-based market research firm, recruited the survey respondents from a panel of around 300,000 volunteers who are paid a fee of 50p for completing a survey⁸. At the beginning of the fieldwork period, some 8840 *YouGov* panellists who were party members were invited to take part in the poll, and 5696 respondents subsequently took part in the survey, effectively a response rate of 64.4%. Although data are not weighted in any way since there are no known official population parameters for the various party memberships in the UK, data triangulation gives us confidence in the quality of the data⁹.

Table 2. Party members survey details, six British parties

Party	Type of party	N	Period: start	Period: end
Conservative	Conservative	1192	12 May 2015	26 May 2015
Labour	Social-democratic	1180	12 May 2015	24 May 2015
Lib Dem	Liberal-democratic	730	12 May 2015	26 May 2015
UKIP	Eurosceptic and Right-wing populist	784	12 May 2015	25 May 2015

⁷ Northern Ireland party members have not been included.

⁸ Upon joining the *YouGov* panel, volunteers complete a survey asking a broad range of demographic questions, which are subsequently used to recruit respondents matching desired demographic quotas for surveys. Potential respondents for the party member survey were identified from questions asking respondents if they were members of any of a list of large membership organisations, including the political parties.

⁹ Previous *YouGov* party membership surveys using unweighted data have generated predictions for party leadership contests that came very close to (that is within 1% of) the final official outcome. Further validation was provided by comparing demographics of our UKIP sample with those generated by a far larger UKIP survey (n=13568) conducted by Paul Whiteley and Matthew Goodwin using a mailback method on the UKIP membership population. We are grateful to Professors Whiteley and Goodwin for facilitating this.

Greens	Ecologist	845	12 May 2015	23 May 2015
SNP	Nationalist and social-democratic (Scotland)	963	12 May 2015	23 May 2015
Total Response rate: 64.4%				

The central dependent variable of our analysis is a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not a party member has voted for his or her own party in the last general elections (0 = vote for the own party ; 1 = vote for another party). This is used to run a logistic regression model. Only party members who casted a vote at the last general elections are included in the analysis. As for the independent variables, for the programmatic '*push*' factors we rely on a comparison (i.e. the absolute difference) between the score of party members on a self-placement left (0)-right (10) scale and their placement of the party on the same scale. For the programmatic '*pull*' factors, we do the same, but compared to the most adjacent other party¹⁰. So, for instance, if a Labour member considers him or herself in a position of 4 on the left-right scale, and positions the Labour party at 5, the Green party at 1 and SNP at 2, the distance between him or herself and his or her party (i.e. Labour) will be 1 (i.e. $|5 - 4|$), whereas the distance from the most adjacent other party will be 2 (i.e. $|4 - 2|$)¹¹. For factors related to leadership evaluations, we asked Belgian party members to express the sympathy they feel for their current party leader on a scale from 0 to 10. Similarly, we asked to British party members to express how they feel their party leader performed in the electoral campaign on a scale from 0 to 10. Finally, for strategic considerations, we take the size of the party into account, i.e. the share of votes they obtained in the last general elections (for which party members did (or did not) cast a disloyal vote). In order to control for the effect of other socio-demographic and political behaviour variables in our regression model, we also include sex, three age categories (15-34; 35-65; 65+), education level (graduates vs. non-graduates)

¹⁰ The ideological distance to the most adjacent party includes the perceived position of SNP only for members based in Scotland, since it is not possible to vote for the SNP in England or Wales. Ideological distance to Plaid Cymru, a Welsh social democratic political party, is also included in the measure for members based in Wales.

¹¹ If the same member were to place also the Green party at 2, there would be two most adjacent parties rather than one. However, this would not affect the calculation of the absolute ideological distance, which would remain 2.

and level of party activism. The latter is measured with a factor score resulting from country-specific factor analyses of campaign, selection and policy activities¹².

5. Results

We will first discuss the results of the descriptive analyses of disloyal voting behaviour of party members. The goal of this analysis is to map out the extent to which members cast a defecting vote. Next, we will present the results of an explanatory logistic regression analysis that allows us to test the hypotheses we formulated above.

5.1 Descriptive analysis

Although most party members still vote loyally for their own party, it becomes apparent from Table 3 that both in Flanders and Britain disloyal voting behaviour is not a negligible phenomenon. On average, about 6 per cent of the surveyed party members did not vote for the party they are member of in the previous elections. At first glance, the share of disloyal party members seems to be higher in Britain than in Flanders but only when we take into account all British parties, and not only those who won the highest number of seats (i.e. *Labour, SNP, Conservatives*).

Table 3. Voting results (share and seats) and party members’ disloyal voting behaviour

	Belgium			UK			
	Vote share 2010(/2014) (%) ¹³	Seats (/2014) ¹⁴	Members’ disloyal vote (%) - Flanders	Vote share 2015 (%)	Seats 2015	Members disloyal vote (%) – Britain	
Groen	7.1	5	4.0	Greens	3.8	1	15.8
SP.A	14.2	13	7.8	Labour	30.4	232	4.9
Open Vld	14.0	13	6.1	Lib Dem	7.9	8	12.1

¹² The following party activities were included in the factor analyses in both countries: taken party in the selection of party leader, delivered leaflets, stood for office within the party organisation, helped at a party meeting and displaying election posters. All activities load on the same factor of party activism.

¹³ I.e. the vote share for the elections of the federal House of Representatives in 2010 (2014 for sp.a) calculated only for the Flemish constituencies.

¹⁴ 2014 for sp.a since this survey took place in 2015.

CD&V	17.6	17	4.9	Conservative	36.9	331	3.8
N-VA	28.2	27	5.7	SNP	4.7	56	3.8
				UKIP	12.6	1	6.9

Indeed, when we take a closer look at the table above, then outspoken differences between British parties strike the eye. Parties encountering difficulties to gain seats in Britain's majoritarian electoral system (the *Greens* and *Liberal Democrats* in particular) exhibit much higher shares of defecting votes (15.8 and 12.1 per cent respectively, but also *UKIP* at 6.9) than mainstream parties (*Conservative* with 3.8 % and *Labour* with 4.9 %). In Flanders, we do not observe similar differences between small and large parties. Already from descriptive data, strategic voting considerations seems to be a likely explanation for these differences across the two countries. In Belgium's PR system the risk of gaining no seats is much smaller for minor parties than it is in Britain. Even when considering the possibility of strategic vote for coalition purposes, strategic voting seems to be less prevalent in Flanders, providing a first confirmation of our expectation as formulated in H6.

5.2 Explaining party members voting disloyalty

In the next sections, we test the possible explanations for disloyal voting behaviour in a more systematic way. For this purpose, we conduct a logistic regression analysis at the individual level, using a variable indicating whether or not a party member has voted for another party as the dependent variable.

Table 4. Logistic regression for Flemish and British party members casting a defecting vote

	Flemish parties			British parties		
	B	Std Err.	Exp(B)	B	Std Err.	Exp(B)
<i>Programmatic concerns</i>						
Ideological distance own party (<i>push</i> factor)	.164**	.054	1.178	.159***	.046	1.172
Ideological distance adjacent party (<i>pull</i> factor)	-.209*	.099	.812	-.109**	.039	.897
<i>Leader evaluations</i>						
Sympathy/Performance score for own party leader	-.214***	.042	.807	-.239***	.021	.787
<i>Strategic considerations</i>						

Vote share most recent elections (%)	.013	.012	1.013	-.028***	.005	.972
<i>Controls</i>						
Level of education (ref: graduate degree)	-.064	.181	.938	-.090	.118	.914
Age (ref: 65+)						
15-34 years old	-.055	.277	.946	-.327	.168	.721
35-65 years old	-.039	.207	.961	-.450**	.144	.638
Sex (ref: women)	.026	.181	1.027	.063	.124	1.065
Activity rate in the party	-.757***	.126	.469	-.503***	.070	.605
Constant	-1.629	.412	.196	-.021	.321	.979
Nagelkerke pseudo-R ²	0.11			0.13		
N	2880			4924		

*** p < 0.001 ; ** p < 0.01 ; * p < 0.05

The results (Table 4) show a highly similar pattern for Flemish and British parties. First of all, *programmatic concerns* appear to play a role in deciding to vote for another party. Both ‘*push*’ factors (i.e. the perceived ideological distance to the own party) and ‘*pull*’ factors (i.e. the ideological distance to the most adjacent party) have a significant effect in the expected direction on the chance to cast a disloyal vote, leading to a confirmation of H1a and H1b. In other words, this means that members who perceive a larger ideological distance between their opinions and those of their own party, and members who estimate their opinions to be close to those of another party, are more likely to cast a vote for a different party than the party they are member of. We also hypothesised that, because of differences in the party system, *programmatic concerns* would play a larger role in Flanders than in the UK (H4), but the analysis gives only very limited evidence for this. The odds ratios for the ideological distance to the own party are almost identical for Flemish and British parties (1.178 versus 1.172). Odds ratios for the ideological distance to the most adjacent party are slightly higher in Flanders than in Britain, but differences remain rather small (0.812 versus 0.897). This leads us to mostly reject H4. Consequently, ideological difference from one’s party seem to play a role in disloyal voting behaviour irrespective of the party system in which parties operate, although perhaps ideological proximity to a different party than one’s own has a tiny better chance to cause a vote defection in a PR system such as Flanders than in a majoritarian system such as Britain.

Secondly, results show that evaluations of individual candidates, and of party leaders in particular, also affect the chance of casting a defecting vote in a significant way. Although

the formulation of the questions slightly differed in Flemish and British questionnaires (general sympathy question in Flanders versus leadership performance question in Britain), the sizes of the effects are again to a great extent similar (odds ratios of 0.807 versus 0.787). This means that we find support for H2, stating that party members who evaluate their party leader more positively are less likely to cast a disloyal vote. We, however, reject hypothesis H6, stating that party leader evaluations should be affecting vote disloyalty more in Britain than in Belgium.

As for *strategic considerations*, we find that they also have an impact on defecting voting behaviour, but only in Britain, where party members of smaller parties have a significantly greater chance of voting for another party than members of larger parties. This is not the case in Flanders, where the vote share of the party has a small positive, but non-significant effect. This corresponds with the findings in Table 3, and leads to a confirmation of H5 and only a partial confirmation of H3.

Finally, we discuss the effects of the control variables. Not surprisingly, activity rate in the party has a significant effect both in Flemish and British parties: the more active party members are, the less likely they are to vote for another party. If party members are considering whether to vote for another party, they might be less active in the party's campaign activities from the start. This effect is slightly larger in Flanders than in the UK (odds ratios of 0.469 versus 0.605). Socio-demographic variables do not have a significant effect on disloyal voting behaviour, except for age in the UK where people between 35 and 65 have a lower chance to vote for another party compared to people older than 65 years old. Moreover, it seems that younger people (15-34) are less likely to cast a defecting vote than the elder party members, given that the p-value for the coefficient is extremely close to the 5% conventional levels of significance ($p= 0.051$). Although young and less young party members in Belgium seem to also indicate a lower chance of voting for another party compared to over 65, these effects are not significant.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we examined the loyalty of party members by describing and explaining their voting behaviour at general elections. In light of increasing levels of electoral volatility, party members are often seen as a beacon of stability for parties: they generally portray high levels

of (formal and far-reaching) party identification and subsequently provide the party with some guaranteed electoral support, both by casting a vote for the party themselves and by persuading others to follow their lead.

Our findings in Belgium and Britain, however, show that the loyalty of party members is not absolute nor unconditional. Although the great majority of party members continue to vote for their own party, a relevant share appears to cast a defecting vote in the ballot box. Our figures largely correspond with the findings of Polk and Kölln (2016) but provide greater detail with regards to differences between parties. In Flanders, the share of disloyal party members varies between 4.0 and 7.8 per cent, whereas among British parties there is more dispersion, with percentages ranging from 3.8 to 15.6 per cent.

When trying to explain party members' defecting voting behaviour, we took into account *programmatic concerns*, *party leadership evaluations* and *strategic considerations*. The latter only appeared relevant for British party members whose voting decisions are partially shaped by the incentives provided by the FPTP electoral system. The *programmatic* and *leadership* considerations, however, contrarily to our context-driven expectations, appeared equally important for both countries. Party members tend to cast a vote for another party when they feel that there is a large distance between their own ideological orientations and those of the party, or when they feel that other parties are closer to their own orientations. Also, when they are dissatisfied with the (performance of the) party leadership, party members are more likely to cast a defecting vote. In this sense, (disloyal) party members do not differ that much from other voters, who similarly increasingly let their voting choice depend on short-term factors as evaluations of party programs or party leaders, rather than on long-term factors as party identification and socialisation (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002; Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2016).

Except for strategic voting, however, these findings do not seem to vary much in a majoritarian two-party system such as Britain compared to a proportional multi-party system such as Flanders. In this sense, there is an indication that party members seem to differ from other voters and to be less affected by the political context. Although our research design does not allow us to generalize across different electoral and party systems outside our two cases, we can still take this study as a first contribution in this direction.

Moreover, although these findings do not necessarily undermine the idea of party members as antidote against electoral de-alignment, they contribute to qualify it. *Strategic*

considerations of British members are probably the least worrying defection for parties. A (defecting) member would probably cast a vote for his/her own party if (s)he were living in a different constituency (in the case of Britain). His or her *'exit'* option seems to be more a pragmatic choice than a choice out of disappointment. This means that he or she can still act as an *'ambassador'* for the party, although he or she might find it more satisfactory to do so in a different constituency than his or her own, either face-to-face or through phone canvassing, or maybe using a national platform such as the Internet.

Excluding strategic considerations, however, in order for party members not to vote disloyally (and not to convince others to do so), they need to have a degree of ideological congruence with the direction the party is going, not to be ideologically too close to a rival party, and to be relatively positive about their party leaders. In other words, they need not to be too dissatisfied with the current state of affairs within their party. Failing these conditions, even a party member can cast a disloyal vote and thus jeopardize intra-party cohesion. The immediate danger is that a disloyal party member may convince other party supporters to vote disloyally. The long term danger is that, if one remains dissatisfied for long, the temporary *'exit option'* (Hirschman, 1970) of disloyal vote might eventually turn into a permanent one, through cancellation or not renewal of one's membership, further contributing to the declining party membership trend.

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