NEW PARTIES IN GOVERNMENT:
A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

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This short paper is not the result of empirical research. Its major aim is to try to organize the activities of the workshop in a meaningful way. The topic of new parties in government is fairly well focussed, but it can certainly be approached in many different ways. It can be subdivided in a list of different questions that deserve to be dealt with. Organizing these questions into a logical grid or checklist for research is thus what we would like to do here. The paper looks therefore more like a research programme than like a real paper. It provides the bones (with many loose ends though), to which the flesh of the empirical analysis still has to be added.

1. The rise and success of new parties

New parties have received quite some attention in the party literature of the past few decades. The focus has indeed been on change and adaptation of parties and party systems, and therefore also on the rise and success of new parties. Increasing volatility, dealignment or the decline of class voting are all in one way or another indicators of the fact that traditional parties have been and still are challenged by newcomers that are able to play a significant role in the electoral game and that have therefore affected the structure of the political competition.

The new parties have come in three large groups or families. The first and most homogeneous group is formed by the Green parties. They have been researched extensively from the very beginning of their appearance on the political scene. The political sociology, the voters and voter motivations, the party ideology and the party organization have all received ample attention.

The second group is composed of the parties of the new radical right. This group is much less homogeneous, and has engendered quite some discussions about its very
nature, about the exact and reliable label that can be used as the family name. The party ideology (generally more disturbing for academics than the green ideology) has been studied, and the electorate has been thoroughly analysed, while the party organization remained a bit more in the background. Contrary to the greens, the radical right wing parties do not pay much attention to their party organization, and it is furthermore not possible to single out one specific type of organization that would be typical for this party family.

The regionalist parties form a third large group. This one has been rather under researched, at least in the comparative literature. The obvious reason for that is the fact that these parties (and thus the explanations for what they are and what they do) are in the first place deeply rooted in their own (contested) national state.

These three large groups do however not cover all the new political parties that have seen the light. The democratisation of eastern and central Europe, where the long interruption of competitive party democracy has created parties and party systems whose link with the time of the ‘freezing’ (beginning of the 20th century) is very limited. Virtually all parties in these new democracies are new parties. The collapse of the old party system in Italy in the early nineties has also given rise to a series of new (and sometimes very volatile) political parties that do not really fit into the usual party family classifications. One of these – Forza Italia – has even managed to become the major governing party of the country.

Most of these new parties have started their career at the margins of the party system, as radical challengers of the existing order (although there are new parties – like the Scandinavian Christian parties for instance – that can be situated more in the centre of the spectrum). Their relevance both for the party system and for the party scholars was therefore their role as outsiders, as players disturbing the electoral
competition and the quest for power of the existing older parties. Yet the challenging or disturbing position of these new parties has gradually changed. Quite a number of them have today become part of the executive branch at the national level, often after acceding to power at a lower tier of government first. Some have already started a second term in office. Others may not (yet) have reached this governmental status, but are at least considered to be parties with a governing potential.

While the party literature has to a large extent been focussing on the explanation of the rise and success of new parties and their effects on the party systems and on the older parties, a new set of questions emerges today. It is related to this quite dramatic status change of the new parties. Not their origins or survival raises questions, but the new role they play in their party systems. Why has it changed? And what are the consequences of this change? What explains the evolution from principled opposition to loyal opposition and eventually to participation in the executive? Which characteristics of the parties can be held responsible? Which characteristics of the parties’ context (electoral system, structure of the state) should be brought into the picture? And what have been the effects of the status change on the party organization, on the party ideology, on its electoral results? These are a lot of questions indeed, that deserve to be organized in a logical way.

2. Some definitions

If new parties in government is our research topic, we need however to clarify first two notions before proceeding into further details: “new party” and “government”. In the previous pages we have referred to new parties as parties belonging to new party families, as parties that do not belong to or cannot be classified according to the
traditional Lipset & Rokkan types of cleavages. We referred thus to parties that have been created (more or less) recently. Yet the research questions mentioned above do not need to be restricted to only parties that are newly created. The general question of status change, of moving from opposition to (potential) government is indeed a much broader one that applies to all parties making this move. Empirically, most of the parties concerned will be young and new parties, but others can be fairly old. The example that immediately comes to the mind here is that of the Italian communist party. The PCI has been around for quite a long time, and has been electorally very strong, but remained on the opposition benches until its transformation into PDS (and later DS).

This actually means that we need to define ‘new parties’ for our purposes as *newly governing parties*. Parties that have previously been in the opposition and that make the move towards government for the first time are newly governing parties. Some of these parties can be old parties that have been locked into the opposition for a long time, some might be new parties that move from their challenging position towards a cooperative position and some might simply be new parties in new party systems. The different historical background of the parties is undoubtedly something that can be used for the understanding of the way in which the status change takes place, but all these parties qualify as newly governing and should therefore remain within the reach of this research programme.

The second notion that we have to clarify is *government*. The problem with government is that its definition and meaning (also for parties) is very context-specific. That will oblige us to be flexible, and to allow different meanings of governing into the empirical analyses. The first variation is the one between one-party governments and coalition governments. It coincides more or less (but not
necessarily so) with the variation between first-past-the-post electoral systems and electoral systems with lower thresholds of representation. It is clear that winning office in a two-party system has a different meaning (and different trajectory) than winning office in a coalition government.

The second one is the variation between political systems with a tradition of majority governments, and those with a tradition of minority governments. In the latter the boundary between governing and not governing can be very vague. Is a party that supports (once in a while or permanently) a minority government also a party in government? The same blurring of boundaries is present in countries (like Belgium) that are regularly in search of extended majorities and therefore solicit the external support of parties not holding government portfolios.

As said above, we need to be flexible here. Reducing the notion of government to the holding of government portfolios excludes processes of status change from opposition to cooperation that are very relevant and also – more important – very comparable with the status change processes occurring when parties move from opposition to really controlling governmental policy domains. The consequence of being flexible in this respect, will however be that we need to take the possible variation in the meaning of government explicitly into account as one of the crucial contextual variables that can explain the evolution of newly governing political parties.

3. Lifespan and strategic choices

Mogens Pedersen (1982) has suggested using the metaphor of the life span to conceptualise the evolution of political parties. The basic idea is that a party is going
through a number of stages, starting with being born and eventually ending with the
death of the party. Parties can however remain in one of these stages for a very long
time. Other authors have already used this model to look explicitly at new parties,
and more in particular to new parties moving towards government (Pedersen, 1982;
Buelens & Lucardie, 1998; Rihoux, 2001; Müller-Rommel, 2002). Pedersen
distinguished between four stages, also assuming that a party can go back and
eventually disappear again. The four stages are declaration (announcing the will to
come a party), authorization (passing the necessary requirements to be
recognized as a party), representation (winning seats) and relevance. We are not so
much interested in the first three of these stages. Our research questions are being
asked when parties have reached the threshold of representation, and have to
decide how they will play their further role in the system. We need therefore to break
down the stage of ‘relevance’ and add explicitly the stage of governmental
participation.

The relevance of a party is a notion based on Sartori (1976). A party is relevant if it
affects the competition in the system. The party then has to be counted as a relevant
actor in the system. Sartori distinguished two types of relevance: blackmail potential
and coalition potential. In the first case, the party is relevant because it affects the
competition amongst the others, but it is itself not a potential coalition partner
(eventually because the other parties do not allow it to enter the government – Sartori
was much inspired here by the position of the PCI in Italy). If relevance is derived
from coalition potential, it means that the party can be (or has been) in government.
We therefore suggest dividing the stage of ‘relevance’ into these two subcategories
that are thus considered to be two consecutive phases in the lifespan of a party. That
does not mean however that all parties move from the first phase to the second, but it
draws the attention to the fact that a threshold is being passed here, and that the changes from one stage or status to the other needs to be analysed and explained.

The amended lifespan model would then be as follows:

DECLARATION → AUTHORIZATION → REPRESENTATION → BLACKMAIL POTENTIAL → COALITION POTENTIAL → GOVERNING

It is the second part of the lifespan that is interesting for us. We start at the point where parties are represented and relevant. And we assume (although that might be questioned in concrete cases) that parties start as blackmail parties, as protest parties, as principled opposition parties. If one stage is empirically not present, that does not need to undermine the logic of the model. The stage of authorization can be irrelevant for parties not having to pass this formal threshold. A party can also skip the representation phase and govern even without having participated in elections, simply because other parties assume that it will be able to gain representation. In other words: the model serves in the very first place a heuristic goal: it draws the attention to critical junctures and eventually ‘rites de passage’ that can occur in the lifespan of a political party.

In the phases that we want to look at more closely, there are two possible thresholds to be passed. The first one is the change in the source of relevance, the move from blackmail to coalition potential. A party having coalition potential can have it because it has governed before, but in the case of a party that has not yet governed, the fact that it accedes to this phase is very important. The second threshold is then the
actual move from opposition to government (keeping in mind that the division line between the two stages might not be very clear-cut in all institutional contexts).

Behind this idea of a lifespan lies the assumption that a party can have different strategic goals, and that these goals are reflected in the position of the party in the lifespan. A party opting for a principled opposition and thus choosing to stay in the stage of blackmail potential is clearly not driven by the will to participate in government. A party having coalition potential, is perceived by the others as being prepared to govern and should therefore show explicit willingness to do so. Yet the story is not that simple. The stages do not simply reflect clear strategic choices, but rather strategic possibilities. A party having blackmail potential might be excluded form power, while it has itself the aspiration to participate in government. The coalition potential of a party can also be the result of its position in the party system (small parties can make or break a coalition), and not so much of its explicit willingness to govern.

In order not to assume an easy link between the stages in the lifespan on the one hand and the strategic choices of the parties on the other hand, the two need to be discussed separately. In other words: the relation between the stages and the strategic choices of the parties has to be problematized as one of the research questions. For mapping the strategic choices of the parties, we can easily use the conceptual tools provided by Harmel & Janda (1994) and by Müller & Strøm (1999). They see three or four primary goals for political parties: vote seeking (winning elections), policy seeking (wanting to realize the programme), office seeking (wanting to hold executive positions) and keeping internal democracy. The latter has clearly been added to make sure that one of the primary goals of the Green parties is brought into the picture. The typology of party goals is meant to be an analytical
typology. All parties will in one way or another try to realize these goals, but the mix of the goals and the predominance of one of them is a matter of empirical variation. The relevance of the strategic mix lies in the fact that parties behave and especially organize in function of these goals, which means that changes in the strategic mix is likely to produce or to be anticipated by a change in the organizational structure of the parties. That clearly makes this conceptual tool very interesting for our purposes.

As said above the stages in the lifespan of political parties are related to the party goals. We will have to focus on the ‘office seeking’ goal. If a party moves from opposition to government, this goal is likely to become or to have become more important. Parties remaining out of power are likely to focus more on vote seeking or on policy seeking. The distinction between policy seeking and office seeking is one that can allow us to understand the strategies of parties in systems with minority governments. In any case the strategic choices of the parties and the way in which they combine the different possible goals have to be our major concern.

4. Explaining and assessing strategic changes: the party variables

In the amended lifespan model there are two thresholds that must retain our attention: the move from blackmail potential to coalition potential and the move from opposition to government. The first is a change that has to be assessed inside the party. It presents itself in the system as a party that might be available for government. The second can be measured from the outside: a party does indeed participate in government. The two changes can be seen as a gradual move towards government, but both can also be analysed separately, especially since we assume
that parties can remain (for a long time) in one of the stages, and do not necessarily move on to the next one.

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BLACKMAIL POTENTIAL → COALITION POTENTIAL → GOVERNING

For each of the two thresholds there are two questions to be answered. The first refers to the causes: why has the party changed its strategy? The second refers to the consequences: what are the effects of this strategic change? The two questions deal with an analytical sequence that is not necessarily a temporal one. Indeed, parties can change in anticipation of a status change, and causes and consequences might then occur at the same time.

Many different variables can be brought into the explanatory models. What follows is a first attempt to draft a list of possible candidates. We present them one after the other, although we have to keep in mind that these variables can interact and that some of them might be much more important than others. The list can be used to organize the answers to the two questions. All these variables contain elements that are able to explain why the party has changed. And all these variables are likely to be affected by the strategic change of a party.

In the next paragraph we will present a similar list of contextual variables. These contextual variables can be added to the list of independent variables for the explanation of the strategic change. On the other hand they also affect the way in which the party variables explain the strategic change, and they affect the way in which the strategic change affects the party variables. The figure below formalizes this logic.
The first party variable is ideology. Two dimensions can be important here. In the first place the degree of radicalism is likely to play a role. A party presenting and defending a radical ideology will not easily allow office seeking becoming the party’s primary goal. If it functions in a two party system, a radical position will keep it far away from the perspective of governmental power. In a multi-party system where coalition formation is required to form a government, a radical party is less likely to be asked, and by keeping its radical position it almost automatically chooses for blackmail based relevance rather than for coalition potential. A separatist party is less likely to govern than a regionalist party. And if governing has forced it to accept compromises, its radicalism can keep it away from power after this first bad experience.

The second dimension here is the type of ideology. This is important for the Greens, because part of the Green programme is related to party organization and to the functioning of the political system. The strong will to be organized deliberately in a non-oligarchic way, to offer the rank and file the possibility to participate and to criticize the party leadership – if leadership there is – can be an element that slows down the pace to the power. The Green ideology can also colour the way in which the consequences of participation in power are perceived. If the daily bargaining that is required to survive in a coalition government limits the internal democracy, this might be seen as much more of a problem in a Green party than in a radical right
wing party for which a centralized organization has never been a problem or an issue.

The second variable is membership. Its role is probably not that important as the role of party ideology, but we can suggest here two plausible hypotheses. In general, membership numbers are going down, which affects the resource base of the parties. Newer and smaller parties have to rely more heavily on membership dues, and are more deeply affected by a reduction of the numbers. This might (together with other factors of course) make participation in power more attractive, because it offers financial resources for the party.

One can also think of possible effects of governing on the membership numbers. A party in government can be – for several reasons – more attractive than a party that is (structurally) in opposition. A governing party has access to individualizable policy rewards (clientelism) and can be more attractive for potential politicians preferring to militate in a party that has more mandates to offer. Governing can also simply make a (small) party suddenly more visible and therefore more attractive.

The third party variable is the relation with civil society. The inclusion of this variable is (again) strongly inspired by the Green parties’ story. Greens are indeed – contrary to right wing extremists – deeply rooted in the new social movements of the 60s and the 70s. Often the decision to pass the threshold of declaration as a party already led to discussions within these new social movements. If a Green party then decides to govern, it might be confronted with a very reluctant set of social movements, expecting it to be closer to its original ideas than what is possible in a coalition government. This is related of course to the more general evolution of the ideology from a radical to a more reformist position. The social movements in the civil society
remain exclusively on the input side of politics and can thus keep a more ‘pure’ and radical view.

A fourth party characteristic that can be important for us is the degree of centralization of the internal decision-making. As said above, we assume that governing leads to more centralization. Yet this hypothesis deserves a closer analysis. Increasing centralization might be a process occurring in parties that have to govern in a coalition (requiring constant negotiations), while parties governing alone do not have that need. On the other hand, we should probably not assume that opposition parties are more participatory. Indeed, the right wing extremist parties or Forza Italia cannot be considered as very open and democratic organizations. Being in the opposition or in government does not really make a difference.

A fifth and more general indicator of party organization is the internal relationships between the components of the party. Mair’s (1994) distinction between the party on the ground, the central party organization and the party in public office can be very useful in this respect. Mair makes the distinction in a historical perspective, describing a ‘migration’ of the political parties (in general) from society to the state. That means that the party on the ground becomes gradually less important, while the party in public office becomes more important. The central party organization has strong links with the party in public office, while the links with the party on the ground are becoming weaker. This strong linkage between parties and the state (and the common need of parties to keep that link strong) has lead to the typology of the ‘cartel party’ (Katz & Mair, 1993) or ‘modern cadre party’ (Koole, 1995).

The role and position of the party in public office is of course the most relevant for us. We need however to break it down in its different components. In Mair’s terminology it refers to both the party in parliament and the party in government. For us the
addition of a link with the party in government is the crucial new development in parties entering government for the first time. Yet the party in parliament can play a significant role in the evolution towards government. A possible scenario would be one in which the parliamentary group acquires more to say in the party decision making, and therefore pushes the party strategy more in the direction of government than in the direction of ideological communication with the rank and file. The increased weight of the party in public office can be an explanation (or an anticipation) for the move towards government. When the party is in government indeed, the presence of the new group (the ministers of the party) will very likely lead to a further strengthening of that component, or to more visible tensions due to the demands related to being in government. The agenda of a governing party will probably be much more influenced by the agenda of the cabinet than by the agenda of the membership or the civil society linked to the party. This internal life of the party, and the way in which the components are related to each other, is clearly a very broad topic that is highly interesting for our research questions.

The sixth party variable that we would like to put on the checklist is the party identity or the institutionalisation of the party. This is inspired by the fact that in practice most of the newly governing parties are new parties. They are thus new in the party system and their position and meaning in that system – both in terms of ideological identity and strategic position – is also new and still in the making. The fact that new parties emerge in party systems that are in a process of transformation, where the old structure of competition and electoral alignment is being challenged, reinforces this problem of unfinished institutionalisation.

Right wing extremist parties govern with conservative parties, and greens govern with socialist parties. That puts these new parties in a very visible and recognizable
position in the structure of competition. But on the other hand it can create problems. The partners in government are also likely to be electoral competitors, thus creating for the new parties the need to keep a distinct identity. All this is very dependent on the political context, and especially on the electoral rules. The French system for instance, requiring the formation of electoral alliances, firmly locks the greens into the leftist block. Today’s structure of competition in the German political system also links the Grünen to the SPD. In Belgium the question of a separate green party identity and the choice for either going alone or forming an electoral alliance with the socialists, has been predominantly on the agenda since the electoral losses of the greens (and the socialist victory) in 2003.

The very fact of governing also affects the party identity. That is linked to the evolution of the party strategy and party ideology. A governing party needs in general to accept compromises, and that is something that is much easier to deal with for a party with a long record of government experience and thus with a governing identity. The very move from opposition to government can be dramatic for a party that has a clear opposition identity. The Austrian FPÖ is an excellent example of this. On the other hand we have seen for instance how the Italian Alleanza Nazionale and (to a lesser extent) the Lega Nord have been able to change their identity in the system without too many problems.

The final party variable on the list is the simplest but also crucial indicator of a party’s strength: the electoral results. The results at the polls are the most important indicator of the realization of the party goal if the party is primarily a vote seeking party. This is the strategy that we assume to be important (together with policy seeking) of a party in opposition. It tries to influence the political agenda and debate by being as strong as possible and by asking attention for the (new) issues that it
wants to raise. A party able to win lots of votes will indeed be able to put its themes on the agenda and to have a number of proposals implemented, even without being itself in government. As long as the electoral results are satisfactory, the strategy will be perceived as paying. Research on the green parties (Dumont, 2002) has shown clearly that the decision to become a governing party has in all cases been preceded by electoral losses. That has lead to internal discussions about the right strategy and has influenced the decision to get ready for government. It would be interesting to see whether this insight can be generalized, whether this pattern – losing at the polls before entering government for the first time – is one that can also be seen in the other party types and party families.

The effect of governing on the electoral results is also very important. If the decision to participate in government is paid cash at the next election, a newly governing party might as well go back to the old strategy and opt for an opposition role again. In order to assess the effects of governing on electoral results of newly governing parties, we need to bring together all the figures.

5. Explaining and assessing strategic changes: the contextual variables

Keeping in mind the logic presented in the figure on page 10 above, we have to look at a number of contextual variables that influence and interfere with the (hypothetical) processes discussed in the previous paragraph. The most important contextual variables have already been mentioned, so that we can suffice with a short presentation here.

The first contextual variable is the **electoral system**. It goes without saying that the electoral system is of crucial importance for the strategic choices available for
political parties. That is the case for the threshold of representation, but remains important for the decision about the role to play after the threshold of relevance has been passed. We already mentioned how electoral thresholds can affect the discussions about party identity and electoral alliances.

The party system is the second contextual variable. We look at the system in terms of structure of competition, because that has direct consequences for the position of a (new) party in that system. Is it a centre party? Is it a pivotal party? Is it needed for a left wing or for a right wing coalition?

The political culture could be a third variable. Here the important element that plays a role is the tradition of government formation and functioning, i.e. the difference between a culture and tradition of minority government and a tradition of majority government. In the first the division line between government and opposition is less clear, and the decision for a new party is therefore less clear-cut and less dramatic. Supporting a minority government is actually a position between opposition and government that deserves to be looked at explicitly.

And finally the state structure needs to be put on the list. The aspect of the state structure that can be relevant for us is the existence of more than one layer of government. That is the case in federal or in decentralized states. It is important for at least two reasons. The first is the fact that federal-type systems have more entry points than unitary systems. The step between opposition and government can be more gradual if it can be made by governing at the sub-state level first. If that sub-state level is a relevant level of substantial policy making, it can allow for a learning process in newly governing parties.
The second reason why the multi-layered nature of a state can be important is the fact that it allows for varying strategies between the levels. It certainly makes the story more complicated, because we need to analyse parties and their varying choices at different levels. The regional and regionalist CiU in Catalonia has been a governing party (even leading the government) at the regional level for more than 20 years. At the national Spanish level the party also participates in elections, but it has so far not governed, though it has supported a minority government of the PSOE and one of the Partido Popular. Today it is again negotiating with the PSOE about supporting the Spanish government. The German PDS is also playing a different role (or allowed to play a different role) at the Land level and at the federal level. In other words: the life of a party is more complex in multi-layered political systems, and that complexity is relevant for the understanding of the strategic choices of parties.

**Conclusion: we have a research programme**

What we have presented in this paper is a very open and undoubtedly incomplete checklist of party characteristics and contextual variables that can allow us to understand and explain how and why parties move from opposition to government. That move is a change in the status of a political party. It involves the crossing of a threshold. We want to know why parties cross the threshold and we want to assess the consequences of that status change. The two questions are fairly simple, but it is clear that they can be broken up in many smaller questions and analyses of separate dimensions. The presented checklist can then help us to organize the empirical findings and can remind us of remaining gaps in our knowledge.
Bibliography


