Conforming to the dominant discourse. Framing convergence and multiparty competition.

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Abstract
This study provides a causal mechanism explaining differences between parties in ‘framing distance’. Put differently, their degree of frame overlap with other parties. Parties within PR systems compete in the wake of future coalition bargaining, and as such, mainstream opposition parties, which have previously been part of governing coalitions, are unlikely to adopt large framing distances since this would limit their coalition appeal. In contrast, challenger parties, parties that have never governed, have every reason to adopt non-centrist framing positions because the probability that they will have to cooperate with other parties is rather low. Nonetheless challengers are expected to reduce their framing distance in response to a more favorable standing in polls as electoral success acts as a trigger for these parties to become more office-seeking. These theoretical propositions are confirmed on the basis of the issue of European integration, utilizing pooled time-series regressions on party manifestos issued by 21 parties between 1987 and 2006 in three political systems (Germany, Netherlands, and UK).

Keywords: framing, engagement, party competition, coalition formation, and European integration

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Introduction

To date, numerous studies have appeared on issue and ideological convergence examining when political parties decide to address the same issues (Sigelman and Buell Jr. 2004; Kaplan et al. 2006; Damore 2004; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010) or adopt similar issue positions (Downs 1957; Cox 1990; Ezrow 2008). Yet hardly any scholarly attention has been devoted to ‘framing convergence’, or the extent to which parties frame issues in similar manner (notable exceptions are Jerit 2008; Hänggli and Kriesi 2012). The aims of this article are twofold. First, it explores whether there are systematic differences across parties regarding their degree of frame overlap with other parties. Then it seeks to explain when parties framing issues in a divergent way decide to converge to the dominant discourse.

These questions add to the scarce research on how political parties employ framing, i.e. to emphasize specific aspects of issues, to manipulate reality (Entman 1993). Whereas previous research has shown that parties hold divergent preferences for particular frames (cf. Helbling et al. 2010; Stratham and Gray 2005), very few studies have focused on the extent or conditions under which parties address the same aspects of an issue (Jerit 2008; Kriesi et al. 2006). This study fills this lacuna by introducing the concept of ‘framing distance’ defined as the extent to which a party’s emphasis of different frames overlaps with other parties in a political system. Subsequently, it provides a causal mechanism explaining differences between parties as regards framing distance. More generally, this endeavor also carries weight for the ongoing work on issue convergence (cf. Sigelman and Buell Jr. 2004; Kaplan et al. 2006; Damore 2004; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Holian 2004). Contrary to issue competition theory, which proclaims that parties exclusively focus on their preferred issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Carmines 1991), existing studies on issue convergence also find overlap in the issues parties emphasize. Yet it may very well be possible that political competitors use such dissimilar frames as to present voters with dueling monologues rather than true dialogue. Consequently, insight is needed in the dynamics of framing converge to affirm that parties truly engage in dialogue rather than talk past each other as issue competition theory predicts.

The main argument is that within proportional systems where parties act in the wake of future coalition bargaining, a party’s framing distance is primarily determined by the extent to which it is office-seeking. Parties that have previously been part of governing coalitions, so called mainstream opposition parties, are unlikely to adopt large framing distances to potential coalition partners since this limits their coalition appeal. In contrast, parties that have never governed, challenger parties, have every reason to divergence because these parties are not constrained by such considerations (see also de Vries and Hobolt 2012; van de Wardt, de Vries
and Hobolt 2012). Yet challengers are expected to reduce their framing distance in response to a more favorable standing in polls because electoral success may act as a trigger for these parties to reconsider their goals (policy, votes, or office) and become more office-seeking.

These theoretical propositions are tested on the case of European integration in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK between 1987 and 2006, which for several reasons constitutes an excellent case-selection. First, the EU is a multidimensional issue that can be framed in multiple ways (Helbling et al. 2010), e.g. in light of economic, political, or social concerns. Prior research has shown that parties indeed hold strong preferences as to how the issue should be framed (cf. Kriesi et al. 2006; Hooghe and Marks 2009), making it a particularly interesting case for studying framing convergence dynamics. Second, the country selection makes it possible to explore the impact of the electoral system (PR versus majoritarian) on parties’ framing distances. The fact that coalition governance is very rare in the UK provides a perfect research design for testing whether coalition considerations determine the framing distances adopted by parties. If this argument holds true, one should expect to find no differences between parties in systems without coalition rule. Indeed, pooled-time-series-regression on 21 parties show that the hypothesized dynamics are only present in Germany and the Netherlands.

This study proceeds as follows. First, I will outline the hypotheses after which the case of European integration is further elaborated upon. Then the dataset, i.e. human-coded party manifesto data, operationalizations and estimation procedure are discussed. In a fourth step, the results are presented. Finally I conclude by summarizing the main findings, their theoretical implications and avenues for future research.

Theory and hypotheses

According to Entman (1993, p. 52), ‘to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and or treatment recommendation’. It should be noted that a frame is more than an argument as the latter refers to a specific justification underlying a position while framing is the process by which parties selectively emphasize particular dimensions of a conflict when engaging in debate. A classic example of framing is given by Riker (1986) when discussing how Senator Warren Magnuson was able to win a majority in the Senate for an amendment that would prohibit the transportation of nerve gas through the states of Washington and Oregon. Initially the
Senator opposed the transport in light of arguments concerning the health of inhabitants of both states. Yet he only managed to win a majority after he had added a second dimension to the conflict, emphasizing the constitutional side of the issue, i.e. inconsistent with recent legislation, the President had not consulted the Senate on the matter. Reframing the issue was thus a strategic maneuver enabling ‘those who would have lost in one dimension [to win] in two’ (Riker 1986, p. 113).

The few empirical studies examining how parties use framing as a strategic device have shown that parties hold strong preferences regarding the aspects of issues they emphasize. Much of this work has specifically focused on the issue of European integration (Helbling et al. 2010; Stratham and Gray 2005; Wüest 2009), arguing that green parties, for instance, tend to highlight the cultural dimension (i.e. multiculturalist-universalist arguments) of the European integration process when supporting Europe, while activating economic considerations (i.e. labor and social security-related arguments) to justify con-positions. In turn, the exact opposite holds true for radical right parties. Analogous to issue ownership theory (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996), parties may thus become associated with certain frames and considered as ‘owning’ that frame by the electorate. A fine example includes the ‘master frame’ employed by the Danish People’s Party which enabled them ‘to mime [niches in the electorate] by […] combining ethno-pluralist xenophobia and anti-political establishment populism’ (Rydgren 2004, p. 474).

To date, few efforts have been directed towards understanding if and under which conditions parties will emphasize the same aspects of an issue. Notable exceptions include studies by Jerit (2008) and Hänggli and Kriesi (2012), providing evidence that while parties mostly focus on their own frames, they do to some extent engage in dialogue on their opponents’ frames in an attempt to gain public support for their policies (Hänggli and Kriesi 2012; Jerit 2008). Yet despite the value of these studies, they fail to provide a causal mechanism explaining differences between parties in their likelihood to address the same sides of issues. For this purpose, this study introduces the concept of ‘framing distance’, defined as the degree a party’s emphasis of different frames overlaps with the other parties operating in a given party system. In this regard, greater dissimilarity between a party’s emphasis of anissue-specific frame and the average emphasis attached by other parties to that same frame contribute to a larger framing distance. Parties may thus vary considerable from one another regarding the distance they adopt to ‘the dominant discourse’, and as such, this study proposes a theoretical framework explaining this variation.
The impact of electoral systems on framing distance

The strategic mobilization of frames lies at the core of issue evolution and manipulation approaches developed within the United States (US) (cf. Riker 1986; Schattschneider 1960; Baumgartner and Jones 2009). Consequently, the limited attention for framing convergence may be due to the fact that theoretical approaches originating from the US two-party context provide little reason to expect small framing distances between parties. In his seminal work, Schattschneider (1960, p. 68) argues that ‘the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power’, implying that the governing party has an obvious incentive to stick to the current frames of reference in order to reinforce the status-quo, while the opposition should try to modify the terms of the macro-political debate with new frames. As such, a political system is never in equilibrium, framing, or ‘issue definition’, being the driving force in both stability and instability’ (Baumgartner and Jones 2009). Therefore framing has been portrayed as an optimal rhetorical strategy, predicting that opposing sides of a political debate will emphasize different considerations, leading them in effect to talk past one another (Jerit 2008).

Yet, while maximizing votes suffices to gain office in a majoritarian system such as the US, the main argument of this study is that parties operating in an electoral system stimulating proportional representation (PR) face a trade-off between votes and office (cf. Strom 1990). In accordance with Duverger’s (1954) law, proportionality fosters multiparty competition, which in turn increases the likelihood of coalition governance as no single party is likely to gain a majority in the absence of a ‘winner takes all’ principle. Thus in order to gain office, parties need to cooperate. The fact that future coalition negotiation are always on the horizon has clear consequences for party behavior. Specifically, Schofield and co-authors (1998) have demonstrated on the basis of Dutch and German elections that parties refrain from adopting centrist policy positions that would maximize their vote share, but instead put themselves in a good position for the post-election negotiations.

For various reasons parties could damage their coalition appeal by adopting large framing distances. First, in line with previous research indicating that parties with closer policy positions are more likely to enter coalition negotiations than ideologically distant parties (cf. Warwick 1996), it would be rather difficult to establish consensus on government policy when all participants talk past each other due to their unwillingness to formulate similar problem definitions. Second, the state of the world strikes back on governments so candidates for office are under pressure to address the same aspects of reality rather than their own (Sigelman and Buell Jr. 2004). Third, deliberative democracy is an important political
norm in Western societies entailing that especially parties wanting to join a coalition cannot just refrain from dialogue with potential coalition partners during election campaigns (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen). Note that framing convergence not automatically implies that parties adopt the same tone on issues. Addressing the same aspects of important issues during elections should be seen as a minimal condition for parties to enter coalition negotiations after which they can further settle ideological disputes.

Considering that small framing distances aid the process of coalition formation, I thus expect parties in PR systems to adopt smaller framing distances than those acting in majoritarian systems for whom it suffices to maximize their votes to secure office benefits. This can be formalized as follows:

**Electoral system hypothesis (H1):** Parties operating in PR systems adopt smaller framing distances than those operating in majoritarian systems.

*Differences between parties within PR systems*

Downs (1957, p. 137) defines a party as a ‘team of men who seek office’. Yet parties operating in PR systems face a trade-off between multiple goals: votes, office and policy, which respectively refer to maximization of votes, maximization of elected office, or advocacy of the party’s preferred policies (Strom 1990). While the goals of vote-maximization and office overlap in majoritarian systems, parties with office aspirations acting in PR systems need to make compromises. Therefore parties are unlikely to be office-seeking to the same degree. Thus, rather than pitting all opposition parties together expecting that the opposition will exclusively focus on its own frames to unseat government while the latter does the same to keep the opposition out of power, as the literature based on two-party systems predicts (cf. Schattschneider 1960; Baumgartner and Jones 2009), we need to differentiate between challenger and mainstream opposition parties to understand dynamics of framing convergence in PR systems (de Vries and Hobolt 2012; van de Wardt, de Vries and Hobolt 2012).

Mainstream opposition parties, those who frequently rotate between government and opposition, are likely cautious to frame important issues in a divergent manner. While these parties are currently not in government, they bear a strong resemblance to governing parties in that they inhabit similar majoritarian and pivotal positions on the dominant dimension of political conflict which eases coalition bargaining. It might seem tempting for mainstream opposition parties to distantage themselves from the main discourse during election
campaigns, for instance to satisfy their more radical rank-and-file whom they can only compensate for their efforts with policy concessions as a result of their past term in opposition (Strom 1990). Yet doing so is likely to damage their coalition appeal as credible candidates for coalition governance are expected to adopt the same problem definitions and should also engage in dialogue on aspects of issues deemed important by other parties, may it be because of ideological reasons or because events in the real world direct them to do so.

Quite the contrary holds true for challenger parties, defined as parties that never held political office, since the chances for challengers to be part of future governing coalitions are rather slim. Research demonstrates that past governing experience is one of the important determinants of prospective coalition membership as it reduces the uncertainty for potential partners about the way a party will behave once in office (Warwick 1996). In the words of Warwick (1996, p. 499), situations of government formation do not ‘represent a totally new start’, but should be seen as ‘an iterated game’ in which past experience matters. As a result, challenger parties have every reason to diverge from the dominant discourse and exclusively emphasize the aspects of topics that are favorable to the party. Exactly this mechanism may offer a more in-depth explanation of why Helbling and his co-authors (2010, p. 497) have found that fringe parties tend to use more ‘consistent discourse’ when discussing European integration than established parties, which they note: ‘apply different justifications in different situations, and also employ functional arguments to support European integration’. In line with the theoretical argument of this paper, this difference is likely due to the fact that challengers can afford discussing issues one-sidedly as they are not constrained by considerations involving coalition-formation.

Nonetheless models of party behavior are not static as parties’ election strategies are typically conditioned by the anticipation of future benefits (Strom 1990), and as such, there may be considerable differences between electorally small and large challenger parties. On the basis of insight derived from party change theory (see also Harmel and Janda 1994), challenger parties can be expected to hold low aspirations regarding votes and consecutive office membership as long as they are electorally small. Instead they are likely to focus on policy goals (Harmel et al. 1995), for instance by advocating ‘pure’ ideology or encouraging participation through intra-party democracy, as is the case with green challenger parties (Burchell 2001). Yet (unexpected) electoral success may serve as a strong impetus for change, fuelling the challenger to moderate its party’s platform in an attempt to become an acceptable coalition partner to mainstream parties and reap the material rewards of office (Harmel et al. 1995). Indeed, prior research on the effect of populist parties on the policy programs of
mainstream parties failed to confirm that mainstream parties become more populist in response to electoral loss, but rather that populist parties themselves become less populist when holding larger vote shares in parliament (Rooduijn et al. 2012).

In sum, challenger parties are expected to adopt larger framing distances than mainstream opposition or governing parties when facing low levels of support in the polls. In this phase, policy goals—promoting a message by sticking to their own frames—supersede vote or office aspirations. However, when challengers find themselves confronted with higher levels of support, they are likely to become more office-seeking and moderate their framing distance. Mainstream parties, in turn, may they be governing or in opposition, are always constrained by coalition considerations and will be reluctant to adopt high framing distances regardless of their electoral support. These propositions can be summarized in the following two hypotheses:

**Challenger framing distance hypothesis** (H2a): *Within PR systems, challenger parties hold the largest framing distance at low levels of electoral support. Yet in response to higher levels of electoral support challengers decrease their framing distance.*

**Mainstream parties framing distance hypothesis** (H2b): *Within PR systems, there are no differences in framing distance between mainstream opposition and governing parties regardless of their level of electoral support.*

The hypotheses above are motivated by expectations regarding the extent to which parties are office-seeking, which subsequently affects framing distance. One should thus expect to find different dynamics in majoritarian systems where coalition government is highly unlikely to occur. While insights from the US literature not only provide little reason to expect small framing distances (H1), it is also unlikely that framing distances will vary between parties within majoritarian systems. Indeed, the degree to which the government sticks to its preferred frames mirrors the attempts of the opposition to challenge the status-quo with new frames (Riker 1986; Schattschneider 1960; Baumgartner and Jones 2009), implying that framing distances will be largely the same. Furthermore, challenger parties have no incentive to decrease their framing distance due to a better standing in election polls since the chance that they will have to cooperate with other parties is rather low. Maintaining focus on the frames on which they have a performance advantage thus appears to be a better strategy to
secure office than converging to the discourse of the other parties. As a result, the dynamics expressed in H2a and H2b are unlikely to surface in majoritarian systems, which can be expressed as follows:

**H3:** Within majoritarian systems there are no differences in framing distance between parties regardless of their level of electoral support.

**The case of European integration**

The hypotheses of this study are tested by examining the framing distances adopted by 21 parties in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK on European integration between 1987 and 2006.\(^2\) The EU issue presents an excellent testing-ground for the hypotheses of this study. Due to the fact that the EU has transformed from a merely intergovernmental body with economic and market-related purposes into a supranational regime with increased political competencies, the issue has become more-and-more multidimensional (cf. Helbling et al. 2010; Green-Pedersen 2012). Parties could either choose to emphasize economic, cultural, or political aspects of the issue. For mainstream parties in particular this has caused considerable trouble (Kriesi et al. 2006; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Marks and Wilson 2000). While mainstream parties on the left are confronted with the dilemma that they generally favor further social and cultural integration but hold more ambivalent positions towards economic integration, mainstream parties of the right face the precise opposite dilemma (Kriesi et al. 2006). Because of these inconsistencies, the EU has been a major ‘touchstone of dissent’ within established parties and key source of party infighting (Taggart 1998). Furthermore, public opinion on Europe is particularly susceptible to construction (i.e. priming, framing and cueing) as the consequences of European integration can usually not be induced from direct experience (Hooghe and Marks 2009). For these reasons, parties can be expected to hold strong and divergent preferences as to how the EU should be framed. Yet on the other hand, parties in power must deal with issues arising from Brussels implying that they cannot just ignore particular sides of the issue. Therefore ‘any party entering government will have little choice but to play by the rules’, also implying that ‘parties vying for office experience the pressure to behave responsibly’ (Crum 2007, p. 66). Crum (2007) finds empirical support for this argument as mainstream opposition parties usually endorse EU Treaty reforms in order

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not to alienate themselves from future coalition partners. As such, a party’s framing distance on the issue provides a perfect indication for its readiness to govern in a coalition since governments framing Europe in an ambiguous manner run the risk of isolation and ineffectiveness at the EU level. Given the importance of EU framing congruence for governing parties, the issue constitutes an excellent case for testing the main mechanism of this study that parties’ office aspirations shape framing distances.

The country selection, in turn, makes it possible to explore the impact of electoral system characteristics on framing convergence. While the German and Dutch electoral systems seek to maximize proportionality, i.e. parties receive the same share of seats as their share of votes, the ‘first past the post’ system in the UK fosters disproportionality. Indeed, the Gallagher index (1991) measuring the level of disproportionality averaged over the elections observed in the sample is considerably higher in the UK (15.9) than in Germany (3.35) or the Netherlands (1) (Gallagher 2012). This has clear implications for the likelihood of coalition governance to occur, as illustrated by the fact that the UK did not experience coalition rule throughout the sample period, while Germany and the Netherlands were governed by coalitions in each of the elections included in the data. Overall the considerable variation regarding party system proportionality provides a perfect design for testing the argument that coalition considerations shape the likelihood for parties to decrease framing distance.

Finally, the country selection offers the practical advantage that polling data is widely available making it possible to measure a party’s level of support by means of a more recent indicator than its vote share obtained in previous elections as is typically done in the party change literature (cf. Janda et al. 1995; Somer-Topcu 2009). Parties that performed bad in previous elections may very well have improved their situation when facing new elections, which stimulates office-seeking behavior and subsequently affects their framing distance to other parties.

**Data and operationalizations**

In order to examine the framing distances parties adopt on the EU as well as the influence of electoral support and electoral systems on this linkage, a longitudinal cross-national dataset was compiled containing data on 21 parties between 1987 and 2006 in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK (N=86).

A party’s framing distance is the dependent variable in this study. For the necessary data on the EU frames used by individual parties, I relied on human-coded party manifesto
Given that parties not only publish their election programs to communicate their policy positions on preferred issues (Budge 2001), but also to selectively emphasize specific aspects of issues, these documents constitute a valid source for measuring the prominence of EU frames. The coding procedure was as follows. First, the coders isolated the statements concerning the EU in each party manifesto, and then indicated to which EU sub-issue the particular statement belonged, e.g. accession of countries, foreign policy, and immigration. In a subsequent step, for each sub-issue coders could choose from five non-mutually-exclusive frames, i.e. the peace frame, the prosperity frame, the pride frame, the profit frame and the politics frame. A peace frame was coded when a party discussed a sub-issue in terms of (international) security, diplomacy and/or war and peace; prosperity framing refers to the extent to which sub-issues are presented from a social welfare or environmental angle; the pride frame denotes whether sub-issues are presented in light of national identity, ethnic, or cultural arguments; the profit frame focuses on economic or financial aspects of the EU; finally a politics frame signifies that EU issues are discussed from an institutional or political-strategic viewpoint. When the relative importance parties attach to each of the five frames is known, a party’s framing distance to the other parties competing in that election can be calculated by means of the following formula:

\[ d(a, \bar{b}) = \sum_{i=1}^{n} |a_i - \bar{b}_i| \]

Where:

- \( d(a, \bar{b}) \) is the absolute framing distance of the focal party to the EU discourse of the other parties participating in an election.
- \( a_i \) is the proportion of the focal party’s manifesto framing the EU in terms of frame \( i \), obtained by dividing the number of times it mentions frame \( i \) by the total number of EU statements in its manifesto.

The author expresses his gratitude to Catherine de Vries for sharing this dataset.

Note that inter-coder reliabilities scores (calculated on 10% of the data) between coders from different countries as well as within the same country ranged between a Krippendorf Alpha of .69 and .87 for the specific frames used by parties.

Analyses in which these city-bloc-distances were squared, creating a measure of Euclidian distance, yielded essentially the same results. Analyses available upon request.
\( \bar{b}_i \) is the average proportion of sentences devoted to frame \( i \) by all parties except for the focal party.

\( i \) is the index of the five frames (i.e. peace, pride, profit, prosperity, and politics).

For each individual party, this measure thus calculates the sum of differences between the importance the party attaches to each EU frame vis-à-vis the mean emphasis of other parties for that particular frame. In so doing, it adequately captures the concept of framing distance, which was defined as the degree a party’s overall frame usage overlaps with the other parties competing in an election.

The first key independent variable of this study indicating the type of party, i.e. challenger, mainstream opposition or governing party was coded on the basis of the information presented in the ‘ParlGov’ database (Döring and Manow 2010). A party was operationalized as a governing party if it was governing in the run-up to the election; as mainstream opposition party if it was in opposition at that time but had taken part in a government coalition at least once since 1945; and as a challenger if it was in opposition and had never governed during the same period.

In turn, the second key independent variable, a party's electoral standing, was captured by measuring the support for a party in the most recent election poll prior to the ratification of its manifesto at the party’s election congress. This was done so as to meet the fundamental prerequisite of causality for a cause to precede its consequence. Due to the fact that polling data was widely available—at least monthly and mostly even on a weekly basis—it was possible to create a very fine-grained measure of parties’ electoral support before launching their election programs.\(^6\) Note that polling companies in Germany and the UK always present vote shares while the Dutch polling agency TNS NIPO mostly publicizes a party’s predicted number of seats.\(^7\) Hence, in order to create a functionally equivalent measure of electoral support, vote shares were used to depict the electoral strength of German and British parties in the polls, while for the Dutch parties seat shares were calculated by dividing

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\(^6\) For the Netherlands the TNS NIPO polling data was used; for Germany the data from ‘Forschungsgruppe Wahlen: Politbarometer’; and for the UK the data collected by Ipsos MORI. The author thanks Tim de Beer and Michel Reijmerink from TNS NIPO for providing the necessary data for the period prior to the Dutch 1989 and 1994 elections.

\(^7\) Due to the overrepresentation of East German respondents in the accumulated 1990 Politbarometer data, I reweighted the proportion of East and West Germans in accordance with the 1990 population census. More information on this procedure is available from the author upon request.
the number of seats a party received in the polls by the total number of seats available in the legislature (150). 

The third independent variable of this study, the type of party system, i.e. PR or majoritarian was captured by means of a dummy variable (1 PR, 0 majoritarian). As explained in the section discussing the case-selection, the Netherland and Germany are proportional systems, while the UK is a majoritarian system.

Finally, I control for a party’s absolute EU positional distance to the other parties operating in an election so as to ensure that a party’s framing distance is not a proxy for the extremeness of its position. Party positions were calculated by subtracting the EU statements that according to the coders provided a negative evaluation of the EU from the positive ones, divided by the total number of EU statements a party made in its manifesto. While the modest Pearson’s correlation (.4) between the framing and positional distance variables supports the proposition that one should distinguish party positions from frames, controlling for this variable makes it possible to test whether parties moderate their framing distance in response to polls irrespective of their issue position.

**Estimation procedure**

The data at hand were treated as pooled time-series, defining political parties as the cross-sectional units that vary over elections. Following the recommendations of Beck and Katz (1995) panel corrected standard errors (PCSE) were estimated to deal with panel heteroskedasticity (i.e. the fact that error-terms have different variances across parties), contemporaneous correlation (i.e. that the errors of party i at time t may be correlated with party j at time t), and serial correlation, that is to say, the complications that arise when errors tend to be dependent from one period to the next within parties. Tests indicated that each type of correlation indeed was present in the data. A common alternative for dealing with serial correlation is the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable in the right hand side of the equation (Beck and Katz 1995). Yet more recent work gives primacy to the Prais-Winsten solution used in this study for handling the panel-specific AR(1) error structure since a lagged

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8 For some parties in the periods prior to the Dutch 1989 and 1994 elections only predicted vote-shares were available. Since for the Netherlands electoral strength is measured by seat shares, I transformed vote to seat shares by means of the d’Hondt method used in the Netherlands for the allocation of seats.

9 The Woolridge (1999) test for serial correlation was used, a modified Wald statistic proposed by Greene (1990) to detect panel heteroskedasticity, and the Pesaran (2004) test to examine the degree of contemporaneous correlation.
dependent variable absorbs a large part of the trend in the dependent variable and likely biases the estimates (Achen 2000; Greene 1990; Plümper et al. 2005). Finally, relevant tests ensured that the dependent and independent variables were stationary (cf. Asteriou and Hall 2007).\(^{10}\)

The *Electoral system hypothesis* (H1) positing that parties in PR systems adopt smaller framing distances can be answered by examining the two-way interactions between the type of party (challenger, mainstream opposition or governing party) and the kind of electoral system (PR versus majoritarian). Yet the *Challenger* (H2a) and *Mainstream parties framing distance* hypotheses (H2b) as well as H3, which jointly imply that only challengers within PR systems reduce their framing distance in response to a more favorable standing in election polls, require three-way interactions between party type, electoral system and electoral standing. Thus, in order to simultaneously explore all hypotheses, the following model was specified:

\[
(1) \quad \text{Framing distance}_t = b_0 + b_1(\text{standing in polls}) + b_2(\text{CP}_t) + b_3(\text{MOP}_t) + b_4(\text{PR}) + b_5(\text{CP}*\text{standing in polls}) + b_6(\text{MOP}*\text{standing in polls}) + b_7(\text{CP}*\text{PR}) + b_8(\text{MOP}*\text{PR}) + b_9(\text{standing in polls}^2 * \text{PR}) + b_{10}(\text{CP}*\text{standing in polls}^2 * \text{PR}) + b_{11}(\text{MOP}*\text{standing in polls}^2 * \text{PR}) + e
\]

where:

- Framing distance\(_t\) = the framing distance the focal party adopts to the other parties in the current election \(t\).
- \(\text{CP}_t\) = 1 if the focal party is in opposition and has never governed since 1945, 0 if otherwise.
- \(\text{MOP}_t\) = 1 if the focal party is in opposition and has previously governed since 1945, 0 if otherwise.
- Standing in polls\(_t\) = the percentage of votes (in Germany and UK) or seats (in case of the Netherlands) held by the focal party according to the most recent election poll prior to the ratification of its manifesto.

\(^{10}\) Since conventional unit root tests are unavailable for unbalanced panel data, each variable was regressed on its lagged value controlling for the unit fixed effects. By means of F-tests it was further examined whether the null-hypothesis could be rejected that the coefficient of the lagged dependent variable was equal or larger than 1 as the latter provides evidence in favor of a non-stationary process (Plümper and Neumayer, 2006). In each instance the null-hypothesis of non-stationarity could be rejected implying that all series are stationary.
PR = 1 if the focal party operates in a PR system, 0 if it operates in a majoritarian system.

The dependent variable denotes the framing distance a party adopts to its competitors. Yet for two reasons the hypotheses of this study cannot be evaluated on the basis of the standard errors calculated in the regression model. First, due to the presence of the interactions in the equation, \( b_2 \) and \( b_3 \) capture the framing distance of respectively challengers and mainstream opposition parties compared to the reference category ‘governing parties’ in majoritarian systems (PR=0) when their level of support in the polls is zero. Recall, however, that H2a, H2b and H3 formulate explicit expectations about the framing distance of parties for specific levels of electoral support (i.e. lower or higher values in H2a and for each value in H2b and H3). With the intention of being as thorough as possible, I will also test H1 by examining the differences between challengers, mainstream opposition and governing parties in PR systems and their counterparts operating in majoritarian system for each value of electoral support observed in the sample. Second, the sum of \( b_1+b_5+b_9+b_{10} \) indeed depicts the effect of a one-percentage increase in electoral support on framing distance for challengers, but the standard errors in the regression model will only be indicative of significant differences across regression slopes while H2a, H2b and H3 are about the substantive effects of electoral support on framing distance for the different party types: whether slopes significantly differ from zero. For these reasons, it was necessary to calculate marginal effects and their standard errors to evaluate the hypotheses of this study (see also Brambor, Clark and Golder 2006).

**Descriptive statistics**

Table 1 displays the framing distances adopted by the parties in each of the elections. The face validity of the measure appears to be quite good as radical left (‘Linke’ in Germany and Socialist Party in the Netherlands), radical right (PVV and CP’86), and green parties (Grünen in Germany and ‘GroenLinks’ in the Netherlands), labeled niche parties (cf. Adams et al. 2006), tend to adopt the largest framing distances. The fact that these parties were also challengers in each or most of the elections (as depicted by high values under the column ‘challenger score’) confirms that challenger status is an important explanation for the variation in framing distance across parties operating in PR systems. While at first glance the low framing distance of the Dutch populist-rightwing LPF seems at odds with this proposition, it should be noted that electoral support for this challenger was extremely high in the run-up to the 2002
elections. Eventually the LPF entered a coalition with the mainstream VVD and CDA. Thus rather than disconfirming the theoretical propositions, this shows that large challengers indeed decrease their framing distance so as to improve their coalition appeal. In turn, the lower average framing distance of the Liberal Democrats in comparison to Labour provides a first indication that distinguishing between challenger and mainstream opposition parties is irrelevant in majoritarian systems. While the figures discussed thus far conform to the expectations, they provide little evidence that absolute framing distances are larger in majoritarian systems (H1). Yet more formal tests are required to provide definite answers to the research questions.

-- Table 1 about here --

Results
The results for the pooled time-series regressions are depicted in table 2. As explained, predictive margins were calculated to test the hypotheses. In order to facilitate interpretation, the parties’ predicted framing distances and corresponding standard errors are graphed in figure 1, 2, 3 and 4.

-- Table 2 about here --

To begin with the Electoral System Hypothesis (H1), holding that parties in PR systems adopt smaller framing distances than those in majoritarian systems, a simple two-sample t-test revealed that although the average framing distance is slightly higher in majoritarian systems (diff=.03), this difference is statistically insignificant (p=.67). Yet it may be possible that differences between electoral systems only hold for particular types of parties and/or specific levels of electoral support. Therefore figure 1 depicts the predicted margins for challengers, mainstream opposition and governing parties in PR systems vis-à-vis their counterparts acting in majoritarian systems. The y-axis denotes the predicted framing distance, while observed values of electoral support are graphed along the x-axis. Consequently, non-overlapping confidence bounds imply that framing distances significantly differ between parties in different electoral systems. As can be seen, only mainstream opposition parties in PR systems adopt significantly lower framing distances than their equivalents in majoritarian systems, but these differences dwindle and become insignificant after support amounts to 37 percent. Given that for none of the values of electoral support the framing distance of
challengers and governing parties differs from their respective counterparts, there is only limited evidence for the first hypothesis.

-- Figure 1 about here --

Turning to the hypothesized differences between parties within the same electoral system, figure 2 depicts the marginal effects of performance in the polls on framing distance for the different types of parties. Marginal effects should not be confused with the predictive margins used elsewhere as in this case the y-axis denotes the effect of a party’s electoral standing on its framing distance. As can be seen from the confidence bounds, the slope for challenger parties in PR systems significantly differs from zero ($b=-.024$, $p=.009$). In response to a one-percent increase in seat or vote share, challengers will thus decrease their framing distance by .024.\textsuperscript{11} In turn, the fact that the slope coefficient for mainstream parties, may they be governing or in opposition, entrap the zero-line indicate that electoral support exerts no effect on their framing distance.

-- Figure 2 about here --

While these findings are consistent with the Challenger Framing Distance (H2a) and Mainstream Parties Framing Distance (H2b) hypotheses, recall that these propositions also make explicit predictions on the parties’ framing distances for differing values of electoral support. As such, figure 3 shows the predicted framing distance for parties acting in PR systems for all the observed levels of support in the polls, while figure 4 graphs the same dynamics for majoritarian systems. The higher intercept for challenger parties in figure 3 implies that these parties initially have a significantly larger framing distance to the dominant EU discourse than mainstream opposition and governing parties. Yet in response to increasing levels of support in polls, more specifically when they receive about six percent of the votes or seats, the framing distance of challenger parties no longer differs significantly from mainstream opposition parties. Subsequently, challengers bridge the gap with governing parties.

\textsuperscript{11} The maximum framing distance that a party could adopt in theory is 5, which would be the case when a party mentions each of the five EU frames in each sub-issue in its manifesto, while the competing parties in the elections emphasize none of the EU frames; or the other way around, in case all parties mention each of the frames in 100 percent of their EU sentences, while the party uses no EU frames whatsoever.
parties when their support is around seven percent as can be seen from the overlapping confidence intervals. The fact that challengers even adopt lower framing distances than mainstream parties when their support in the polls reaches around 35 percent can be discarded given that observed support for challengers ranges between 0-19 percent.

-- Figure 3 about here --

Intuitively it makes sense for a challenger to become more office-seeking when its support is around 6 percent of the vote since in multiparty systems such vote shares suffice to make a party a candidate for office. Consider for instance the German Greens who after receiving 6.7 percent of the vote joined a government coalition for the first time—which led to considerable conflict with the party’s activists as the leadership had to make many policy compromises in return for office. Likewise the Dutch Greens moderated their policy well before the 2012 elections in response to similar levels of support in polls; for instance by supporting the deployment of Dutch troops to Afghanistan for training police officers and by moderating their EU position. Consequently, levels of support around 6 percent of the vote fuel office-seeking behavior within challenger parties implying that they are also likely to reduce their framing distance on important issues such as the EU.

Support in the polls exerts no effect on the framing distance of mainstream opposition parties, however, as can be derived from the fact that their confidence intervals overlap with governing parties for each observed value of support (.67-52 percent). Thus, regardless of their electoral support, mainstream parties seek to maintain their coalition appeal. Altogether the results fully confirm the Challenger Party Framing Distance (H1a) and Mainstream Parties Framing Distance (H1b) hypotheses.

As a final test for the proposition that office aspirations determine the framing distances held by parties, one should expect to find no differences between parties in majoritarian systems (H3). Indeed, Figure 1 and 4 mutually support this last hypothesis. On the one hand figure 1 shows that the substantive effect of a party’s standing in polls does not significantly differ from zero for any of the parties. On the other hand, the overlapping confidence bounds of challengers, mainstream opposition and governing parties in figure 4 demonstrate that within majoritarian systems there are no differences in framing distance between parties for any of the observed levels of electoral support.
As for controls, the positive statistically significant effect (b=.21, p<.1) of a party’s EU positional distance indicates that parties with more extreme positions are also more apt to frame the issue divergently.

-- Figure 4 about here --

In sum, the findings fully confirm the theoretical framework set forth in this study, arguing that the extent to which parties are office-seeking and thus constrained by relations with potential coalition partners shapes their framing distance on important issues like the EU where credible candidates for coalition governance cannot run away from. The fact that there are no significant differences between parties operating in a system where coalition governments are highly unlikely further increases confidence in the findings. That said, there is only limited evidence for the proposition that absolute framing distances are higher in majoritarian systems. Why is that so? A first possible explanation could be that the ideal of deliberative democracy not only applies to PR systems, implying that to a certain extent parties in a majoritarian system also need to engage in dialogue on the same aspect of an issue in order to convince the public of their policies. This line of reasoning is consistent with the findings of Jerit (2008) originating from the US two-party context, that even though the Democrats and Republicans mostly stick to their owned frames, engagement is more effective at increasing support for important reforms. Second, under the assumption that the mean party EU discourse and the framing preferences of the median voter overlap to some extent, parties operating in majoritarian system may be reluctant to adopt extreme framing distances as they have to sway the median voter to their block.

Sensitivity analyses

Given that the German and Dutch data were pooled because both countries have a PR system, it is important to ascertain that the results for the Challenger Party Framing Distance (H2a) and Mainstream Parties Framing Distance (H2b) hypotheses are not driven by a single country. As can be seen from figure 5, this is not the case since the dynamics observed in both countries show an identical pattern. Challengers hold the largest framing distance when facing low levels of support in polls, while reducing their distance in response to rising levels of support. In turn, mainstream opposition parties do not differ from governing parties for all observed values of electoral support.

-- Figure 5 about here --
Discussion

‘Party competition is not just about […] demands, ideologies, or even leaderships […] It is also a competition between contested terms of reference’

(Mair 1997, p. 953).

The above quote captures the necessity for ongoing work on party competition to expand its focus beyond the strategic reasons for parties to adopt certain policy positions, or selectively emphasize issues, but also to gain more knowledge on how parties strategically use framing when engaging in political debate. While most studies have focused on frame ownership (cf. Helbling et al. 2010; Stratham and Gray 2005), expecting that parties largely talk past each other, this study seeks to provide an understanding of framing convergence (see also Hänggli and Kriesi 2012; Jerit 2008). Specifically, it provides a causal mechanism explaining systematic differences between parties regarding their ‘framing distance’ on the issue of European integration, defined as the degree to which a party’s frame emphasis overlaps with other parties within a given legislature. Theoretical approaches originating from the US two-party context provide little reason to expect substantive differences between parties: the degree to which the government sticks to its preferred frames mirrors the attempts of the opposition to challenge the status-quo with different frames (Riker 1986; Schattschneider 1960). Yet within PR systems parties need to cooperate in order to trade votes for office.

The main finding of this study is that within PR systems the degree to which parties are office-seeking shapes their likelihood to adopt centrist framing positions in the discourse. In line with previous research showing that challenger parties are more likely to resort to issue entrepreneurship (Hobolt and de Vries 2010), or to mobilize wedge issues (van de Wardt, de Vries and Hobolt 2012), this study demonstrates that parties that have never governed are also the usual suspects to adopt large framing distances. In turn, parties that have governed in the past, so-called mainstream opposition parties are unlikely to jeopardize their coalition appeal. Yet when challengers are confronted with electoral success in the polls they will reconsider their goals, become more office-seeking and likely to reduce their framing distance to other parties so as to become more attractive coalition partners. These findings are relevant for three reasons. First, the results strengthen the conclusions reached in the issue convergence literature that parties not only talk past each other, as issue competition theory predicts, but that there is considerable overlap in the issue emphasis of parties (cf. Sigelman and Buell Jr. 2004; Kaplan et al. 2006; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). This study zooms in on a specific issue and also finds that there is certain correspondence in frame emphasis. Yet
parties operating in PR systems are not equally likely to emphasize the same dimensions of an issue. Subsequently, the second and most important contribution of this study is that rather than pitting opposition parties together, a distinction between challenger and mainstream opposition parties must be made in order to understand the dynamics of framing convergence in PR systems. Third, the results demonstrate that a party’s electoral standing in the polls acts as an impetus for change, and as such, not only a party's actual number of seats should be taken into account in future studies explaining party change.

This study also raises some questions deserving further research. While the EU is an excellent issue for testing the main mechanism of this study that office aspirations determine a party's framing distance, framing convergence dynamics on other issues merit further attention as soon as data comes available. Second, while election programs provide a valid source for measuring framing distance, future research could explore patterns of framing convergence during election debates. Finally, inter-party ‘frame trespassing’ offers a promising avenue for further research, i.e. to explore in more detail how frame owners can force other parties to engage in dialogue on that aspect of the issue. Thus, considering that the existing literature on the use of frames by political parties predominantly focusses on how parties selectively emphasize their own frames, framing convergence offers an important area for future research. What this article offers is the introduction of the concept of framing distance and a causal mechanism explaining variation between parties in the distance they hold to the dominant discourse.
References


Table 1. Framing distances adopted by parties in Germany, the Netherlands and UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Election 1</th>
<th>Election 2</th>
<th>Election 3</th>
<th>Election 4</th>
<th>Election 5</th>
<th>Challenger score</th>
<th>Average framing-distance</th>
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Note: Bold font denotes that party is a challenger, * Mainstream opposition party. The challenger score is obtained by dividing the times a party was a challenger by the total number of years in was included in the sample. The election years are 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002 and 2005 in Germany; 1989, 1994, 1998, 2002 and 2006 in the Netherlands; 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2005 in the UK.
<table>
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| R² | **0.62** |
| N  | **86**   |

***p<0.01 **p<0.05 *p<0.10(two-tailed test). Regression coefficients with panel corrected standard errors and panel specific AR1 error structure to correct for serial correlation. The dependent variable captures the framing distance of a party on the EU issue to the other parties competing in an election.
Figure 1. Differences in predicted framing distance between mainstream opposition parties (upper left), governing parties (upper right) and challengers (lower left) in PR and majoritarian systems for increasing values of support in the polls.

Note: 90 percent confidence bounds
Figure 2. Marginal effect of a parties standing in polls on framing distance for different types of parties in majoritarian and PR systems.

Note: 90 percent confidence bounds.
Figure 3. Predicted values on framing distance for increasing values of support in the polls in PR systems

Note: 90 percent confidence bounds. Observed electoral support for challengers, mainstream opposition and governing parties within PR systems respectively ranged between 0-18, 0.67-52 and 4-43.3 percent.
Figure 4. Predicted values on framing distance for increasing values of support in the polls in majoritarian systems.

Note: 90 percent confidence bounds. Observed electoral support for challengers, mainstream opposition and governing parties within PR systems respectively ranged between 11-22, 30-55 and 28-54 percent.
**Figure 5.** Predicted framing distance for increasing values of support in the Netherlands (left) and Germany (right).

*Note: 90 percent confidence bounds*