

POLICY OR OFFICE AND VOTES?
THE DETERMINANTS OF PROGRAMMATIC CHANGE IN WEST EUROPEAN POLITICAL
PARTIES

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Prof. Dr. Reimut Zohlnhöfer
Ruprecht-Karls-University Heidelberg
Department of Political Science
Bergheimer Str. 58
D-69115 Heidelberg
Germany
tel +49 (0)6221-54-2868
fax +49 (0)6221-54-2858
reimut.zohlnhoefer@uni-heidelberg.de
<http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/politikwissenschaften/personal/zohlnhoefer/>

Frank Bandau, M.A.
Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg
Feldkirchenstraße 21
D-96052 Bamberg
Germany
tel +49 951 863 2727
frank.bandau@uni-bamberg.de

Policy or Office and Votes? The Determinants of Programmatic Change in West European Political Parties¹

Abstract

Even though it is undisputed in the literature that parties' policy positions move, it is much less clear what actually moves parties. In our paper we seek to advance the debate on programmatic change in political parties theoretically as well as empirically. We start out by theoretically discussing the relevance of policy seeking vs. vote and office seeking with regard to the programmatic position of parties. This allows us to develop hypotheses regarding the timing and direction of programmatic change. We then move on to test these hypotheses empirically. We present results from comparative case studies of the two most important parties in four West European countries (Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom) which are characterized by dramatically different party systems. We show that in most cases considerations regarding vote or office seeking rather than lack of policy success drive programmatic change. This is because the incentives resulting from a (long-lasting) exclusion from government are usually much more unambiguous than a lack of policy success since a lack of success at elections or in the coalition game are directly related to a party's programmatic position while the reasons for disappointing policy performances can usually be sought elsewhere.

1. Introduction

Political parties are important in influencing public policy. Quantitative research has shown time and again that parties matter when it comes to explain the differences in a great number of policy outputs and outcomes in the post-war era. Yet, at the same time, parties change their programmatic positions and at times quite dramatically so. For example, broad discussions about a possible 'third way' emerged within many social-democratic parties in Europe at the end of the 1990s (cf. Keman 2010), triggered by the new challenges of globalization, Europeanization and societal change. Similarly, despite (or maybe: because of) traditionally being less interested in ideology, right parties had their share of programmatic changes, too. Even though it is thus undisputed that parties' positions move, it is much less clear what actually moves parties. A rapidly growing quantitative literature has come up with important

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new insights about the process of programmatic change but has not yet reached consensus about the relative importance of ideology on the one hand and office and vote seeking on the other. Thus, a number of studies from the latter camp have found evidence that most parties, particularly rightwing and center parties, respond to public opinion (cf. Adams et al. 2004; Adams et al. 2009; Ezrow et al. 2010; Keman 2010). Other studies from the proponents of the vote-seeking hypothesis put more emphasis on previous election results, arguing that if parties have lost votes in the previous election they are likely to change their positions at the next election (Somer-Topcu 2009; Walgrave/Nuytemans 2009; Ezrow et al. 2010).

Ian Budge and his co-authors, on the other hand, take a slightly different view on changing party programmatic positions: “Our model differs from most of the ones proposed by reversing their order of importance and regarding ideology as primarily important and vote-seeking as secondary” (Budge et al. 2010: 793). Thus, parties’ policy positions are expected to change only to a very limited degree because parties essentially remain faithful to their basic ideology. According to this account, changes in a party’s policy position, if they occur at all, are the results of varying strengths of competing factions inside the party. Electoral results do play a certain role in strengthening the role of either the dominant (in case of an increase of votes) or the minority faction (in case of a loss of votes) and can thus influence parties’ programmatic stances only indirectly.

A third strand of the literature has focused on the effects of globalization on parties’ economic policy stances (cf. Adams et al. 2009, Haupt 2010, Burgoon 2011). The evidence of this research seems to suggest that parties actually respond to real-world-challenges like globalization even though the responses do not necessarily go in the same direction with regard to all globalization indicators and are not the same for all parties. It is not entirely clear, however, what these results mean with regard to the importance of ideology or vote- and office-seeking. Rather, it depends on the mechanism via which globalization impacts on parties’ policy stances whether an effect of globalization can be regarded as prove of the importance of policy-orientation or vote- and office-orientation. For example, a policy-oriented social democratic party might resort to higher welfare spending under the conditions of an open economy in order to realize its main policy objective, a high level of de-commodification. On the other hand, a party primarily seeking votes might also increase social expenditure if the median voter demands a compensation for higher external risks under globalization. Moreover, the fact that these studies do not find convergence between competing parties, even in the face of globalization, cannot be regarded as straightforward support for either camp as the continuing differences could either be evidence that parties

remain faithful to their ideologies or that the voters of competing parties are affected differently by globalization.

Even though this literature provides valuable insights in the determinants of programmatic change, it still leaves room for further research in the field. First, there is no agreement as to the main driver of programmatic change and the mechanisms of how programmatic change comes about. Thus, Andrea B. Haupt (2010: 16 and 20), for example, calls for case studies which take a closer look at when and why parties change their programmatic positions (cf. Burgoon 2011: 22 for a similar argument). Second, almost all of the papers reviewed use party manifesto data as the dependent variable (cf. Budge et al. 2001, Klingemann et al. 2006). Although this is an extremely helpful source for quantitative large N research on political parties, it is not entirely without problems with regard to reliability.² More importantly, most authors use the CMP's left-right-dimension as the principle dependent variable. However, these left-right-scores can be problematic for research on parties' programmatic changes for two reasons. On the one hand, they rest on the assumption that the meaning of 'left' and 'right' is the same in all countries and does not change over time. As Franzman and Kaiser (2006), Jahn (2011) and others have shown this is not a particularly likely assumption.³ On the other hand, CMP's left-right-dimension collapses issues from different dimensions (economic, social, foreign policy) into one variable. Tavits (2007), however, has shown that voters respond very differently to programmatic changes in different dimensions. While programmatic revisions in what she calls the pragmatic (i.e. economic) dimension are rewarded by voters, the opposite is true with regard to what she calls the principled (i.e. social) dimension. Thus, if we are looking for vote-oriented behavior, we must keep these dimensions distinct. Thus, the CMP's left-right-dimension is not an ideal dependent variable. Finally, Walgrave and Nuytemans (2009) have shown that party program change is punctuated, i.e. that programs stay put for quite some time and then change substantially. Most research in the field, however, has failed to take this particular feature into account yet.

In what follows we seek to advance the debate on programmatic change in political parties in different ways by moving beyond quantitative accounts of programmatic change. Instead we present the results of case studies on eight Western European parties over 25 years. This is an

² For example, Hansen (2008) reports for the Danish case that in a significant number of cases inappropriate documents were used and substantial parts of texts were not coded at all. In other cases, the relative position of parties according to the data is somewhat counterintuitive, as e.g. the Italian post-fascists were to the left of the post-communists on the CMP left-right dimension for the 1996 election.

³ We are grateful to Ingo Rohlfing who drew out attention to this point.

important contribution in itself as there are only very few comparative case studies dealing with changes in parties' programs so far. Furthermore, the qualitative approach allows us to study the process of programmatic change in more detail. This will allow us to assess the relative importance of ideology and office-/vote-seeking more thoroughly. In particular, we do not need to rely on the CMP data as dependent variable. Even though this inevitably entails the drawback of a substantially less precise measurement of programmatic positions it provides us with the opportunity to grasp programmatic change much more nuanced than quantitative studies can. Finally, in our systematic process analyses we are also able to learn more about the context of programmatic change. Here, two variables are of particular interest, the first being the importance of party factions, the second being the configuration of party competition. Whereas the former is considered as an important factor in facilitating or inhibiting party change (Harmel and Janda 1994; Budge et al. 2010), the latter sets some kind of external framework for a party's ambitions to pursue votes, office or policy and, thus, at least to some degree influences its goal hierarchy (Kitschelt 2001).

The paper is organized as follows: We start out by theoretically discussing the preferences of political parties, i.e. we discuss the relevance of policy-seeking vs. vote- and office-seeking with regard to the programmatic positions of parties. This allows us to develop hypotheses regarding the timing and direction of programmatic change (2.). We then move on to present our research design (3.) and test our hypotheses empirically. We present results from comparative case studies of the two most important parties in four West European countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and United Kingdom) which are characterized by dramatically different party systems (4.). The final section concludes (5.).

2. Why should parties' policy positions change?

If we want to understand why parties revise their programmatic stances, we need to discuss what parties aim at and what role individual programmatic stances play for the attainment of these overall aims. In the literature, two main aims of parties are distinguished (e.g. Müller and Strøm 1999; von Beyme 2000: 25f.): 1. policy pursuit and 2. vote and office maximization.⁴ We discuss both of these orientations in turn to point out in which way they may trigger programmatic revisions.

⁴ Office seeking and vote seeking orientations are closely related and some authors even claim that 'vote maximizing parties and office maximizing parties cannot be differentiated meaningfully anymore' (von Beyme 2000: 25; our translation). Therefore, we treat them together in the theoretical considerations. The relevance of one compared to the other may depend on party system characteristics: In bipolar party systems where two blocks compete for government, vote maximization is probably more important than office seeking since

According to Anthony Downs (1957), changes in parties' programmatic stances can be related to their vote and office seeking orientation. Given that Downs assumes that parties are not interested in particular policies but only in the privileges that are associated with government positions, parties will adopt the policy positions that they expect will gain them the largest number of votes. If, however, these policy positions fail to win the party enough votes to take over government (over an extended period of time), the party is likely to change its programmatic stance. Thus, Downs argues (1957: 300): 'Political parties tend to maintain ideological positions that are consistent over time unless they suffer drastic defeats, in which case they change their ideologies to resemble that of the party which defeated them.' Therefore, if parties are indeed exclusively or at least mainly vote- or office-seeking actors, programmatic revisions should be the results of disappointing electoral results or of extended periods of exclusion from government.

Thus, hypothesis 1, which we call the Downsian or office hypothesis, claims that parties revise their programmatic stances substantially after dramatic election defeats or after being excluded from government for substantial periods of time.

The Downsian view of parties as mere vote-seekers can be contrasted with a Burkean view, however, that sees parties as "a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they all are agreed" (Burke 1803: 335). According to this latter view, parties are mainly policy-oriented and their members and – more importantly – elites share core values and ideas about how certain policy goals can be attained. Furthermore, they are unlikely to give up these views in the absence of convincing evidence against them. Therefore, if parties primarily behave as policy-seekers, their programmatic stances should not change rapidly and electoral defeats or longer periods of opposition should not suffice for a substantial programmatic revision. As true policy-seekers parties will rather stay firm and try to convince the electorate of their beliefs.

How, then, can a revision of programmatic positions come about according to the Burkean view at all? If parties behave in a policy-oriented way, they will revise their policy positions only if they are unable to attain their most important goals with their traditional policy instruments. Thus, if, due to changing circumstances (e.g. globalization), certain policy instrument (e.g. Keynesian demand management) are no longer suitable to attain a particular

winning a majority in the elections is key to winning office. In contrast, where intricate coalition games dominate government formation, vote maximizing strategies might be subordinated to office seeking strategies since it is more important to 'win' coalition formation than to win the elections.

goal (e.g. full employment) or a particular policy instrument (e.g. contributions-financed welfare benefits) yields significant unwanted side-effects (e.g. unemployment due to increasing non-wage labor costs), a party will probably abandon the policy instrument – i.e. it revises a central policy position.

Thus hypothesis 2, which could be labeled the Burkean or policy-hypothesis, claims that parties' programmatic revisions are the results of policy learning, i.e. the insight in the failure to solve important problems or to attain an important policy goal with traditional policy instruments.

Empirically, it certainly is plausible that parties are not either exclusively policy- or exclusively vote- and office-oriented. Rather, most parties are likely to pay attention to both, their policy positions and the way these policy positions impact on their chances at the ballot box. As Downs (1957) observed, even purely vote-maximizing parties need to gain credibility with the voters, which means that they cannot change their positions too radically or too frequently. Similarly, even policy-oriented parties need to gain votes and government participation if they want to get their policies adopted. Nonetheless, it would be of prime theoretical interest to find out whether one orientation generally dominates and if so, which one.

- table 1 -

At the same time, it seems possible that the answer to these questions could at least to some extent depend upon certain characteristics of the configuration of party competition – an assumption that finds some empirical corroboration in Walgrave and Nuytemans' (2009) study. A party's need to adapt its programs to new circumstances may above all vary with the programmatic and strategic alignment of its competitors. For example, Herbert Kitschelt (2001) has suggested distinguishing four configurations of electoral competition on the basis of a party system's main cleavage, the main competitor of the social democrats, the electoral strength of a liberal market-oriented party, and the existence of a left-libertarian competitor of the social democrats (cf. table 1). The different configurations of electoral competition could incite differences with regard to whether the Downsian or the Burkean orientation prevails.

3. The research design

In order to test our two hypotheses we conducted comparative case studies of the two most important parties in four West European countries, namely Germany, the Netherlands,

Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Each of these countries represents one of Kitschelt's configurations of electoral competition (cf. table 1). This allows us to test whether party system characteristics make a difference with regard to which of the two orientations dominates. As there is ample evidence in the literature that there are differences between party families with regard to programmatic change (cf. Adams et al. 2009; Burgoon 2011), we take into account the three most important party families, i.e. Social democrats (in all four countries), Christian democrats (the German CDU and the Dutch CDA) and Conservatives (the Swedish Moderaterna and the British Tories). Our period of observation starts in the late 1970s and ends at the eve of the financial crisis around 2007. Studying a rather long period of time allows us to compare periods of programmatic change with times of programmatic stability – which is important if party program change is indeed punctuated. Given that the dynamics of programmatic change could differ between the economic and the social dimension (Tavits 2007), we restrict our analysis to the former.⁵

What are programmatic revisions for the purpose of this study? As will become clear in the case studies, it does not suffice to limit the analysis to election manifestos and the process of their creation. Rather, programmatic change in some instances, particularly in the case of opposition parties, can be a rather long process in which many actors are involved; in other instances (most likely when governing parties revise their programs), programmatic positions change rather swiftly as a result of a top-down process. This second type of programmatic change may at times be difficult to disentangle from actual policy-making but it is definitively relevant for our research question as the party leaders in parliamentary systems need to secure that the (parliamentary) parties accept the new policies. We are primarily interested in substantial change of parties' programmatic stances in this paper which we define as second (and/or third) order change according to Peter Hall's (1993) typology. That is to say that, if we are to talk about substantial programmatic change, parties need to change their preferred policy instruments or even the basic aims of a policy according to official documents (either official party documents like election platforms and party programs or as explicitly accepted government policy).

We analyzed our eight cases using systematic process analysis (Hall 2003). Apart from the secondary literature and a wealth of sources (primarily including party manifestos and newspaper coverage) we conducted around 20 expert interviews.

⁵ In contrast to Tavits, we include welfare state issues in the economic, rather than the social dimension as they are closely related in policy terms.

4. Programmatic change in four countries

Due to space restrictions, it is not possible to present the case studies in detail here. Rather, we start out by a brief aggregate overview of our findings and continue by presenting exemplary cases of programmatic continuity or change.⁶

All in all, we were able to identify 31 distinct periods of programmatic continuity or change in our eight parties between the late 1970s and the late 2000s (cf. table 2). In only 4 of these cases, representing 37 of the almost 260 years of party programmatic development under consideration here (i.e. around 15 percent of the period), the policy hypothesis prevails, while in 26 of the cases, representing 214 of the close to 260 years (i.e. over 80 percent), the office hypothesis is corroborated.⁷ Thus, in general, our results seem to suggest that parties tend to behave in an office-oriented way when they change their programmatic stances.

- table 2 -

Two of our cases are particularly suitable to provide evidence for parties' tendency to choose office over policy if they have to decide between the two. In 1994, the Dutch Christian Democrats were expelled from government for the first time since 1918 as a result of a crushing electoral defeat. As the election result was perceived by the party as a reaction to the welfare retrenchment it had pursued in the previous coalitions (and it had announced in the electoral campaign), it significantly moved towards the left in the mid-1990s in an attempt to re-create the image of a pro-welfare party (cf. Laver/Mair 1999: 54; Duncan 2007: 78ff.). While this behavior is straight-forward from an office-seeking perspective, the policy-approach fails to explain this programmatic change: It certainly cannot be argued that the CDA changed its programmatic position because the policies it used to advocate were evidently failing. Quite the contrary, even the new government of PvdA and two liberal parties that came into office in 1994 stuck to the policies of the previous, CDA-led governments and was enormously successful with these policies (cf. Hoogerwerf 1999: 175; Green-Pedersen 2002: 106). Thus, from the point of view of a pure policy-seeker no revision of social and economic policy positions would have been necessary. The fact that such a revision occurred nonetheless thus lends support to the office hypothesis.

⁶ The complete case studies will be made available at Reimut Zohlnhöfer's website (<http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/politikwissenschaften/personal/zohlnhoefer/>) soon.

⁷ The case of the CDU before 1982 turns out to be ambivalent (cf. fn. 11).

The German social democrats (SPD) behaved in a similar way. During their period of government (particularly after 2002), the party had adopted a number of rather far-reaching liberal reforms, especially regarding the labor market (cf. Egle/Zohlnhöfer 2007 as an overview). These reforms turned out to be highly unpopular, however. Therefore, the SPD started distancing itself from them after 2005 (cf. v. Alemann/Spier 2008: 49) and instead started focusing on popular social policy issues again like pension increases, an extension of the unemployment benefit entitlement period or the introduction of minimum wages, even though these policies at least partially revoke reforms adopted by the previous SPD-led government (cf. Raschke 2010). This move is difficult to reconcile with a policy-oriented point of view as these reforms were very successful in policy terms as unemployment went down substantially as a consequence of the reforms. A policy perspective would have expected the SPD to stick with these policies irrespective of popular discontent as they helped achieve one of the principle goals of the party, namely the reduction of unemployment. The fact that this did not happen again is strong corroboration for the Downsian hypothesis.

Changing programmatic positions in response to electoral defeat can also be observed in many other instances. The British Labor party's move first to the left after 1979 (Shaw 1994: 23-28) and later, in response to the crushing defeats between 1983 and 1992, increasingly to the center (Seyd 1993; Heffernan 2001: 65-84), are other cases in point. The Conservatives needed three consecutive electoral defeats until they decided to move back to the center under David Cameron after 2005, but when it happened the programmatic change was clearly driven by the desire to return to government, too (Bale 2011: 267ff., 284ff.; Dorey et al. 2011: 57-91). Another interesting case in point are the Swedish conservatives, the Moderaterna. In the late 1990s, the party increasingly focused on tax reductions, apparently hoping to profit from public discontent with the high tax burden. The 2002 election, however, ended in a mere disaster. The party fell to 15 per cent and lost one third of its votes (Widfeldt 2003). Already on election night an internal debate started which led to a renewal of the party executive and the election of Fredrik Reinfeldt as new leader in 2003. Reinfeldt fundamentally changed the face of the Moderates. Under the modern label of 'New Moderate Party' (*Nya moderaterna*) the party toned down its demand for tax reductions, promised to defend the welfare state and to curb unemployment by new labor market measures. Thus, the party frontally attacked the Social Democrats by praising itself as the 'new Swedish workers' party'. All of these changes were sharply criticized from the right wing of the party, but steadily growing support in the opinion polls facilitated the programmatic changes promoted by Reinfeldt. In the 2006 election the more moderate stance proved highly successful and

Reinfeldt became the leader of a coalition government dominated by his party (Widfeldt 2007). Thus, this case also clearly corroborates the office hypothesis.

Finally, the German Christian democrats behaved in a similar way after 2005. The party had fought the 2005 electoral campaign on a remarkably liberal platform. The result of the election, however, was extremely disappointing for the CDU in terms of votes and office because it was unable to form a coalition with the liberal FDP (that would have been willing to support the reforms the CDU had proposed). Instead, a ‘Grand coalition’ had to be formed with the SPD that was more than unwilling to adopt the liberal reforms the CDU had put forward. Since most observers (including the CDU leadership as well as the party’s rank-and-file) saw the liberal reform agenda as the main reason for the bad result in the election, the party’s programmatic stance substantially changed after 2005 (cf. Zolleis/Bartz 2010: 55-60). In most areas of economic and social policy, the CDU moved closer to the position of the social democrats. Thus, the party accepted an increase of the top income tax rate, the introduction of sector-specific minimum wages as well as an increase in a number of welfare benefits (cf. Zohlnhöfer 2010). Again, this is a clear indication of office seeking behavior as the policies had not been tried and thus did not even have a chance at failing. Interestingly, the ‘lesson of 2005’ that liberal economic and social policy positions will in all likelihood lead to electoral defeat is influential even after the end of the Grand coalition, as the CDU has not come back to most of its liberal ideas in the new coalition with the liberals since 2009.

Office orientation does not always seem to drive parties to the center, however. There are a number of cases when parties feared to be excluded from government permanently despite a rather centrist position. The British Conservatives after 1974 and the Dutch Christian democrats in the early 2000s are cases in point. After having lost three out of the last four elections, the Tories were still in a “state of shock” (King 1981: 58) in early 1975 when Edward Heath was challenged by Margaret Thatcher for the party leadership. Thatcher openly embraced a laissez-faire approach to the economy, but her success in the race for the leadership was not so much a victory for her beliefs, as a result of dissatisfaction with her luckless predecessor (Crewe/Searing 1988; Blake 2010: 317-321) as even close allies of Thatcher admit: “When Margaret Thatcher defeated Ted to become leader in February 1975 it was more a rejection of Ted – on personal and political grounds alike – than a positive endorsement of her, at least so far as the majority of her parliamentary colleagues were concerned” (Lawson 1992: 13). Though many in the party doubted the electoral wisdom of Thatcher’s market-liberal and monetarist convictions, the high centralization of the Conservative party – „in the end, policy is what the leader says it is“ (Butler/Kavanagh 1980:

76) – which was essentially only conditional on the party’s electoral success helped her to garner support for her ideas and run an anti-interventionist election campaign in 1979 (Kavanagh 1997: 117; Norton 1993: 35).⁸

A similar development can be observed with the Dutch Christian democrats in 2001/2. Despite its turn to the center (see above), opinion polls continued to find rather low levels of support for the CDA until the fall of 2001 when a leadership crisis broke out which made the prospects for the next election look even less promising (van Holsteyn/Irwin 2003: 44f.). In the face of a likely third crushing election defeat and the continuing exclusion from government that seemed probable, the CDA chose its – relatively unknown – spokesman for fiscal policy, Jan-Peter Balkenende, as frontrunner for the pending election. As a consequence, the party’s policy positions changed dramatically. As van Kersbergen (2008: 282) points out: “Christian democratic concepts such as public justice and solidarity have either entirely disappeared or have become irrelevant... In short, with respect to economic issues the party has embraced a neoliberal agenda” (cf. also van Kersbergen/Krouwel 2006: 44-51). The reason for this policy reversal was that the welfare-state-friendly policy position did not pay off in or at the polls. The 1998 election result was worse than the one four years earlier and opinion polls did not indicate an improvement until the end of 2001. So the CDA failed to develop a programmatic stance that attracted voters in its entire opposition period. Instead, the party was on the verge of losing the third consecutive election and to remain excluded from government. Thus, there was a very real sense of crisis inside the party which in turn widened the room for maneuver for the new frontrunner. Balkenende in turn used his leeway to commit his party to a much more liberal economic and social policy than the party had advocated during its period in opposition. The major reason why the party accepted this programmatic revision was that most actors believed that – after a long period of opposition and numerous leadership crises – it was essential for the CDA to be perceived as united and backing its leader. As one leading Christian democrat explained in one of our interviews: “...there was still this very strong [...] feeling after the difficult years during purple [purple coalition, i.e. the coalition of PvdA, VVD and D66 during which the CDA was in opposition]: now we have to support our first man. ... There were hesitations in the party, but when it came to the decisions they supported him.”

⁸ How central vote-seeking considerations remained within the party is further demonstrated by the party’s coup against Thatcher in 1990 which largely resulted from fears of losing office in the looming election. Correspondingly, Thatcher’s enormously unpopular ‘poll tax’ was repealed by her successor, John Major (cf. Dorey 1999).

Nonetheless, the CDA was not the only Dutch party to embrace policies its members had a hard time agreeing to for the sake of office seeking. The Dutch Labor Party (PvdA) is another case in point. In the late 1960s, the PvdA had embarked on a polarization strategy which aimed at winning a majority left of the bourgeois parties (cf. Wolinetz 1995: 116-120; van Kersbergen 1999). Even though this strategy had been successful as far as vote and seat shares were concerned, it dramatically reduced the chances of the Social democrats to be included in governments because a left wing majority was not forthcoming and the Christian democrats as the pivotal actor in the coalition game increasingly perceived the PvdA as unable to govern and thus avoided coalitions with it in the 1980s (Timmermans/Andeweg 2000: 368). Therefore, the polarization strategy was abandoned and most of the austerity policies the bourgeois parties had adopted in the 1980s were accepted (Green-Pedersen/van Kersbergen 2002: 517; cf. Wolinetz 1995: 120).

This new policy position was seriously put into question by social democratic party members and voters in the following legislative period, however, when a coalition of Christian democrats and PvdA decided to reform disability pensions (for the following Hillebrand/Irwin 1999: 130-133). This reform caused the PvdA to plummet in the opinion polls and to lose a substantial part of its membership. Nonetheless, a party conference in September 1991 endorsed the reform. The prime reason for this outcome was that a rejection would have put the PvdA's ability to govern into serious question again and would thus in all likelihood have meant the exclusion from government for the foreseeable future. Thus, even though the reform of disability pensions was highly controversial as it was seen by many party members as being at odds with the long-term policy objectives of the PvdA the party adopted it in order to make sure that the other parties, particularly the CDA, perceived it as a party with sound and responsible fiscal policy positions – a precondition to remain a player in the coalition game. Thus, we again find clear corroboration of the office hypothesis.

In a similar way, the two German parties under consideration here adopted substantial programmatic changes in response to the prospect of losing office in the next election. After 1996, the CDU started adopting liberal economic policy reforms that went substantially further than anything that had been implemented in the previous 14 years. The reason for this programmatic change was that the number of unemployed exceeded the threshold of 4 million in 1996 for this first time in Germany's post-war history and thus put the government's re-election at risk (Zohlnhöfer 2001). Similarly, the SPD progressively reoriented its social and economic policies during its period in government, culminating in the substantial reforms of 2002/03 which cut welfare benefits, liberalized the labor market

and reduced direct taxation. This liberal turn in economic policy can again easily be explained by the Downsian hypothesis. In the electoral campaign of 1998, the SPD had promised to reduce unemployment to 3.5 million by the next election in 2002. Unemployment failed to fall sufficiently to reach that target and started to rise again in 2001, however, and the party was thus likely not to be able to keep its most prominent election promise. To avoid this electorally damaging outcome, the party leadership adopted more liberal policies which it hoped would reduce unemployment and help the SPD win the next election (Zohlnhöfer 2004; Raschke/Tils 2007: 519).⁹

If office orientation thus clearly dominates, why do some parties at some points nonetheless behave as policy-seekers? Our case studies suggest that policy-orientation only prevails when parties perceive that their government participation is not endangered in the near future. Thus, if parties believe that they are extremely likely to participate in the next government, they will behave more openly policy-oriented. This condition is regularly met by parties that are pivotal for government formation like the SAP in Sweden until the 2000s and the CDA in the Netherlands until 1994. The Dutch Christian democrats for example had been member of every Dutch government since 1918 until 1994 because of their pivotal role in government formation: As the other two large parties, PvdA and liberals, were unwilling to form coalitions with each other, the Christian democrats could pick and choose who they wanted to form a government with which indeed meant that the CDA and its predecessor parties could be rather sure that they would always be in the next government as well. Thus, when the CDA believed that unpopular welfare state retrenchment was necessary in order to cure the ‘Dutch disease’ in the 1980s and early 1990s, it pursued those policies without much consideration of the consequences for the next elections (cf. Green-Pedersen 2002).

Similarly, the SAP was able to pursue quite unpopular policy measures in the mid-1990s due to its advantageous position in the Swedish party system. After outlining “austerity measures previously unheard of from that party” (Widfeldt/Pierre 1995: 481) in the 1994 election campaign, the new Social Democratic government continued the austerity policy of its bourgeois predecessor to consolidate public finances. Despite fierce protests, especially by their traditional electorate, the Swedish Social Democrats could behave in such a policy-oriented manner as electoral losses did not necessarily mean the loss of office. While the even more austerity-prone bourgeois parties posed no real alternative for disappointed SAP-voters, the Social Democrats could reckon upon the support of smaller left-wing parties who profited

⁹ It has to be added that this policy shift was only possible because the party’s left wing was substantially weakened after the former party leader Oskar Lafontaine had resigned from all posts and had even left the party.

from the SAP's weakness (Kitschelt 2001: 290-292).¹⁰ Thus, the Swedish party system changed the trade-off between policy and office and allowed the Social Democrats to follow a kind of long-term office strategy that accepted short-term vote losses, to prove their economic competence in the long run.

Even though, the CDU was not the pivotal party in the German party system, it also behaved in a policy-oriented manner during its period in opposition between 1998 and 2005. Even though the distinctively liberal economic policy stance the party had adopted from 1996 onwards played an important part in the party's defeat in the 1998 general election, this liberal policy stance not only remained in place, but was even stressed in the opposition period, particularly after 2002 (cf. Schmid 2007: 74ff.). This behavior is difficult to explain from an office-seeking perspective as the voters were clearly reluctant to accept these kinds of reforms. So, this is a case in which the policy hypothesis fares better: The Christian democratic leadership believed that more liberal reforms were necessary to solve Germany's economic problems. The adoption of this policy position was facilitated by two factors, however: First by the fact that the social democratic government pursued similar policies, so voters did not seem to have a choice anyway; and second the CDU was doing so well in the polls and in elections at the state level that a victory in the next elections seemed certain (Zohlnhöfer 2007). So, as the party leadership felt that vote- and office-seeking considerations could take a back seat for the time being, policy seeking dominated.

The exception to the rule that parties only behave policy-oriented if they are sure to be part of the next government is the case of the British Conservatives after the electoral disaster of 1997. Though numerous polls showed the party out of touch with the electorate and conservative thinkers advocated the Tories to move back to the center (e.g. Gray/Willetts 1997; Scruton 1996), real modernization did not occur before the party had suffered two more bitter electoral defeats in 2001 and 2005. In this period, fixed policy beliefs and the resulting selective perception by the leadership seem to have impeded a faster reaction (Norris/Lovenduski 2004; Bale 2011).

At first sight one might want to add the CDU in the 1970s and the SPD in the 1990s as similar cases as both of these parties did not revise their programmatic stances despite four consecutive defeats at general elections. We do not agree with this interpretation, however. In the case of the CDU, the party was able to secure many election victories at the state level (which helped win and extend the majority in the second chamber of parliament) and did

¹⁰ Indeed, the Social Democrats' losses in the 1998 election were largely compensated by the gains of the Left Party and the Greens whose parliamentary support allowed the SAP to stay in power.

even rather well at Federal elections, e.g. winning 48.6 percent of the votes (together with the CSU) in the 1976 Federal election.¹¹ A similar argument applies for the SPD in the 1990s: While the defeats at the federal elections could be interpreted as a rejection of the party's policy by the voters, it got very different signals from the elections at the Land level. As the CDU in the 1970s, but contrary to the social democratic experience in the 1980s, the SPD won many elections at the Land level in the 1990s and thus managed to win a majority in the second chamber and in turn was also able to influence government policy at the Federal level. Given these successes, further programmatic revisions did not seem to be necessary. Thus, in these cases, the signals the voters sent to the parties with regard to their programmatic positions were far from unambiguous and thus staying put seemed the safest option.

5. Conclusion

The starting point of our paper was that even though it is undisputed in the literature that parties' policy positions change, it is much less clear what the factors are that drive programmatic change – policy seeking or pursuit of vote and office? We tested these two competing hypotheses empirically by presenting results from eight case studies of programmatic change from four West European countries with dramatically different party systems. We show that in most cases considerations regarding vote or office seeking rather than lack of policy success drive programmatic change. The British Labour Party step by step moved to the center in the late 1980s and the early 1990s when it discovered that it would not be able to beat the Tories unless it got rid of its tax-and-spend image. Similarly, the Dutch PvdA moved significantly to the center, embracing orthodox fiscal policy stances and adopting substantial welfare retrenchment, in order to be allowed back to the coalition game. The German SPD also changed its programmatic positions in order to improve its chances to regain government. In the 1980s, this meant moving towards post-materialism in order to be able to form a coalition with the Greens while in 1998 the focus was on the center to maximize votes.

But not only social democratic parties changed their programmatic positions, the same can be observed for Christian democratic and Conservative parties, and again more often than not vote or office seeking was the driving force for these revisions. The British Conservatives

¹¹ In table 2, the case of the CDU in the 1970s is interpreted as both policy and office seeking as policy considerations also suggested to stay put: When the CDU had lost power in 1969 the economy was in an excellent shape. Thus, the deterioration of many indicators of economic performance between 1969 and 1982 was blamed on the economic policies of the government led by the Social democrats, and the CDU expected that a return to the concept of Erhard's 'Social Market Economy' would again improve the economic situation substantially.

sacked Edward Heath after he had lost three out of four elections but they only followed Margaret Thatcher as long as she was expected to win elections, too. Moreover, even though it took more than one crushing electoral defeat, they finally learned their lesson and moved back to the center after 2005. The same can be said about the Swedish Conservatives after 2002 and the German Christian democrats after 2005. Finally, the Dutch CDA in the early 2000s resembles the 1970s Tories in that they followed a new leader almost irrespective of his program if only he promised to lead them back to the government benches after a number of landslide defeats.

There are some incidences which could be interpreted as evidence for policy-seeking behavior. The Swedish Social Democrats in the 1980s and early 1990s are a case in point as are the CDA in the 1980s, the CDU during its period of opposition and the Tories between 1997 and 2005. With the notable exception of the Tories, policy-seeking prevailed in these cases because the parties believed that office-seeking behavior would not be necessary in order to secure participation in the next government.

On aggregate, however, our case studies point to a much greater relevance of office- and/or vote-seeking. We can only speculate about the reason why policy-seeking is not as relevant for substantial programmatic changes as office-seeking. As Budge et al. (2010) and other have pointed out, other things being equal parties are unlikely to change their programmatic stances substantially when they are policy-oriented. Only when a party understands that its programmatic position makes it unlikely to either attain its programmatic goals or gain government representation it will consider programmatic change. Thus, we argue that the signals resulting from a (long-lasting) exclusion from government are usually much more unambiguous than a lack of policy success since a lack of success at elections or in the coalition game are directly related to a party's programmatic position while the reasons for disappointing policy performances can usually be sought elsewhere.

With regard to other factors shaping programmatic change, it turns out that party families played a minor role. Both Social democratic and bourgeois parties had their share of programmatic revisions. Furthermore, party system characteristics played a certain role as the party system constellation determines whether parties behave as vote- or as office-seekers. The Dutch pivotal systems incited the PvdA to sacrifice votes in order to gain government participation while in the British context vote-seeking is the pre-condition for office. The advantageous position of the SAP in the Swedish party system (at least until recently), facilitated the party to pursue unpopular policies. Finally, we find ample evidence for the importance of party factions in shaping programmatic change, as Budge et al. (2010) have

predicted. Interestingly, Social democratic parties seem to be particularly faction-prone in this regard but also most other parties experienced substantial internal conflict over future policy stances. Though our case studies indicate that factional debates might inhibit party change – as best illustrated by the long-lasting transformation of Labour and the SPD – more research is certainly necessary to better understand how office seeking party leaderships and internal factions interact to shape programmatic change.

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Table 1: Configurations of electoral competition

	Configuration 1	Configuration 2	Configuration 3	Configuration 4
Main cleavage	Capital vs. Labour	Capital vs. Labour (Libertarian vs. Authoritarian exists)	Libertarian vs. Authoritarian (Capital vs. Labour still matters)	Libertarian vs. Authoritarian
Main Competitor of Social Democracy	Market-liberal/ Conservative party	Market-liberal/ Conservative party	Christian Democrats and Liberals	Christian Democ- rats/paternalistic Conservatives
Liberal Party	Very strong	Strong	Medium	Weak
Left-Libertarian Competitor	Non-existent	Strong	Weak	Strong
Examples	Great Britain	Denmark	Netherlands	Germany

Source: Kitschelt 2001.

Table 2: Results of the case studies

Party	Period	Description	Hypothesis
Labour Party	1979-1983	Move to the left	Office hypothesis
Labour Party	1983-1997	Move to the center	Office hypothesis
Labour Party	1997-2007	Stay put	Office hypothesis
Conservatives	1974-1979	Move to the right	Office hypothesis
Conservatives	1979-1997	Stay put	Office hypothesis
Conservatives	1997-2005	Stay put	Policy hypothesis
Conservatives	2005-2010	Move to the center	Office hypothesis
SAP	1979-1990	Third way: More liberal policies	Office hypothesis
SAP	1990-1998	Acceptance of austerity measures	Policy hypothesis
SAP	1998-2006	Turn to more welfare-friendly policies	Office hypothesis
SAP	2006-2010	Stay put	Office hypothesis
Moderaterna	1976-1981	Concessions in government	Office hypothesis
Moderaterna	1981-early 2000s	Move to the right	Office hypothesis
Moderaterna	2002	Turn to more welfare-friendly policies	Office hypothesis
Moderaterna	2003-	Stay put	Office hypothesis
PvdA	1970s-1982/6	Polarization strategy	Office hypothesis
PvdA	1986-2002	Abandonment of polarization strategy, acceptance of austerity policies	Office hypothesis
PvdA	2002-	Stay put	Office hypothesis
CDA	1980s-1994	Austerity policies	Policy hypothesis
CDA	1994-2001/2	Turn to more welfare-friendly policies	Office hypothesis
CDA	2002-	Turn to neo-liberal policies	Office hypothesis
SPD	1980-1982	Acceptance of austerity policies	Office hypothesis
SPD	1982-1989	Turn to the left (and towards post-materialism)	Office hypothesis
SPD	1990-2002	Stay put	Office hypothesis
SPD	2002-2005	Far-reaching labor market reforms	Office hypothesis
SPD	2005-	Move away from own labor market reforms	Office hypothesis
CDU	1970s-1982	Stay put	Office and policy hypothesis
CDU	1982-1996	Stay put	Office hypothesis
CDU	1996-1998	More far-reaching liberal reforms	Office hypothesis
CDU	1998-2005	Stay put	Policy hypothesis
CDU	2005-	Socialdemocratization	Office hypothesis