

**Intraparty Opinion Structure, Dominant Factions and Party Behavior:  
Moving beyond May's Law**

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Though often treated as unitary actors, political parties are complex organizations that must balance competing interests and resolve internal divisions in reaching collective decisions (Daalder 1983; Katz and Mair 1994). Parties may present a united front at election time or in parliament, but this belies the critical role of intraparty politics. Indeed, party behavior, including, the formation of policy positions, electoral strategy, and the selection of candidates for public office, is largely a function of power relations among various “factions” within the party hierarchy (Panebianco 1988; Sartori 1976). Interestingly, however, we continue to know relatively little about the internal lives of parties (Mair 1994; Montero and Gunther 2002). This is despite the fact that the seminal studies of Ostrogorski (1902) and Michels (1911) focused on this very topic. To be sure, there is no shortage of theories or analytical models, but these remain largely untested and the existing evidence suggests we need to refine many of our theories.

This paper focuses on one aspect of intraparty politics—namely, the structure of policy and ideological opinions within party organizations and how it ultimately relates to the positions that parties present to the electorate. Our starting point is the former where scholars have long suspected an inherent tension between the party leadership and the activist rank-and-file. Leaders, it is said, primarily desire the material and status benefits of public office; hence, they tend to support more moderate, vote-maximizing electoral strategies. Activists, in contrast, are thought to be loyal champions of the party’s core principles and constituencies, and adamantly opposed to compromising these interests for short-term electoral gain.

Expanding on these assumptions, May (1973) developed a more general model of intraparty conflict, known as the “Special Law of Curvilinear Disparity” or simply May’s

Law. According to May, party supporters can be divided into three basic groups (voters, activists, and elites), and arranged in a single hierarchy based on their power and status. Moreover, and the main thrust of his law, the groups' policy and ideological preferences are thought to vary in a systematic, *curvilinear* pattern. That is, activists tend to hold the most extreme policy orientations, while both voters and elites are more moderate. Party leaders, especially elected representatives, tend to the center of the ideological spectrum, because this is where the majority of voters, and hence, electoral success is to be found. In short, May's Law formalizes the widely held suspicion that leaders are chiefly "vote-seekers" while activists are "policy-seekers."

If true, May's Law has important implications for political parties as well as the functioning of democratic politics more generally. For example, several scholars have used similar assumptions about activist extremism to explain why parties fail to converge on the median voter (Aldrich 1983; Strøm 1990; McGann 2002; McGann et al. 2002; Adams et al. 2005; Schofield and Sened 2005). This suggests that recent moves to give activists more weight in intraparty decision-making may lead to such parties adopting even more extreme policy positions (see Scarrow 1999). Similarly, and at a more fundamental level, May's Law also implies an inherent tradeoff between two central elements of modern democracy: participation and representation. On the one hand, oligarchic parties leave little room for effective citizen participation; on the other, if activists are more extreme than voters, then democratizing party decisions may lead to a *polarized* party system that fails to represent the vast majority of the electorate (Norris 1995: 31).

But, does May's Law accurately depict the nature of intraparty opinion? Despite its simple, intuitive appeal and a large body of anecdotal evidence, the few systematic studies have found limited support for the theory (Iversen 1994a; Norris 1995; Narud and Skare 1999). In fact, a curvilinear pattern seems to be the exception as top elites are often the *most* ideologically extreme segment. However, previous studies have been limited in their ability to distinguish among various intraparty actors. Indeed, some have suggested that May's simple distinction between activists and leaders does not accurately reflect the structure of power or opinions in parties. Katz and Mair (1994a), for example, argue that parties have separate, relatively autonomous organizational "faces" that help structure ideological beliefs and policy preferences. The distinction between the "party in public office" and the "party in central office" may be particularly useful in this sense (Charlot 1989; Kitschelt 1994).

This paper therefore seeks to enrich our understanding of intraparty conflict and party behavior with a comprehensive analysis of ideological opinion structures in party organizations. It employs a unique set of representative party member surveys that allows the examination of this issue with greater breadth and depth than previous research. In particular, it analyzes the internal distribution of ideological preferences in 27 parties across five countries: Canada, Denmark, Great Britain, The Netherlands, and Norway. The surveys permit finer distinctions among the actors within party organizations, which helps capture more accurately the patterns of ideological and policy preferences.

The paper proceeds in two steps. The first is to test May's Law, the most widely accepted theory on the distribution of intraparty ideological attitudes. At the same time, we consider alternative models of general party behavior, focusing more directly on the

ideological positions of party leaders. Finding limited support for either May's Law or the general models of party behavior, the second part of the paper develops and tests an alternative theory of intraparty opinion structure and party behavior, what I term a *theory of dominant factions*.

### **Theoretical Foundations of May's Law**

Although May's Law draws on a large body of testimonial evidence about party activists and organizations, its theoretical foundations lie in the Downsian spatial model and rational choice theories of collective behavior. According to Downs (1957), voters and parties can be placed along a single (left-right) ideological dimension. Moreover, voters' policy preferences are thought to be fixed or exogenous to the political process, and they support the political party closest to their own ideological position. Voters, in other words, are passive consumers of politics.

Parties, in contrast, are viewed as political entrepreneurs who care only about winning. They are free to position themselves anywhere along the left-right spectrum, but assumed to adopt the position that maximizes their electoral support. As is well known, Downs predicted that under these conditions, parties would converge on the median voter in two-party systems. Even in multi-party systems, "vote-maximizing parties are attracted to those policy positions favored by large groups of voters" (Iversen 1994a: 157), which is the median voter position when the electorate is "normally" distributed along the ideological spectrum, also a common assumption.

Notably, however, the Downsian model finds little support in empirical reality, even in the (approximate) two-party systems of the United States and Great Britain (see

Grofman 2004). Indeed, party systems often display a *polarized* pattern, especially at the elite level. This is the case in the multiparty systems of Sweden (Holmberg 1989) and Norway (Listhaug et al. 1990), as well as the United States (Poole and Rosenthal 1984; Rabinowitz et al. 1991). In addition, studies of official party positions, as measured by party manifestoes, find little evidence of median voter convergence, even in recent years (Budge et al. 2001). In short, as Grofman and his colleagues note, it appears that “there are centripetal pressures; but in general they are partly or largely outweighed by the centrifugal ones,” (Grofman 2004: 27) leading to what they label “spaced out politics” (Adams et al. 2005).

Posed with this dilemma, some have sought to remedy the rational choice model. One approach, which finds support in the seminal studies of party organizations as well as May’s Law, retains Downs’ basic assumptions about leaders and voters, but introduces party activists as a constraint on the leaders (Aldrich 1983; Schofield and Sened 2005). Activists are thought to be policy extremists, and hence, when they exert influence on a party’s decision-making process, either directly or indirectly, leaders are constrained in their ability to move the party to the vote-maximizing position.

But, why are activists thought to be policy extremists as May and many others believe? It is useful here to review theories of collective action behavior, which explain participation primarily in terms of (rational) motives or incentives. According to Olson (1965), parties, like all voluntary associations, are faced with the difficulty of attracting individuals willing to contribute to the achievement of their objectives. This is because parties seek to enact policies that are *collective goods*, which, as Olson famously argued, are susceptible to “free-riding.” In working for a party, one incurs the costs, such as time

and money, but only has a trivial effect on the probability that the party wins office and implements the desired policies. Yet, if one does not participate, she will still enjoy the policy benefits if the party wins office. Consequently, it is argued that it is not rational to participate in a party merely for the purpose of supporting its collective policy goals.

To overcome the free-riding problem, political parties must provide *selective incentives*—chief among these are paid party or public office positions. This logic is implicit in the Downsian model and May’s Law, which assume that leaders primarily desire the material and status benefits of holding office, not specific policies. The logic, however, breaks down when applied to party activists who devote significant time and resources to the party, but as campaign workers, national convention delegates, or local party officials can expect little material compensation for their efforts.

Thus, May (1973) must step outside the rational choice framework to explain volunteer activism. His argument is that activists, like voters, are motivated primarily by policy interests; unlike voters, however, activists’ preferences are much *more intense and extreme*. It is this strong commitment to a party’s policy goals that is thought to motivate activism. Curiously, then, May imposes “rational” motives on both leaders and voters, but the behavior of activists is viewed as “irrational,” extremist, and, of course, out of touch with the mainstream electorate.

May finds support for his theory in the observations of several eminent scholars of British and American party organizations, including, Mosei Ostrogorski, Maurice Duverger, David Butler, and V.O. Key. For example, observing the major British parties after WWII, Butler (1960: 24) concludes that a party’s “most loyal and devoted followers tend to have more extreme views than [the party leaders], and to be still farther removed

from the mass of those who actually provide the vote.” Similarly, Key (1956: 112) states that for a party to achieve electoral success, the top leadership “must try to restrain the extremists within the party ranks.” Epstein (1960: 385) captures the essence of May’s Law even more pointedly when he writes, “the voluntary and amateur nature of [local branches] ensures that they attract zealots in the party cause, and particular so at the local leadership level, where there are many routine political chores which only the devoted are likely to perform. Principles, not professional careers, are what matter here.”

Despite these widely held suspicions, more recent systematic research on actors’ policy and ideological positions has cast serious doubt on the validity of his theory. For example, Herrera and Taylor (1994) collected data on several strata in the U.S. parties, including members of Congress, but they found no support for May’s Law among either Republicans or Democrats. Similarly, Norris (1995) found that in the two major British parties, the leaders have more radical policy positions than both local office holders and party voters. Research on multiparty systems has reached similar conclusions. In the most comprehensive test of the theory to date, Iversen (1994a) analyzed 56 parties in 11 West European democracies. While a few parties exhibited a curvilinear pattern, the dominant pattern was one of elite extremism and some cases of elite-activist congruence (see also Holmberg 1989; Narud and Skare 1999; Gallagher and Marsh 2002).

A few studies, however, have found support for May’s Law, at least for specific parties or issues. Kitschelt (1989), for example, observed a curvilinear pattern in Agalev, but not Ecolo, the two Belgian Ecology parties. Moreover, Widfeldt (1999) compared MPs, activists, passive party members, and voters in Sweden, and contrary to an earlier study (Holmberg 1989), found that the Social Democrats exhibited a curvilinear pattern



for three of three elections, whereas the Conservative party did for two of three elections. Finally, one study suggests activist extremism may arise for the policy issues that are particularly relevant to a party's core constituency (Narud and Skare 1999).

### **Two Extensions to May's Law**

The variability of these findings indicates the need to reconsider May's Law as he formulates it. Specifically, May appears to underspecify the relevant internal divisions in parties. Kitschelt (1989), for example, argues that May's Law is built on a reductionist psychology that oversimplifies the political motivations of both leaders and activists (see also Norris 1995). Leaders often are interested in achieving power, but many also have policy interests. Equally important, activists have a wide range of potential motivations for participating in politics. Indeed, parties may appeal to ideological purists as well as *pragmatists* who "subscribe to programmatic and strategic moderation and an electorally efficient, rather than an ideologically pure, party organization" (Kitschelt 1989: 406). However, according to Kitschelt, so-called ideologues and pragmatists are attracted to different types of political activities. While ideologues focus on national politics and the advancement of major policy initiatives, pragmatists, he claims, have a greater interest in local affairs where they can participate in the issues that are more directly relevant to their daily lives.

A second type of internal division May fails to consider is that between a party's publicly elected face and its organizational apparatus. Scholars have long recognized a potential division between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary factions at the elite level (Ostrogorski 1902; Panebianco 1988). Ostrogorski, for example, feared that the

more ideologically extreme party caucus would be able to handcuff the party's elected officials, who depended on the caucus for their (re)nomination. Indeed, the image of the party machine wielding power from its smoke filled rooms is a familiar one to students of political parties.

While this division has received the most attention at the national level, it is likely also relevant to the local level (Charlot 1989). Those who seek elected office, regardless of the level of government, should hold more moderate, vote-maximizing policy beliefs than their fellow active party members. In contrast, the organization apparatus provides an attractive outlet for the more policy-minded supporters. Here, activists can focus their efforts on a party's core constituencies and long-term ideological visions, rather than the mass electorate and other political parties. Finally, Katz and Mair's (1994a) analysis of organizational change suggests that ideological and strategy differences may be widening between these two groups. Specifically, they argue that parties' public and organizational faces have become increasingly autonomous over recent decades.

In sum, the law of curvilinear disparity, based loosely on rational choice theory, holds that activists are more extreme than both voters and party leaders. Though May's Law finds support in the testimony of several party luminaries, systematic empirical analyses have found little corroborating evidence. In particular, it appears that May oversimplifies the divisions within the party hierarchy, failing to differentiate between local and national activists as well as the publicly elected and organizational apparatus faces of the party.

## The Directional Theory of Voting and Party Behavior

The failure of parties to converge on the median voter also has led some scholars to develop an alternative, general theory of voting and party behavior that explains the observed pattern of “spaced-out” politics. Rabinowitz and his colleagues (1989, 1991), for example, have proposed a *directional theory* of party behavior. This theory challenges the basic Downsian assumption that voters have a clear understanding of either their own or parties’ exact ideological and issue positions. Instead, voters are thought to see politics in primarily black and white terms and have only a diffuse preference for the Left or the Right. Accordingly, voters are attracted to the party that most clearly signals it is on the same “team” as them, that is, in the same *direction*. Thus, contra Downs, it is claimed that voters do not necessarily and, in fact, are unlikely to support the party closest to their own ideological position. Moreover, the implication of this theory for party behavior is that political parties *should* desert the median voter and adopt more extreme ideological positions.<sup>1</sup>

While it is evident that the directional theory of voting and party behavior better reflects the pattern of spaced-out politics at the *party system level*, this does not mean that it accurately predicts *individual party behavior*, which is a true test of the theory. Indeed, this requires that individual parties are more extreme than their voters and more passive supporters. We also examine this proposition in the following analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> There are, however, some logical inconsistencies in the basic directional model developed by Rabinowitz and his colleagues. Most notably, the basic theory places no limits on the extremeness of parties; indeed, it suggests parties should adopt increasingly extreme positions in order to maximize vote-share. The authors, thus, must (re)introduce a spatial constraint, or *region of acceptability*, on party leaders, claiming that parties that are too extreme are seen as illegitimate and punished. Yet, the boundaries for the region of acceptability can only be established *ipso facto*, and hence, a direct test of the theory’s assumptions is not possible; we can only validate whether parties tend to be more extreme than their voters. See Iversen (1994b) and Adams and Merrill (1999) for a more detailed discussion of the similarities between the spatial and directional models of party behavior, and attempts to produce a single model of voting behavior that combines spatial and directional components.

## Data and Method

The first step in the analysis is to test the basic theories of party opinion structure. While our main interest here lies in testing May's Law and its extensions, which predicts a curvilinear pattern among the various intraparty actors, we also examine the more basic Downsian and Directional theories, which hypothesize elite moderation and extremism, respectively. Drawing on a unique set of representative member surveys from 27 parties in Britain, Canada, Denmark, The Netherlands, and Norway, we are able to make finer distinctions among the various internal party actors, and hence, analyze the structure of intraparty opinion with greater precision than existing research. Moreover, the broad comparative framework provides a more comprehensive test of the theory. The surveys cover a broad range of parties with different ideologies, organizational structures and government experience, as well as two plurality and three proportional representation systems. Thus, the study constitutes perhaps the most complete test of May's Law.

While previous studies have divided party adherents into three or at most four groups (see, however, Kitschelt 1989), the extensions to May's Law indicate this is insufficient. We identify seven strata within the party hierarchy, which taken together should exhibit a pattern of curvilinear disparity:<sup>2</sup>

1. *Party Voters*: Electoral supporters who have no direct organizational affiliation but may identify with the party. Here, we draw on National Election Studies from each country and include all respondents who voted for the party in the election concurrent to the respective member surveys.

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<sup>2</sup> Some respondents have held multiple positions in the party hierarchy. In these cases, first preference is given to national office and second preference to publicly elected positions, regardless of the respondent's current position. For example, a respondent who was both a locally elected representative and a national party official would be placed in the latter group. Similarly, if a respondent held a high level party office position at the time of the survey but had run for national public office in the past, she was placed in the latter (parliamentary leaders) category.

2. *Passive Party Members*: Registered party members who devote little time (less than 5 hours per month) to their party and have never held an elected or party office position or participated in the party's national convention.
3. *Local Elected Officials*: Party members who hold or have held local elected office, including municipal government, school boards, and other local councils.
4. *Local Party Officials*: Activists who hold or have held an official party office position at the local branch level.
5. *Non Office-Holding Activists*: Party members who devote significant time to the party (operationalized as 5 or more hours per month), but do not hold a publicly elected or an official party office position.
6. *Extra-Parliamentary Leaders*: Holders of party office positions at the national, regional, or international level who have never held or stood as a candidate for publicly elected office at these levels.
7. *Parliamentary Leaders*: Party elites who have held or stood as a candidate for publicly elected office at the national, regional, or international levels.

The law of curvilinear disparity, as now formulated, predicts that extremism will increase from party voters (group 1) to non office-holding activists (group 5) and then decrease again to the parliamentary leaders (group 7). However, we also do not expect differences between each level to be uniform; instead, the largest gap should be between, on the one hand, the party office holders and activists (groups 4-6) and, on the other, the publicly elected officials, passive party members, and voters (groups 1-3 and 7).

To measure policy positions, I use self-placement on the left-right ideological scale. Left-right ideology can be viewed as a sort of “super issue” (Dalton 2006), or as an

aggregation of one's various policy preferences. It has been shown to correlate with attitudes on a host of specific issues, and hence, serves as a good summary measure of policy orientation. It also is a reliable indicator for cross-national comparison; voters in a variety of countries are generally able to place parties in their "correct" position along the left-right spectrum (Fuchs and Klingemann 1990). Finally, the specific measure used here is compatible across countries and intraparty actors; left-right ideology is measured on an 11-point scale, running from 0 to 10, for both the member surveys and national election voter studies.<sup>3</sup>

### **Empirical Results**

Figures 1-5 present the analyses with the parties separated by country. Taken together, the findings are consistent with previous empirical research; there appears to be no general pattern of curvilinear disparity. While a few parties approximate such a pattern, most notably the Danish DF, the Dutch VVD, and Canadian NDP, these are the exception. Indeed, as Iversen (1994a) and others have observed, parties are more likely to exhibit a *polarized* pattern where the publicly elected national elite is among the most radical segments in the party organization. This is especially evident for the leftist parties in the four European countries, but it is also the case for the British Conservatives and the two Canadian conservative parties (PC and CA).

A pattern of elite extremism is particularly troublesome for May's Law, because it directly contradicts both of its basic assumptions. It undermines the rationale for middle-level elite activism, and perhaps more importantly, it contradicts the assumption of the

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<sup>3</sup> The only exception to this is the *party member surveys* in Great Britain where ideology is measured on a 9 point scale. Though not ideal, I standardized and rescaled the responses to be comparable on the 11 point scale.

simple Downsian model that political leaders adopt more moderate, vote-maximizing policy positions. However, notably, the figures do reveal some support for the latter proposition. Indeed, parties may not display a pattern of true curvilinear disparity, but parliamentary leaders commonly do adopt similar or even more moderate positions than their voters. This is the case in about half of the 27 parties. In other words, parliamentary leaders are just as likely to be more moderate than their constituents (Downsian Model) as they are to be more extreme than them (Directional Model).

The two extensions to May's Law also provide mixed results. The more refined distinctions in the party hierarchy clearly do not lead to a general pattern of curvilinear disparity; nonetheless, there is some evidence that the distinction between the "party in central office" and the "party in public office" may help explain the structure of intra-party opinion. This is most evident looking at the local level where party officials are more ideologically extreme than elected representatives in 18 of the 24 parties (we have no local level data on the Canadian parties). The pattern is similar at the national level where in two-thirds of the parties, the party apparatus leaders are more extreme than their publicly elected counterparts. Moreover, when elected representatives are more radical, the differences are often small, suggesting relative congruence among the two party organizational faces.

The patterns within each country also reveal an interesting picture. Looking first at Figure 1, we see that the Danish party system displays a general shift to the left as we move up the party hierarchy. Indeed, the nationally elected representatives are nearly a full point to the left of their respective voters for all but the left-libertarian RV. This

indicates rather curiously that most voters are actually better represented by the party directly to the right of the one they voted for at the ballot box!

=== Figures 1-3 about here ===

A similar pattern between national elites and voters emerges in the Netherlands; however, unlike Denmark, there is greater variation in the ideological positions of the other party actors. In the PvdA, the entire party is shifted to the left of its voters, but within the organization proper there is a high degree of congruence among the actors. The two centrist parties, D'66 and CDA, in contrast, display a “zigzag” pattern with party voters and organizational officials being to the right of elected representatives at both levels of government. Finally, VVD shows a fairly clear curvilinear pattern: the middle-level party strata are all more extreme than the party voters and the national elite.

The Norwegian party system (Figure 3) shows a very different pattern from that of Denmark and the Netherlands. Most notably, in all 7 parties, there is a relatively high degree of congruence among the intraparty strata. That is, voters, organization officials, and elected representatives from each party are all relatively close to one another on the left-right ideological spectrum. Moreover, the small differences among the groups are largely attributable to the division between public representatives and party officials. As our above discussion suggested, public representatives (Groups 3 and 7) tend to be more moderate than their party official counterparts (Groups 4 and 6). Interestingly, non office-holding activists appear not to be extremists; they have ideological positions similar to those of elected representatives.

Figures 4 and 5 present the results for the two plurality systems, Great Britain and Canada. According to May and several other eminent scholars, political parties in these



countries should demonstrate an even greater tendency for both activist extremism and elite convergence on the median voter. Yet, the empirical evidence provides little support for these assumptions. In Great Britain, the national elites of both parties are not only far from the median voter, but also significantly more extreme than their respective constituents. Indeed, rather than converging on the median voter, it appears that both parties have deserted the ideological center, creating a highly polarized two-party system (see also Norris 1995). Yet, it also appears that the distinction between party and public officials again may help explain intraparty opinion. Party officials, especially in Labour, are even more extreme than elected representatives; in the Conservatives, local elected officials are the most moderate segment.

=== Figures 4 and 5 about here ===

Finally, we turn to the Canadian system. Though we have no data at the local level, the results at the national level paint an interesting picture. The two Conservative parties are highly polarized with national elites more extreme than their constituents, but in both cases the *entire* party organization is shifted to the right of voters. The Liberals, in contrast, show a high degree of congruence among all groups of party supporters. Finally, the NDP and Bloc Quebecois reveal the familiar pattern of party organizational officials being more extreme than the elected representatives. In the NDP, this gap is particularly pronounced with party officials being a full point to the left of parliamentary elite on the ideological spectrum.

In sum, the results find little support for May's Law, especially as he formulates it. Only 3 of 27 parties demonstrate a curvilinear pattern: activist extremism coupled with elite moderation. Indeed, party elites are more commonly the most radical segment in the

organization. As discussed above, this pattern is consistent with several previous studies of mass-elite linkages, which find, contrary to the Downsian spatial model, that parties consistently fail to converge on the median voter.

At the same time, however, the Directional model also does not predict party elite behavior accurately. In half of the cases, the parliamentary leaders are more extreme than their voters (Directional Model); in the other half, they are more moderate (Downsian Model). We take this as evidence that the attempt to develop a general theory of party behavior is misplaced and largely unfruitful. As Grofman and his colleagues note, parties do experience centripetal pressures, but contrary to the simple Downsian model, there are also strong centrifugal ones (Grofman 2004; Adams et al. 2005). Thus, the critical task is to identify these forces that push parties, or in this case party leaders, away from more moderate, vote-maximizing ideological positions. We do this in the second part of the paper.

### **A Theory of Dominant Factions**

Despite their apparent limits, we suspect Downs, May, and others have gotten it mostly correct. This is especially true for recent models that incorporate party activists as a potential constraint on the leadership (Aldrich 1983; Strøm 1990; Adams et al. 2005; Schofield and Sened 2005). Importantly, they reject the long held assumption that party leaders, specifically the parliamentary faction, exercise absolute control over the party, and recognize that *intraparty politics matter for party behavior*.

However, the modified Downsian models also appear to oversimplify the nature of intraparty politics. The above figures indicate that activists are not merely a constraint

on elites, and party behavior cannot be reduced to a simple conflict between *vote-seeking* leaders and *policy-seeking* activists (otherwise, we would have found a clear, consistent pattern of curvilinear disparity in intraparty opinion!). Indeed, the major problem with rationalist theories of party organizations is that they take the preferences of leaders and activists as given and fixed, rather than as endogenous to intraparty processes.

In this section, therefore, I seek to develop a more dynamic model of intraparty politics. Like rationalist approaches, I hypothesize that party behavior depends chiefly on power relations among the various intraparty actors. However, I also suspect a party's internal power structure has a more enduring effect—it actually shapes the ideological positions and composition of the party leadership as well as activists.

Specifically, I posit that over time the ideological preferences of *all* intraparty actors tend to those of the *dominant faction* in the party organization. At one extreme, if the parliamentary faction controls the party, then parliamentary leaders should have more moderate, vote-maximizing preferences, but so should the party's activists and executive officials. At the other, if the party executive, that is, the “party in central office,” is the dominant faction, then they, as well as the parliamentary leaders and activists, also will have greater policy-seeking tendencies. This shaping of intraparty opinions happens through the dual processes of *recruitment* and *socialization*.

First, a party tends to recruit activists and promote into leadership positions those who share the same ideological orientation and electoral strategy as the dominant faction. Moreover, individuals who do not share these persuasions are less likely to join the party in the first place; if they already are members, they will be less likely to participate; and over time, they may become frustrated and eventually *exit* the party. This means there is

tendency for dissident voices to get weeded out of a party, especially if dissidents have a more attractive alternative.

Second, there are socialization effects. While some party supporters may be pure and uncompromising vote-seekers or policy-seekers, many have mixed motives and are open to arguments about the appropriate strategy for attaining their goals. Even activists who have strong policy preferences may recognize the advantages of a more pragmatic or vote-seeking strategy. It might make the party more electorally viable, and hence, provide the opportunity to implement at least some of their policy goals. A strong policy-seeking strategy, in contrast, may alienate moderate voters thereby allowing the opposition to win control of government. Similarly, aspiring leaders may value the prestige of public office over specific policy interests. In this case, they may “change” their policy preferences to gain the support of the dominant faction and secure nominations for public office. This places the dominant faction in a powerful position to subtly shape actors’ ideological and strategy preferences. There are certainly limits in a party’s ability to socialize leaders and activists; they are not completely malleable, but we suspect that many are amenable to different strategies for attaining their goals.

In sum, policy-seeking and vote-seeking are two equally plausible strategies for attaining policy and office goals. While some members may have a strong preference for one over the other, allowing for recruitment effects, others are likely amenable to either strategy, which allows for socialization effects. The dominant faction, therefore, is in a powerful position to shape intraparty opinion in its own image and “pull” party actors in the direction of its ideological and strategy preferences.

## The Structure of Intraparty Power

The discussion to this point has proceeded as though party organizations had a clear and identifiable dominant faction. In reality, parties are complex organizations with diffuse and overlapping centers of power (Hine 1982; Panebianco 1988). Indeed, their formal organizational structure consists of multiple organs often charged with different aspects of party decision-making, such as the selection of candidates for public office or the formulation of official policy positions (Katz and Mair 1994b). Yet, the formal power of the various organs and committees is only part of the puzzle. Equally, if not more important, is the membership composition of those party organs—that is, the members’ ideological orientations and policy preferences. How are members selected to serve on the organs? To whom are they accountable?

Despite the complexity of intraparty power, previous research and the findings above suggest that the most critical division is between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary factions, or more generally, the “party in public office” and the “party in central office” (Charlot 1989; Katz and Mair 1994a).

To simplify the discussion, we focus on the relative power of the parliamentary faction, which holds a unique position as the public face of the party. In particular, we are interested in the *autonomy* of parliamentary elites in the key areas of candidate selection and the formulation of official policy positions in the party platform. The recruitment and selection of candidates for elected office is perhaps the most critical task for a party organization (Gallagher and Marsh 1988). This is because once in office, MPs effectively run the show. That is, they act as the party’s representatives to the electorate; they initiate legislation; and they are the final word on public policy decisions. It is little surprise then

that the selection of candidates is a highly contested, complex domain of party decision-making.

Following Kitschelt (1994: 223-5; see also Lane and Ersson 1994), we examine four distinct, but interrelated elements of party control: the centralization of candidate selection, the domination of the legislative leadership over the party executive, the party's relations with external auxiliary organizations, and the control of conference schedules.

*Centralized control of candidate recruitment* gives the leadership flexibility to nominate party "outsiders" for elected office. Outsiders often have greater appeal to the wider electorate but it is unlikely they would "survive a selection process controlled by the rank-and-file" (Kitschelt 1994: 223). Moreover, outsiders likely have less loyalty to a party's traditional constituencies while being more open to a moderate, vote-maximizing electoral strategy. In contrast, decentralized selection, especially to the local party branch, may severely handicap leadership autonomy. Indeed, there are even instances of a local branch failing to (re)nominate the national party leader. In such parties, it is clear that the parliamentary faction is subordinate to the party executive.<sup>4</sup>

In practice, the party leadership rarely holds a monopoly on candidate recruitment and selection. There are, however, a few cases, including the Norwegian parties in this study, where the *local branch* does effectively control the nomination process with little interference from the central leadership (Strøm 1994). However, most often, there is some form of shared authority between national and sub-national party organs where the

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<sup>4</sup> However, it is important to note that some scholars contend that decentralization does not necessarily decrease leadership autonomy. If candidate selection is decentralized all the way to the general party membership, such as through a postal ballot primary, then this may paradoxically enhance leaders' autonomy (Katz and Mair 1995; Scarrow 1999). This is especially true when the selectorate is large, as it becomes much more difficult for activists to organize against the leadership's "recommended" list of candidates.

national leadership may influence the process in a variety of ways (Bille 2001; Lundell 2004). For example, nominations may take place officially at the constituency branch level, but the national executive has power to add names to the lists or veto undesirable candidates. Or, as in the two major British parties, local constituency organizations may be required to choose candidates from a national executive list of “acceptable” candidates (Denver 1988). Finally, the party leadership may have no direct involvement in the actual decision-making process, but have the right of approval over the entire list of candidates. This gives the national leadership significantly less strategic autonomy than the ability to veto individual candidates, but it does give them some influence over the process.

Although centralized candidate selection by definition means that elites have greater control, this does not necessarily mean the *parliamentary faction* has greater control, which is our primary interest. It simply means that a national organ, usually the national executive committee, has formal influence over the process. However, in order to understand the implications for candidate selection and party behavior, we must also know the membership composition of that national organ. In particular, we are interested in the power that the parliamentary faction has over the extra-parliamentary faction.

Thus, the second element of party control is *the domination of the parliamentary leadership over the party executive*. At one extreme, we find parties that have a clear split between the two factions. That is, members of parliament are not permitted to hold any party executive positions, and thus, the parliamentary faction plays no formal role in the selection of candidates. In principle and largely in practice, the two major British parties worked this way through the 1980s. The parliamentary faction had autonomy over the formulation of policy positions and the day-to-day running of the party in parliament, but

candidate selection was the near exclusive domain of the party executive (Denver 1988).<sup>5</sup> The Conservatives still work this way, but the Labour Party through a series of reforms in the 1980s and early 1990s has gradually increased the power of the parliamentary faction (Webb 2002).

At the other extreme, the parliamentary leadership and party executive leadership are identical. MPs not only sit on executive organs, but the parliamentary leader is in fact the leader of the party executive. While the national executive committee may and often does include representatives from the party organization proper, such as delegates from youth and women's organizations, these auxiliary members are subordinate to and often chosen by the chairperson—that is, the parliamentary leader. This pattern of organization is prevalent in both the Danish (Pedersen 1987) and Dutch (Daalder 1987) parties, though an important exception is their respective Social Democratic parties (Kitschelt 1994) as well as the new left-libertarian parties (Deschouwer 2002; Sundberg 2002).

Third, the *party's relations with external auxiliary organizations* also affect the power of the parliamentary faction. This factor is most relevant for Social Democratic parties where labor unions traditionally have played a significant role in the decision-making process (Kitschelt 1994). In several countries, such as Great Britain, the trade unions effectively *were* the party's organization (Webb 1994). They not only influenced the nomination process, but they were able to put their own people into key executive and legislative positions. While external auxiliary organizations in some countries have seen their influence restricted in recent decades, concurrent with their losses in membership

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<sup>5</sup> The two parties, however, also traditionally had the policy of allowing incumbents to be automatically re-nominated in their districts. This gave the parliamentary faction some additional autonomy, though their original nomination was still controlled by the party executive. In 1981, the Labour Party changed its rules requiring incumbents to have to go through the nomination process for each election.



(Poguntke 2000), they still remain a major constraint on the parliamentary leadership in some parties.

Finally, the *control of conference schedules* also may affect the leaders' strategic autonomy. The party conference or convention is generally the highest formal authority within the party organization (Katz and Mair 1994b). It is a forum for delegates to debate and determine the official party platform, and it is often charged with selecting the party leader. Despite its *formal* authority, the convention's actual importance varies widely among parties. In some the debate and decisions are real; in others, it is mere window-dressing for decisions already made by party elites. For example, in observing the British Conservative conference, Webb (1994: 188) claims the conference is merely a "highly stage-managed consultation process, as well as a morale boosting exercising for the activists." The importance of the party conference depends partially on the above aspects of party control, but also on activists' ability to organize effectively. One indicator of this is the frequency and timing of the party conferences. Frequent conferences at regular time intervals are more likely to limit the autonomy of the party leadership (Kitschelt 1994: 223).

### **Leadership Autonomy and Intraparty Opinion**

Contrary to May's Law, the model developed here indicates that the structure of intraparty opinion depends largely on the relative power of the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary factions. When the parliamentary faction dominates, we expect all party actors will be "pulled" toward more moderate, vote-maximizing ideological positions.

We anticipate the opposite, when the extra-parliamentary faction dominates. We now turn to an initial test of this hypothesis (see also the appendix).

Contemporary data on party organizational characteristics is difficult to assemble, especially because many parties have changed their power structures in recent years as a response to dwindling membership rolls (Scarrow 1999). Thus, as an initial test of the model, I use an indicator developed by Lane and Ersson (1991) in their study of West European party systems. The measure, termed party *integration*, is a single indicator that runs from 1 to 2.2 and includes the four aspects of party control discussed above. A lower value indicates the parliamentary leadership has *greater* strategic autonomy and more control over the party organization. Data for the Canadian parties was not available.

A review of Figures 1-5 provides some initial support for the model, but we want to test it more directly. In particular, we focus on the ideological position of the party's parliamentary leadership relative to the party's voters (Groups 7 and 1 in the above figures). The expectation is that the parliamentary faction will be more extreme than voters when their strategic autonomy, and hence control over the party, is low. In contrast, when their autonomy is high, we expect that they will adopt a vote-maximizing position, that is, more moderate than the average party voter. Thus, we subtracted the ideological position of the mean party voter from that of the parliamentary leadership. We then recoded the variable so that a positive value indicates the leadership is more extreme than voters.

=== Figure 6 about here ===

Figure 6 presents the results, which largely confirm our expectations. Indeed, there is a relatively strong correlation ( $r = 0.58$ ) and the single factor regression explains

nearly 34% of the variance in the ideological gap between the parliamentary leadership and the party's mean voter position. Moreover, though many of the parties with low leadership autonomy are on the left, we also see that those on the right fit the pattern based on their organizational structure. That is, the parliamentary elites in rightist parties are still further to the right of the party's voters when leadership autonomy is low. When it is high, the parliamentary leadership tends to be more moderate than party voters. This finding is notable, because some have suggested that elites in general tend to be more liberal than the electorate. Our results indicate this has little to do with the personal qualities of elites; instead, leaders are generally shifted to the left in Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands because they *must* be in the Leftist parties (low autonomy) and they *want* to be in the Rightist parties (high autonomy).

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The first section of this paper sought to test the long-held suspicion that there is an inherent tension in party organizations between “vote-seeking” leaders and “policy-seeking” activists. May's Law, based loosely in rational-choice theory, formalizes these assumptions and predicts that intraparty opinion structure should exhibit a curvilinear pattern. Yet, even with the extensions to May's Law, we found little evidence of activist extremism coupled with elite moderation. Indeed, consistent with previous empirical research, elites were often the *most* extreme segment in the party organization. Unlike previous studies (Rabinowitz et al. 1991; Iversen 1994a), however, we did not find that elites were consistently more extreme than party voters; rather, they were equally likely to be more moderate as more extreme.

Thus, the second part of the paper developed an alternative theoretical framework to explain these divergent patterns. In particular, Downs, May, and others appear to have gotten it mostly correct—they simply failed to take into account the effect that a party’s internal power structure has on party behavior and the structure of intraparty opinion. Parties with a strong parliamentary faction in fact do tend toward the median voter position, but they also appear to attract and promote activists with similar preferences. Extreme or policy-minded supporters likely exit the party or are socialized toward more moderate positions. In contrast, a dominant extra-parliamentary faction pulls all party actors, including members of the parliamentary faction, away from the median voter. These parties are decidedly more policy-seeking in their electoral behavior.

It appears clear then that intraparty politics have very real implications for party behavior. Interestingly, based largely on Michels’ seminal study, party scholars had long assumed that this was not the case and the parliamentary faction exercised near absolute control over the party organization. Moreover, many thought that this was normatively desirable, arguing that activist control would lead to extremist, unrepresentative political parties (Key 1956; Epstein 1967; McKenzie 1982). Yet, these claims appear unfounded in several respects. Contrary to Michels, the parliamentary faction does not always monopolize party decision-making. In addition, in the cases where the parliamentary leadership is not the dominant faction, parties do not adopt radically extreme positions out of touch with the electorate. Indeed, the above results indicate that parties dominated by the extra-parliamentary faction represent their voters just as well as those dominated by the parliamentary faction. The former are more extreme; the latter are more moderate.

In other words, it appears there is not an inherent tradeoff between intraparty democracy and electoral democracy as many scholars have speculated.

## Appendix

This appendix presents some preliminary results from efforts to replicate and expand on the findings in Figure 6.6.

### **Party Voter Positions**

I draw primarily on CSES data to estimate the ideological positions of party voters. I use Module 1 of the project when available; otherwise I use Module 2 (Finland, Ireland, and Japan) or the 1999 European Elections Study (Austria, France and Luxembourg).

### **Party or Party Leaders Positions**

The estimates of party positions are drawn from four different sources: expert surveys of party positions from Laver and Hunt (1992) and Huber and Inglehart (1995); the coding of party manifestos from the Party Manifestoes Project (Budge et al. 2001); and a 1994 survey of candidates to the European Parliament.

Laver and Hunt's expert survey does not include a single summary measure of left-right ideology. Instead, experts were asked to estimate the positions of party leaders on eight distinct issues and the importance of each issue to the party. Based on this information, I constructed two summary indicators—one that included all 8 issues and one with only the top 3 most important issues for each party. In both cases, the issues were weighted based on their importance for each party.

This provides us with five separate indicators of party/party leaders' positions. In each case, the summary indicators were rescaled to be comparable with the data on voters: 11-point scale (0-11).

### **Party-Voter Gap**

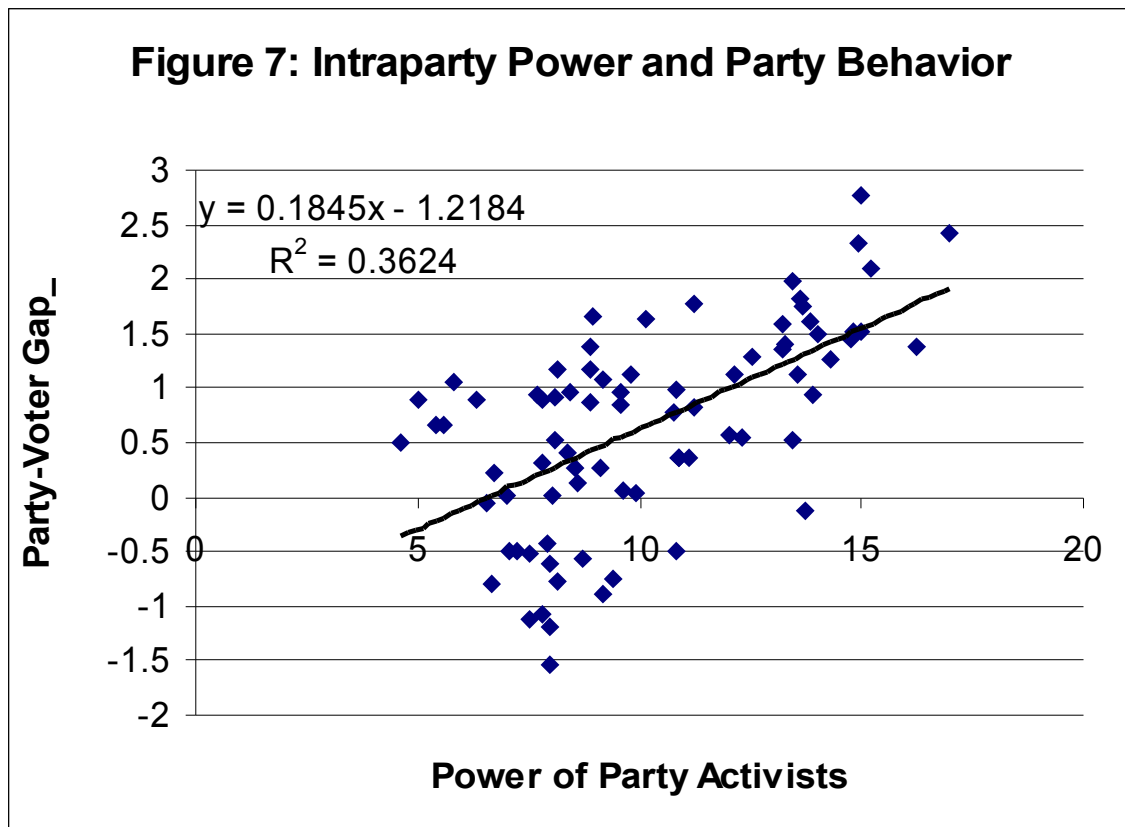
This is the dependent variable. I subtracted the party voter position from that of the party. I then recoded the variable such that a positive value indicates the party is more extreme than its voters while a negative value indicates the party is more moderate than its voters. I did this for all five indicators of party/party leaders' positions. I also then calculated the *average gap* across the five estimates. The results below are based on this final estimate; however, it is important to note that the general pattern holds regardless of the indicator.

### **Internal Structure of Party Organizational Power**

This indicator was taken from Laver and Hunt (1992). Experts were asked to estimate the influence that activists have over the policy-making process in each party. The scale runs from "1" (no influence) to "20" (high influence). It is not an ideal measure based on the above discussion in the text; however, I am not aware of a better one.

Using the above sources, I was able to gather the relevant data on over 100 parties in 20 countries, including most of Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Israel. A few nations, however, experienced major changes in their party system between the time of the party organization data (1989) and that of the party voter data (late 1990s)—including, Italy, New Zealand, Israel, and Belgium.

The below figure does not include political parties from these countries. It also does not include the far-right, anti-system parties, which appear not to fit the general pattern. The far-right parties appear to adopt more extreme positions than their voters despite a high level of elite control. Thus, the results below include 80 parties across 19 countries.



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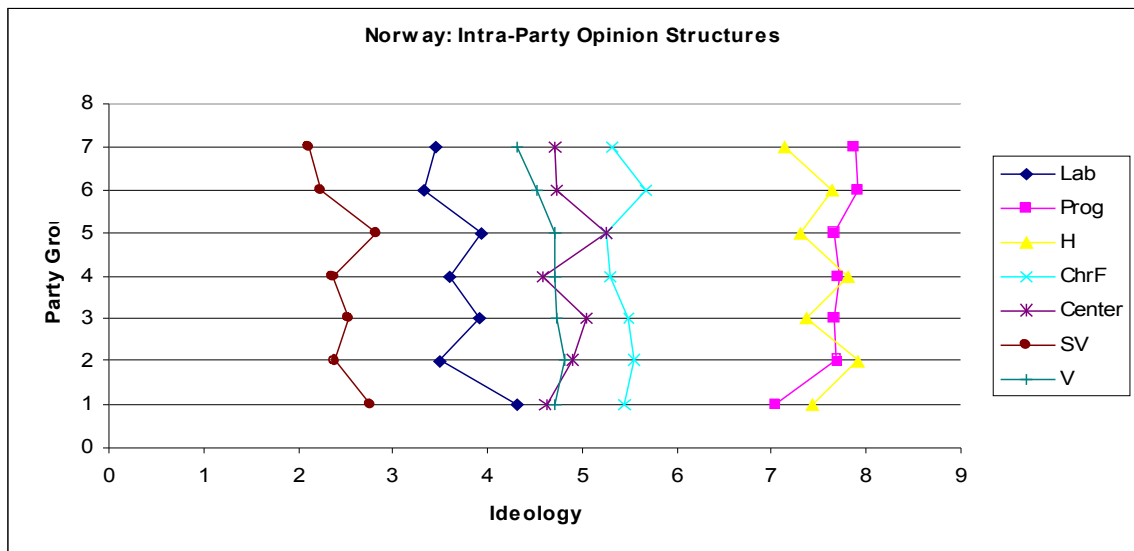
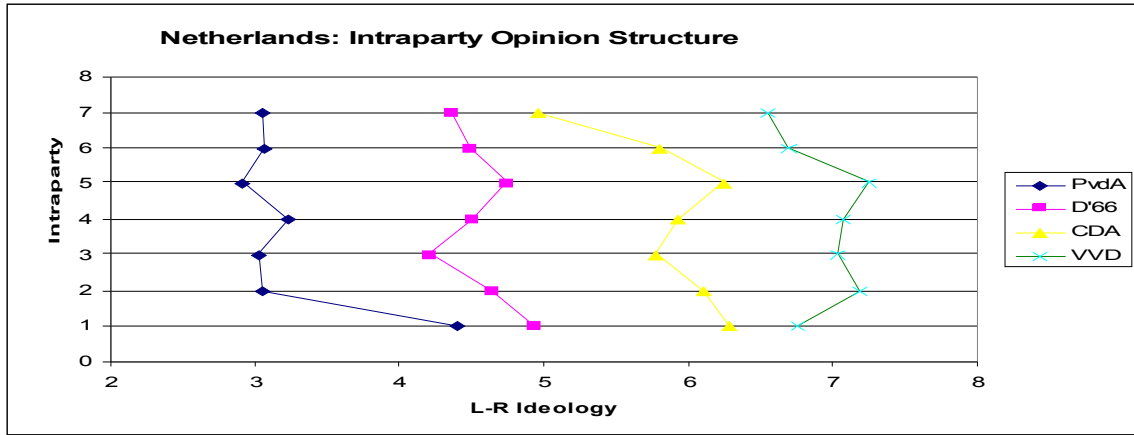
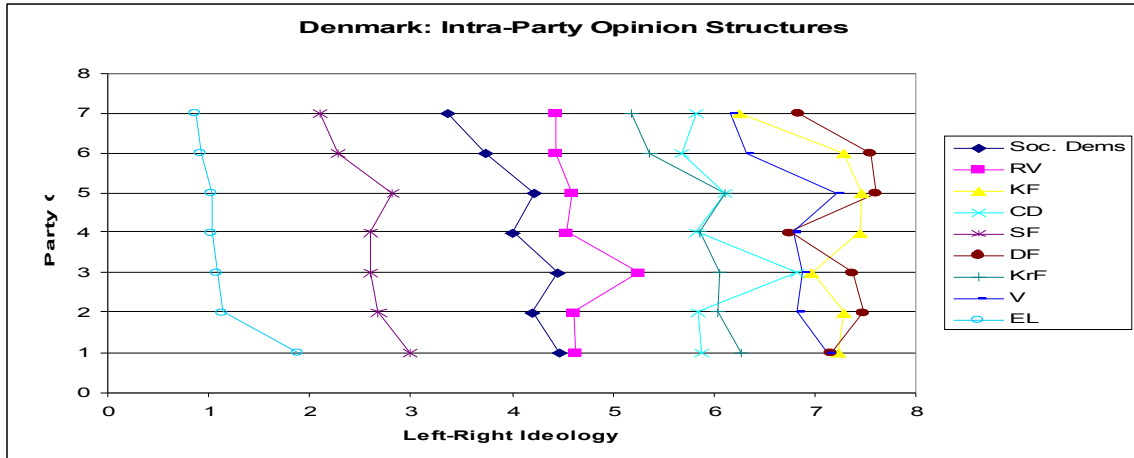
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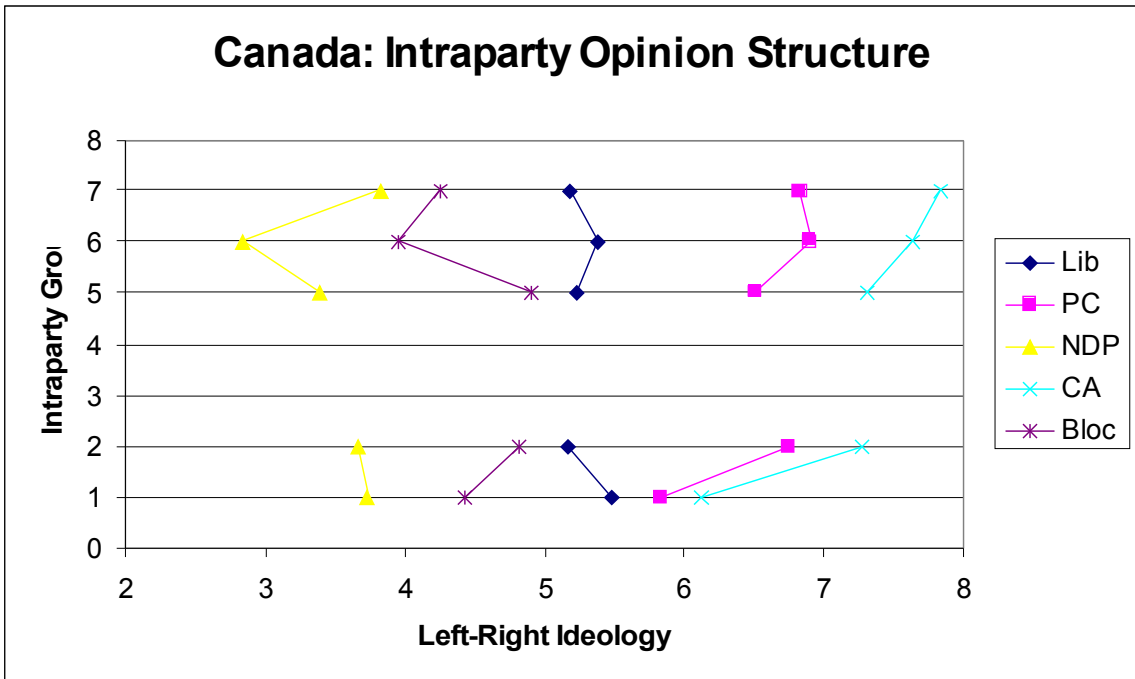
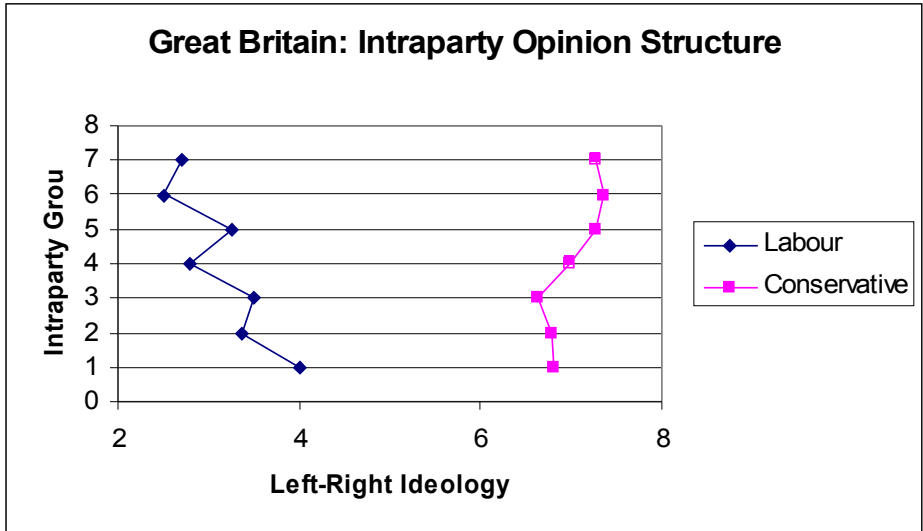
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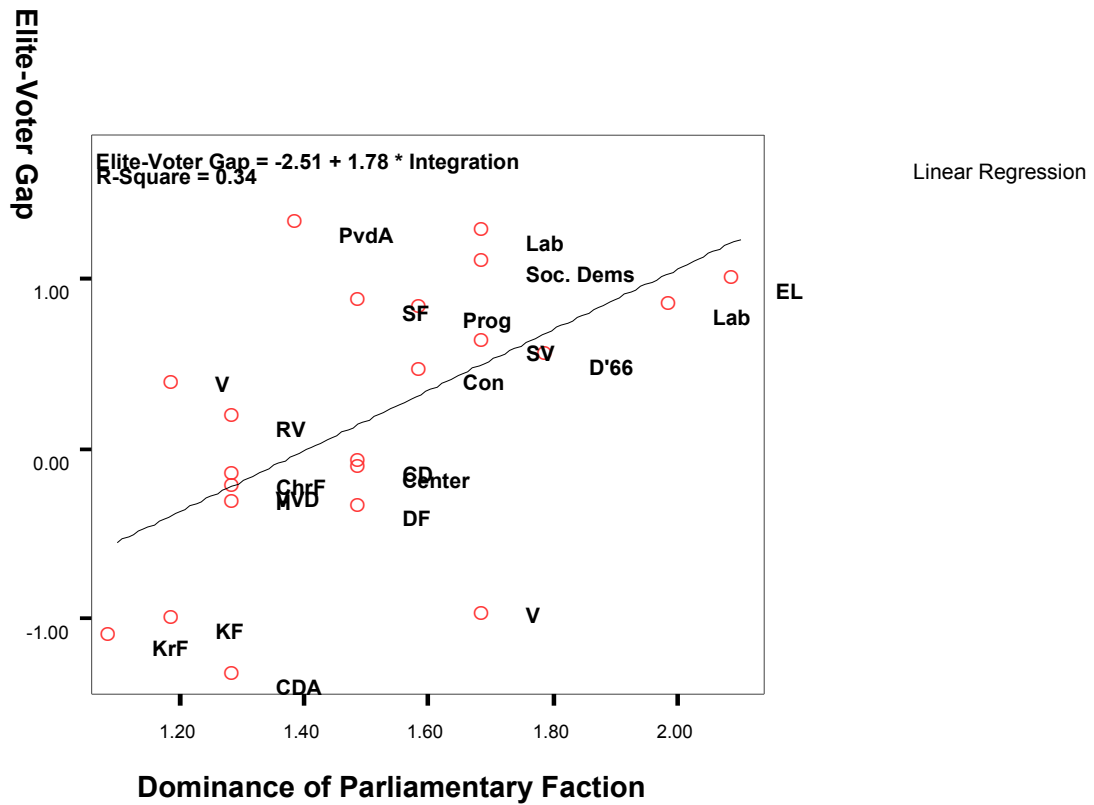
**Figures 1-3: The Structure of Intraparty Opinion in PR Systems**



**Figures 4-5: The Structure of Opinion in Plurality Systems**



**Figure 6: Policy and Vote-Seeking Behavior: The Impact of the Parliamentary Leadership's Control**



Note: Positive values on the Elite-Voter Gap indicate that party elites are more extreme than their voters. Higher values on the Integration index indicate that the parliamentary faction has *less* autonomy or control within the party.