

LOST BUT NOT BLOWN AWAY. HOW DO LOSERS OF PARTY LEADERSHIP CONTESTS REACT?

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Abstract

Many Western parties have recently opened up the process of leadership selection in order to increase the party's attractiveness, but negative reactions of losers in such contests might undermine these efforts. It has extensively been documented that losers of an election or referendum become less supportive for the political system (e.g. Anderson et al. 2005), but the question is whether such a winner-loser gap also occurs among party members in the context of intra-party elections. We examine unique and original panel data collected among party members of the Flemish Christian Democratic Party CD&V and the Flemish Liberal Party Open VLD, with one wave being administered before and the second wave being launched one year after the leadership election of respectively 2019 and 2020. We investigate whether the change in attitudes and behavior of party members who voted for the losing candidates differ from those who voted for the winner. Contrary to earlier research on candidate selection processes (Cross & Pruyssers, 2017), we find that the costs of intra-party elections are rather limited as only decision acceptance differs between winners and losers, while there is no gap when it comes to support for the electoral process, party membership satisfaction, and activity rate in the party.

Keywords: winner-loser gap, intra-party elections, leadership election, party members, political parties

INTRODUCTION

Political parties in established democracies have recently been challenged by phenomena such as declining voter loyalty and the erosion of party membership. In response, they have invested amongst others in increasing intra-party democracy, hoping to improve the image of the party (Cross & Blais, 2012; Poguntke, Scarrow, & Webb, 2016; Shomer, Put, & Gedalya-Lavy, 2018). One notable result has been the introduction of more inclusive methods to select the party leader (Pilet & Cross, 2014; Sandri & Amjahad, 2015).

These intra-party elections have the potential to increase the attractiveness of parties (Pedersen & Schumacher, 2015), to generate trust by linking citizens more closely to the electoral process (Shomer et al., 2018), to enhance citizens' satisfaction with democracy, and to provide an additional vertical linkage between the public and the political sphere (Bernardi, Sandri, & Seddone, 2017; Teorell, 1999). However, as recent empirical evidence suggests, these intra-party elections do not always yield the expected positive effects in terms of increased trustworthiness and attractiveness among voters and potential members (Wauters and Kern 2020). Even worse, the literature on presidential primaries suggests that by organizing primaries, political parties might harm their chances in the general election (Bernstein, 1977; Greene & Haber, 2015; Johnson & Gibson, 1974; Kenney & Rice, 1987), as these contests emphasize (or sharpen) existing disputes within political parties and potentially create new internal conflicts which might persist over a longer period of time. As a result, party leadership elections could deteriorate (rather than improve) a party's performance. In this paper, we extend (and test) these arguments by focusing on possible negative effects that might occur because of different reactions to winning and losing in intra-party elections.

Losers' consent is widely considered as crucial for the stability and functioning of the political system, and a so-called winner-loser gap has been extensively documented in the literature. This means that voters' attitudes towards the political system differ substantively depending on whether their preferred party or candidate won or lost the election (Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, & Listhaug, 2005; Esaiasson, 2011; van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018). This effect is driven by psychological, rational-choice and cognitive consistency mechanisms. It seems surprising that only little attention has been paid to this topic in the context of intra-party democracy, particularly when considering the important role that political parties play in established democracies (Dalton, Farrell, & McAllister, 2011) and knowing that the organization of internal electoral procedures in those parties is on the rise (Pilet & Cross, 2014). To our knowledge, only one study has examined this winner-loser gap in the context of intra-party elections, more specifically in candidate selection processes in Canada. The results show that supporters of losing candidates are less satisfied with their party membership, less active within the political party, and less likely to renew their membership after the selection process (Cross & Pruyssers, 2017). While this study provides valuable insights on the winner-loser gap within political parties, it derived its conclusions from cross-sectional survey data at one moment in time which does not allow to investigate the change in both attitudes and behaviors caused by winning or

losing intra-party elections. However, it seems plausible that winners' and losers' attitudes and behaviors already differ before an internal election. Moreover, leadership selection processes are not the same as candidate selection processes (Kenig, Rahat, & Hazan, 2015) in the sense that the latter assume, especially in single-member districts, a much more direct personal relationship between party members and candidates, possibly leading to more severe consequences when the preferred candidate loses.

We account for the change over time by relying on panel data collected before and after the leadership elections of the party of the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) and the Flemish Liberals (Open VLD) in respectively 2019 and 2020. This means that we can not only control for potential preexisting differences between the two groups, but it also allows us to monitor potential changes in attitudes and behaviors amongst winners and losers. We answer the following research questions: (1) Do the attitudes of winners of intra-party elections differ from those of losers? and (2) Does the behavior of winners of intra-party elections differ from that of losers? Attitudes comprise decision acceptance, support for the electoral process as well as satisfaction with membership. Behavior refers to activity within a political party. Satisfaction with party membership and activity rate in the party were also included in the study of Cross and Pruyers (2017), but we have added also attitudes about the acceptance of the decision and about the evaluation of the electoral process, leaving open the option that not so much the party is affected by losing, but only the decision or process itself.

Our results show no differences between winners and losers for activity within the party nor for satisfaction with their membership, nor for members' support for the electoral process. However, losers had a significantly harder time to accept the election result than winners. Thus, opposed to the findings of Cross and Pruyers (2017), our data indicate that the costs of intra-party elections are limited.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss theoretical and empirical insights on respectively intra-party elections and the winner-loser gap. Then, we describe the case of the CD&V and Open VLD leadership elections and our methodological approach. Next, we present the empirical results of our analysis, both for attitudes and behavior. We end with conclusions.

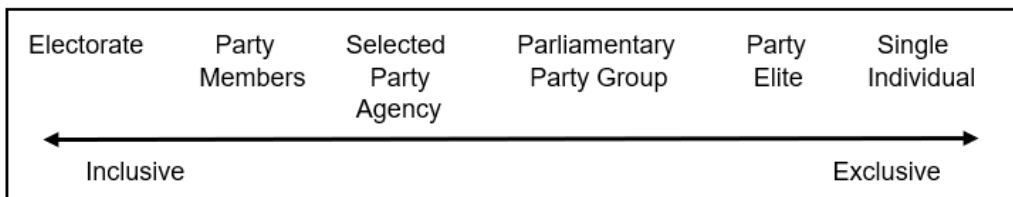
INTRA-PARTY ELECTIONS

Over the past few decades, intra-party democracy has gained popularity in several established democracies (Pilet & Cross, 2014; Poguntke et al., 2016). Through this process, political parties provide more internal decision-making authority to their grassroots members aiming to reverse the trend of declining party membership figures (Cross & Blais, 2012), to increase the party's attractiveness among citizens (Close, Kelbel, & van Haute, 2017; Wauters & Kern, 2020) and to improve the performance and the image of the party (Pedersen & Schumacher, 2015; Scarrow, 1999). Critical voices also say that reforms towards more

intra-party democracy aims to reduce the power of middle-level elites in the party and to strengthen the position of the party leader (Rahat & Hazan, 2006; Wauters, 2014).

The most prominent way to increase grassroots members' impact consists in granting them more influence in the choice of the party leader. In several parties, the selectorate, i.e. the body that selects the party leader, has been opened up to a wider range of decision-makers than before (Kenig, 2009; Rahat & Hazan, 2001). Kenig (2009) developed a continuum, based on the framework of Rahat and Hazan on candidate selection, according to which leadership selection methods are classified according to their degree of inclusiveness (see Figure 1). The most exclusive way to elect a party leader is by a small elite group or even a single individual, while the most inclusive selectorate includes all members or even all voters of a party. Since many parties have moved towards more inclusive methods of leadership selection where every party member has the right to vote (Pilet & Cross, 2014; Poguntke et al., 2016), they can be placed on the second category from the left (see Figure 1). This also applies to Belgian political parties, including the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) and the Flemish Liberals (Open VLD) (Pilet & Wauters, 2014).

Figure 1: Selectorate of leadership elections (Kenig, 2009)



Inclusive intra-party elections have both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, as Shomer et al. (2018) show, they can enhance citizens' trust in political parties. They also have the potential to increase the attractiveness of parties (Pedersen & Schumacher, 2015), both among voters and potential party members. Moreover, intra-party elections represent a reliable channel for participation and can even increase members' and voters' participation in (other) partisan activities (Heidar & Saglie, 2003). In addition to advantages for the political party, there are also advantages for the political system in general as these contests can provide a vertical linkage between the public and the political sphere, and can hence be seen as a supplement to general elections to make policy agenda-setting (more) accountable to the public. As such, they can enhance citizens' satisfaction with democracy (Shomer, Put, & Gedalya-Lavy, 2017; Teorell, 1999).

On the other hand, Wauters and Kern (2020) show in a study using an experimental design that inclusive leadership selection procedures do not always produce the expected advantages. Their results show that organizing an inclusive leadership contest does not pay off in terms of perceived trustworthiness, higher vote shares, or raising party membership figures. Also Pedersen and Schumacher (2015) conclude that in the long run, parties do not benefit in electoral terms from more inclusive selectorates. They only found a positive

short-term effect for parties holding leadership elections, i.e. a rise in the polls mainly due to increased media attention for that party.

And it could even be worse: it might be that intra-party elections do not only fall short in producing the expected advantages, in fact they could even harm parties. The literature on presidential primaries suggests that by conducting a primary, political parties may damage their chances in the general election. This effect occurs especially when one party's nominee is selected by a divisive primary, while the other party's nominee is uncontested (Bernstein, 1977; Johnson & Gibson, 1974; Kenney & Rice, 1987). Intra-party elections can also bring conflict within a political party to the forefront, as the conflict is not only limited to the party elite, but could also potentially involve grassroots members (Cross & Pruyers, 2017). Moreover, by pitting candidates of the same party against one another, political parties become vulnerable to internal competitive strains and fissures. Finally, apart from creating and highlighting conflict, intra-party elections might also evoke long-lasting negative feelings among members on the losing side, which could have far-reaching consequences in terms of attitudes and behavior (Cross & Pruyers, 2017).

In sum, it can be said that political parties might undermine their organizational base by introducing internal electoral procedures. Precisely because intra-party elections have gained popularity within political parties, it is important to examine the impact of these elections, and more in particular how losers of intra-party elections feel and behave after losing, which we will deal with in the next section.

THE WINNER-LOSER GAP AND INTRA-PARTY ELECTIONS

The winner-loser gap classically represents the gap in attitudes between the winners and the losers of an electoral contest. Winners are thereby defined as voters who voted for the parties (or candidates) who made it into government, whereas losers voted for parties (or candidates) that ended up in the opposition (Stiers, Daoust, & Blais, 2018). Research has shown that the level of satisfaction with democracy is higher among voters who identify with the winners of an electoral process than among those who identify with its losers (Anderson et al., 2005; Beaudonnet, Blais, Bol, & Foucault, 2014; Howell & Justwan, 2013; Singh, Karakoç, & Blais, 2012). The same effect has also been demonstrated in the context of referendums (Marien & Kern, 2017; Sack, 2017; Schaffner, 2020). In a similar vein, research has revealed that losers differ from winners when it comes to attitudes about the (functioning of the) political system, the perceived legitimacy of the elections, the willingness to accept the outcome of elections (Anderson et al., 2005; Esaiasson, Persson, Gilljam, & Lindholm, 2016; Moehler, 2009; van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018), and behavioral intentions of (future) political participation (Anderson et al., 2005; Curini & Jou, 2016).

We can point to three potential mechanisms causing this effect. Firstly, there is a rational-choice explanation that states that the expected utility of winners is higher than the expected utility of losers. The gap in

satisfaction with democracy thus arises because winners believe that they will obtain more of their preferred policies than losers (Anderson & LoTempio, 2002; Howell & Justwan, 2013). A psychological mechanism forms the second explanation: people simply like winning and prefer winning to losing because it causes a variety of positive emotions including emotions towards the political system (Singh et al., 2012). Third, people seek cognitive consistency and as voters often experience post-election dissonance, they adjust their support for the political system, depending on the outcome of the election (Anderson et al., 2005).

In the scope of this paper, we translate this concept to party members who voted for the winning/losing candidates in party leadership elections. We should keep in mind, however, that party members are different from voters. On the one hand, members are more involved in a political party than voters in a political system, which may potentially lead to a stronger effect of the winner-loser gap. This reasoning is supported by research that shows that party likeability and party identification reinforce the winner-loser gap: the largest increases in satisfaction with democracy come about when voters win and have chosen parties that closely reflect their preferences (Singh, 2014). Anderson et al. (2005) also conclude that when partisanship at the individual level is high, it amplifies the impact of winning or losing. On the other hand, members are better informed and more loyal to their political party than voters (Cross & Young, 2008; van Haute & Gauja, 2015). As a consequence, they might have a better understanding of the importance of stability and a strong organizational base which could lead to a smaller effect.

To our knowledge, only one study has investigated a potential winner-loser gap in the scope of intra-party elections so far. Cross and Pruyers (2017) looked at the effects of candidate selection procedures on membership satisfaction, activity rate, and loyalty of party members in Canadian parties. Our study differs from their study on three aspects. First, the electoral system of Canada, a single-member plurality electoral system, differs from the Proportional Representation (PR) List system used in Belgium. As single-member systems, in general, are more personalized, intra-party elections also become more personal. Hence, we might expect a bigger effect of winning or losing intra-party elections in a majoritarian system than in a proportional system. Second, candidate nomination contests are different from leadership contests (Kenig et al., 2015). The personal bond between a member and a candidate is arguably less strong in leadership elections than in candidate selection, which could weaken a potential effect of winning or losing. Yet, party leaders are among the most important actors in political decision-making which empathizes the importance of leadership elections and which could, in turn, reinforce a potential effect of winning or losing. Third, Cross and Pruyers focus on cross-sectional survey data which does not allow to investigate the change in both attitudes and behavior caused by winning or losing intra-party elections. In contrast, by the use of unique panel data, we can not only control for potential preexisting differences between winners and losers, but it also allows us to monitor potential changes amongst both groups. We will now discuss first the attitudes on which we focus and then the behavioral aspects, and we will formulate hypotheses about both.

Attitudes

Although attitudes are guided by behavior, research has shown that their relationship is often weak which implies that a change in attitudes is not always automatically translated into a change of concrete behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Kraus, 1995; Nilsson, Fielding, & Dean, 2020). Hence, we expect a more pronounced effect of winning or losing on members' attitudes than on members' behavior. In addition, we also forecast a distinction between the different attitudinal variables we aim to investigate. We present them from most likely to change to less likely to change indicators in the following order: decision acceptance, support for the electoral process, and satisfaction with membership. Whereas Cross and Pruyers (2017) only incorporated party-related attitudes, we adopt a broader scope by including also attitudes about the decision itself and about the electoral process.

First, we expect a difference in winners' and losers' **decision acceptance** i.e. the willingness to accept a decision. The procedural fairness theory claims that if a decision-making procedure is perceived as fair by citizens, they are more likely to accept the decision, even if the outcome goes against their own preferences (Carman, 2010; Grimes, 2017). Esaiasson et al. (2016), however, challenged the claim of procedural fairness (Tyler, 2013) and re-examined its effect in the context of elections. They conclude that the willingness to accept a decision is directly affected by the decision outcome. Their findings suggest that outcome favorability - and not procedural fairness - is the dominant determinant of decision acceptance. Applying this finding to the context of intra-party democracy, we claim that outcome favorability plays a crucial role in the acceptance of the outcome of intra-party elections. This means that we expect that winners (losers) will be more (less) willing to accept the outcome of intra-party elections.

Although decision acceptance stresses the importance of losers' consent since winners as well as losers must accept electoral outcomes and comply with them in order for political systems or political parties to survive, we consider this variable as most likely to show differences between winners and losers. After all, decision acceptance is an example of attitude formation instead of an attitudinal change since there is no change of a prior or existing attitude taken place. Hence, the pressure of obtaining and maintaining valid beliefs is not present (Crano & Gardikiotis, 2015). There are also different gradients of decision acceptance, ranging from defending the outcome of elections, over merely accepting it, to openly protesting against it. This leaves room to demonstrate a certain degree of acceptance (or rejection) without necessarily going for the most radical option. As a consequence, members might be more likely to differ in their level of decision acceptance as a consequence of decision outcome. This argument leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: Winners are more likely to accept the outcome of the intra-party election than losers.

Secondly, having voted for an electoral winner or loser has an impact on the **perceived legitimacy of elections**. Losers are more inclined to report that elections were fraudulent, whereas winners are more likely

to judge elections as free and fair (Anderson et al., 2005; Moehler, 2009; Nadeau & Blais, 1993). This also applies to referendums, as it has been shown that the perception of legitimacy of referendums also depends on how voters evaluate their outcome (Arnesen, Broderstad, Johannesson, & Linde, 2019). Applied to intra-party elections, this can mean that winners and losers of intra-party elections evaluate the process of the internal elections differently. Here we do speak of an attitudinal change that might cause pressure to obtain and maintain valid beliefs (Crano & Gardikiotis, 2015). However, support for the electoral process is an attitude towards the general, abstract principle of intra-party democracy. Hence, we expect it to change, and more easily than members' attitudes towards their political party or their membership, which might also involve emotional feelings. Concretely, we expect winners to evaluate the process more positively than losers:

H2: Winners become more supportive of the electoral process than losers.

Third, in line with Cross and Pruyers (2017), we focus on **satisfaction with party membership** instead of satisfaction with the political system or with the political party. Evidently, for intra-party elections, the point of reference is rather the party than the political system as a whole. We also consider satisfaction with party membership (rather than with the party) to be a more constructive measurement, since satisfaction with the political party is also about for example how the party is represented by the media or how the government functions. We expect that winners are more satisfied with their membership than losers. However, since satisfaction with membership refers to an attitudinal change and as it is an attitude towards the political party or party membership, it is presented as a less likely to change indicator. This reasoning leads to the third hypothesis:

H3: Winners of intra-party elections become more satisfied with their membership than losers.

Behavior

Spill-over effects for participation in other partisan activities can be seen as an important advantage of intra-party democracy (Heidar & Saglie, 2003). But losing can make things worse, also for participation on other aspects of party life. Therefore, it is also important to take behavior into account. Moreover, as indicated above, attitudes are not synonymous with behavior as they are not always translated into concrete behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Nilsson et al., 2020). As a consequence, we expect that members' behavior won't change as easily as their attitudes and see behavior as the least likely to change indicator.

Anderson and Mendes (2006) examined the difference in behavioral intentions of protesting between winners and losers and concluded that being in the political minority heightens citizens' political protest potential, particularly in new democracies. Curini and Jou (2016) also examined the relationship between the winner-

loser gap and political participation (voting, contacting, campaigning, persuading, cooperating, and protesting). They concluded that losers become more inclined to participate if the government is comprised of parties they did not support and if the government is committed to policies they find disagreeable. The logic behind this is that losers have a stronger motivation to participate because they desire to change the status quo.

However, this logic is different when it comes to intra-party democracy. Cross and Pruyzers (2017) analyzed three forms of activity (offline high-intensity activities, online activities, and offline low-intensity activities) and compared losers to members who did not have a contested nomination in their district. They conclude that losers are considerably less active in party life because they would be volunteering their time, money, and effort to a candidate they did not prefer. To put it with Hirschman's (1970) words: after losers have 'voiced' their dissatisfaction in the elections, i.e. an attempt to improve or repair the relationship from within (Saunders, 1992; Van Haute, 2011), they withdraw ('exit') from intensive forms of activism. Moreover, Cross and Pruyzers (2017) also show that losers use even a more radical 'exit' strategy, i.e. withdraw from the relationship altogether (Saunders, 1992; Van Haute, 2011), as they are less likely to renew their membership. While withdrawing from a political system is not really possible, it is a reasonable option in a political party. Consequently, there is an alternative for intra-party activism to change things inside the party, which makes this latter option less attractive. Moreover, intra-party activism is not unequivocal: it could oppose, but also support the party elite.

We operationalize activity as the average time spent on activities of the political party. In contrast to Cross and Pruyzers, we do not include vote choice and future membership as behavioral variables because these are hypothetical questions (and no effect was found for members' loyalty to vote for their party). In contrast, party activity is a more reliable measure. We assume that losers will be more likely to air their dissatisfaction by becoming less active over time, whereas winners will become more active.

H4: Winners of intra-party elections become more active within their political party than losers.

CASE DESCRIPTION AND METHODOLOGY

Case

We test our hypotheses in party leadership contests in two major Belgian parties: the Flemish Christian-democratic party (CD&V) and the Flemish Liberal-democratic Party (Open VLD). Belgium represents an excellent case to study party leadership selection given the dominant role of political parties on a wide range of policy and political decisions, which has led scholars to label the country a 'partitocracy' (Deschouwer, 2009). As the head of the party, the party leader personifies the party organization and is in practice also the one who exerts great influence on most important decisions.

The leadership elections of CD&V were held in November-December 2019. With seven candidates, the CD&V leadership election was one of the most competitive ever held in Belgium (Pilet & Wauters, 2014). The first round did not let one candidate emerge above the required 50%-threshold, so a second round with a run-off system was organized. Eventually, the experienced businessman (and mayor and former MP) Joachim Coens won the race with only 53% of the votes, against the leader of the party's youth section, Sammy Mahdi. We should note that the 2019 leadership elections of CD&V are an atypical case. Firstly, after the party's loss in the previous parliamentary elections, the leadership elections were not only about electing a new leader, but also about determining the (new) direction of the political party. Secondly, the number of candidates that took part in the elections was unprecedented. With no fewer than seven candidates, it became clear that the party elite was not united behind one preferred candidate (as is often the case in such leadership contests). However, this competitive context makes the case of the 2019 leadership elections of CD&V exceptionally interesting for examining the divisive impact of leadership elections.

The leadership contest of Open VLD was held in May 2020. It was also a rather competitive one since it included four candidates. Egbert Lachaert was chosen to be the next leader with 61,03% of the votes. Normally this election should have taken place at the end of March, but due to the covid-pandemic the election was postponed by two months. This postponement was not welcomed by all candidates, especially because the campaign had already largely been conducted. The agreement to have the campaign run sober and serene because of the pandemic was also not respected by all candidates which made the context of this leadership election very competitive as well. Another consequence of the pandemic was the fact that voting took place online and by phone.

The data were gathered through an anonymous online survey in two waves (see detailed figures in Table 1). The first wave started when the party members had received their first round ballot (or instructions to vote electronically) from the party, and stopped just before the election results were made public. The second wave was organized approximately one year after the first wave to test the changes in attitudes and behavior caused by the leadership elections. We sent a private link giving access to our questionnaire to all party members who had the right to vote in these elections and whose email address was available to the party headquarters. We have a decent response rate for this kind of research of about 11 % and 8% in the first wave for respectively the Christian Democrats and the Liberal Democrats, and 47% in the second wave for both parties. Only respondents who participated in the first wave, received an invitation for the second wave. Response rates are comparable with other online party member surveys.

Table 1: Overview of the data per party per election round

		Date	N population	N answers	Response rate
CD&V	1 st wave	6 Nov-18 Nov 2019	24,869	2,657	11%
	2 nd wave	17 Nov-6 Dec 2020	2,657	1,240	47%
Open VLD	1 st wave	19 May – 22 May 2020	21,421	1,700	8%
	2 nd wave	4 May – 13 July 2021	1,700	801	47%

It is difficult to assess the quality of our self-selected sample beyond members' voting behavior, because of a lack of data on the population of party members who effectively casted a vote. There seems for instance to be an underrepresentation of women in our sample, but we know that members are not a perfect mirror of the population (Heidar & Wauters, 2019) nor are members who are casting a vote in leadership elections.

Measurements

First of all, we need an operationalization of **winning and losing a leadership election contest**, which is the main *independent* variable. Traditionally, winning is defined as voting for the party (or candidate) who made it into government, while losers voted for the party (or candidate) who ended up in the opposition (Stiers et al., 2018). Applied to intra-party elections, we define winners as members who voted for the candidate that became the new party leader (resp. Coens or Lachaert), whereas losers are members who voted for another candidate. This was measured by a survey question that asked for members' vote choices.

Four *dependent* variables are used in this study. Three of them refer to members' attitudes and one to members' behavior. The first attitudinal dependent variable is **decision acceptance**. We should note that we see decision acceptance mostly as an attitudinal variable, but we also link a behavioral reaction to it. The measurement of decision acceptance builds on a battery of five items. More precisely, we asked respondents to indicate on a scale from zero to seven whether they completely agreed (seven) or completely disagreed (zero) with five statements. These five statements, which are inspired by the work of Werner and Marien (2018) were: 'I have defended the results of the leadership election in front of friends and family', 'I agreed with the result of the leadership election', 'I accepted the results of the leadership election', 'I sympathized with others who criticized the outcome of the leadership election', and 'I was critical of the outcome of the leadership elections'. These five items form a one-dimensional scale on decision acceptance (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.70) and we hence rely on the factor loadings as measure for decision acceptance. As decision acceptance can only occur after a decision has been made, we use only one measurement in time for this variable (i.e. the second wave).

The second attitudinal dependent variable is **respondents' support for the electoral process** and was measured by a single survey item. Members were asked on a ten-point scale whether it is a good thing to have a direct influence of party members on the leadership election. Zero stood for 'it is not at all good that party members can choose the new party leader' and ten for 'it is very good that party members can choose the new party leader'. This item was measured in the first and the second wave, and we take the difference between these scores as dependent variable.

The last and attitudinal dependent variable is **satisfaction with membership** which is operationalized through a single survey item. Respondents were asked in the first and second wave to what extent they were satisfied with their party membership (on a scale from zero to ten where zero stands for 'very dissatisfied' while ten means 'very satisfied'). Here again, the difference between the two waves will be analyzed.

Our fourth independent variable is the behavioral variable, namely **participation within the political party**, the least likely to change variable. This was again measured by a single survey item. More precisely, respondents were asked how many hours per month they spend on average on activities of the party (in a period other than election campaigns). We took the difference between the first and the second measurement.

RESULTS

Testing hypothesis 1

To test our first hypothesis we start with plotting party members' answers to the five items that capture their acceptance of the intra-party election outcome. As Figure 2 shows, winners in both parties are significantly more likely to indicate that they have defended the results of the leadership election in front of family and friends¹, agreed with the result² and accepted the result³. Losers on the other hand are significantly more critical of the outcome themselves⁴. Moreover, losers of Open VLD are also significantly more likely to sympathize with others who criticized the outcome⁵. Differences between winners and loser across these five items seem to be more clear among the members of the Flemish Liberals as compared to the party members of the Christian Democratic.

¹ CD&V: The difference in mean of defending the outcome of the leadership election of losers (M=3.565; SD=2.173) and winners (M=5.464;SD=1.768) is significant ($t(1124)=-3.371$; $p<0.010$); Open Vld: The difference in mean of defending the outcome of the leadership election of losers (M=3.565; SD=2.174) and winners (M=5.465;SD=1.768) is significant ($t(704)=-12.684$; $p<0.001$)

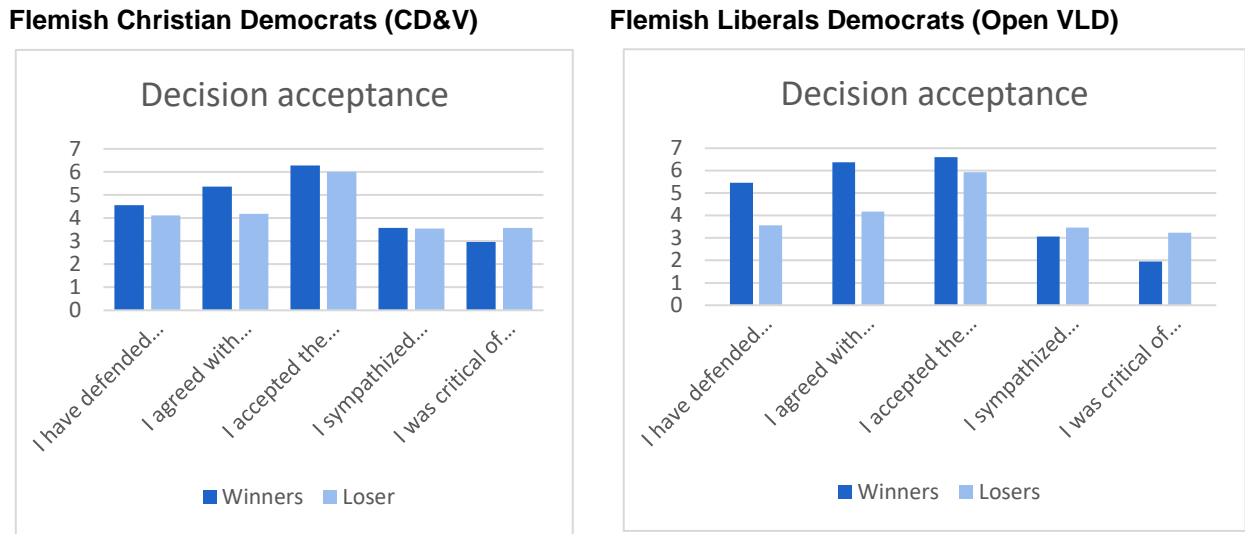
² CD&V: The difference in mean of agreeing with the result of the leadership election of losers (M=4.148; SD= 2.092) and winners (M=6.373;SD=1.020) is significant ($t(1157)=-8.624$; $p<0.001$); Open Vld: The difference in mean of defending the outcome of the leadership election of losers (M=4.148; SD=2.092) and winners (M=6.373;SD=1.010) is significant ($t(718)=-18.669$; $p<0.001$)

³ CD&V: The difference in mean of accepting the outcome of the leadership election of losers (M=5.927; SD=1.451) and winners (M=6.604;SD=0.854) is significant ($t(1157)=-3.594$; $p<0.001$); Open Vld: The difference in mean of defending the outcome of the leadership election of losers (M=5.927; SD=1.451) and winners (M=6.604;SD=0.854) is significant ($t(718)=-7.887$; $p<0.001$)

⁴ CD&V: The difference in mean of being critical of the outcome of the leadership election of losers (M=3.239; SD=2.267) and winners (M=1.956;SD=2.137) is significant ($t(1119)=4.265$; $p<0.001$); Open Vld: The difference in mean of defending the outcome of the leadership election of losers (M=3.239; SD=2.671) and winners (M=1.956;SD=2.137) is significant ($t(690)=7.475$; $p<0.001$)

⁵ Open Vld: The difference in mean of defending the outcome of the leadership election of losers (M=3.065; SD=1.984) and winners (M=1.956;SD=2.137) is significant ($t(666)=2.590$; $p<0.05$)

Figure 2: Decision acceptance, by winner/loser status for both parties



To get a better idea of whether these differences are really attributable to members' winner/loser status, we continue with estimating OLS regression models predicting party members' acceptance of the decision outcome (see Table 2). In Model I, the key independent variable is whether respondents cast a vote for the winning or for a losing candidate. Given the differences we observed between the two parties in Figure 2, we also add a dummy variable for the party to control for possible effects on the party level in this model. In Model II, we add control variables for demographic information: gender and the level of education (as dummy variable distinguishing between respondents with tertiary education and those with a lower level of education). In line with Cross and Pruyzers (2019) we control for the length of membership and we add a control variable that distinguishes between more passive members and those who hold public office or did so in the past. In Model III we add respondents' perceptions of salience of the intra-party elections as final control variable.

Table 2: Predicting CD&V and VLD party members' decision acceptance

	Decision Acceptance		
	Model I	Model II	Model III
Losing (ref. winning)	-0.749***	-0.737***	-0.716***
	(0.046)	(0.046)	(0.045)
Female		0.026	0.003
		(0.060)	(0.058)
Tertiary education (ref. primary and secondary education)		0.022	0.013
		(0.049)	(0.047)
Length of party membership		0.003*	0.003*
		(0.001)	(0.001)
Holding or held public office		0.022	0.139
		(0.049)	(0.072)
Saliency of the elections			0.114***
			(0.013)
VLD (ref. CD&V)	-0.115*	-0.091	-0.070
	(0.046)	(0.047)	(0.046)
Intercept	0.536***	0.404***	-0.576***
	(0.079)	(0.099)	(0.146)
Adj. R ²	0.182	0.184	0.235
N	1,186	1,186	1,186

Note. Regression coefficients shown with robust standard errors in parentheses. Sign.:*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Table 2 reports the estimations of Models I-III. From Model I we see that voting for a losing candidate has a negative effect on decision acceptance (-0.75 units). This effect is statistically significant at a level of $p < 0.001$. Adding additional control variables in Models II and III decreases the size of the effect only slightly. In Model III losing decreases decision acceptance still by an estimated 0.72 and it is also still highly significant ($p < 0.001$). This result hence lends support for our first hypothesis as it shows that members who voted for the winning candidate appear indeed more likely to accept the outcome of the intra-party election than members who voted for a candidate who did not get elected.

Testing hypothesis 2-4

To test hypotheses 2, 3 and 4, we estimate OLS regression models predicting the difference party members' attitudes and behavior before and after the election (Table 3). More specifically, we focus on changes in their support for the electoral process, satisfaction with membership and activity within the political party⁶. We include the same control variables as before, namely age, level of education, length of membership, holding or having held a public office and perceived salience of the intra-party election. In order to control for potential floor and ceiling effects, we add respondent's level of support for the electoral process, satisfaction with membership and activity within the political party from before the intra-party election to the model. Finally, we have to control for two important event that happened between the first and the second wave of data collection, namely the onset of the global COVID pandemic and the formation of a new government on the federal level in which both parties participated. It is hence possible that changes in members' attitudes are not so much linked to the membership election but to (dis-)satisfaction with how their party positioned itself in the context of these two events. To control for this possibility we control for party members' satisfaction with dealing with the COVID crisis as well as their satisfaction with the fact that their party entered the federal government.

Results show that supporting a losing candidate at the intra-party elections has a negative effect on changes in support for the electoral process (-0.03). However this effect does not reach statistical significance. The same holds true for changes in satisfaction with membership and changes in party activity. In both cases the coefficient of losing is negative, but statistically not significant and we can hence conclude that while losing does affect decision acceptance, this effect does not spill over to more general attitudes regarding the electoral process nor does it affect satisfaction with membership. Also respondent's behavior does not seem to be affected by the experience of losing and we find hence no evidence to support H2-4.

Notably, our models suggest the existence of ceiling effects regarding all three variables. The effect of the support for the electoral process measured before the elections, the effect of pre-election satisfaction with membership as well as the effect of pre-election party activity is negative and statistically significant. Also, perceived salience of the elections appeared to be an important predictor for all four dependent variables. It strengthens decision acceptance (Table 3, Model III) and has a positive effect on changes in support for the electoral process, membership satisfaction and activity within the party.

⁶ As we are interested in changes occurring from before to after the intra-party elections we opted for change scores as dependent variables. In Appendix A we also present the models with absolute values as dependent variable and pre-election levels as independent variables. Results do not differ substantively.

Table 3: Predicting changes in CD&V and VLD party members' attitudes and behaviour

	Change in support for the electoral process	Change in satisfaction with membership	Change in activity within the party
Losing (ref. winning)	-0.031	-0.105	-0.903
	(0.065)	(0.104)	(0.821)
Support for the electoral process pre-leadership election	-0.760***		
	(0.033)		
Satisfaction with membership pre-leadership election		-0.582***	
		(0.030)	
Activity within the party pre-leadership election			-0.749***
			(0.072)
Dissatisfaction of dealing with corona	-0.002	0.123*	-0.102
	(0.033)	(0.062)	(0.332)
Satisfaction with government participation	0.036	0.597***	0.223
	(0.030)	(0.060)	(0.314)
Female	-0.130	0.029	-1.117
	(0.079)	(0.130)	(0.976)
Tertiary education (ref. primary and secondary education)	0.026	-0.302**	-1.070
	(0.070)	(0.109)	(0.974)
Length of party membership	0.000	0.009*	0.015
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.017)
Holding or held public office	-0.013	0.286	8.037***
	(0.108)	(0.157)	(2.221)
Salience of the elections	0.202***	0.198***	0.395*
	(0.029)	(0.030)	(0.175)
VLD (ref. CD&V)	0.223**	-0.461**	0.695
	(0.083)	(0.144)	(0.738)
Intercept	4.766	0.594	-0.170
	(0.395)	(0.373)	(2.352)
N	1,328	1,334	1,240

Note. Regression coefficients shown with robust standard errors in parentheses. The predicted variable is the difference in support for the electoral process, satisfaction with membership and party activity before and after the election Sign.:*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper examines the winner-loser gap in the context of intra-party elections. Many political parties in established democracies have recently introduced inclusive methods to select the party leader in order to counter trends of electoral volatility and party membership decline. But using an inclusive leadership selection method comes also with some dangers, such as creating or increasing internal divisiveness. We focused here in particular on how supporters of losing candidates in such a contest react. We know from research in general elections that losers differ from winners when it comes to attitudes about the (functioning of) political system, the perceived legitimacy of the elections, and the willingness to accept the outcome of elections (Anderson et al., 2005; Esaiasson et al., 2016; Moehler, 2009). The question is whether this is also the case in a political party. Apart from a study by Cross and Pruyers (2017) on losers in candidate selection processes, this phenomenon has not been investigated before.

Our research questions focuses on the change in members' attitudes and behavior caused by winning or losing an intra-party election. More in particular, we focused on differences in decision acceptance, support for the electoral process, membership satisfaction, and activity rate in the party. We answered the research questions by relying on unique panel data that were collected before and one year after the leadership elections of the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) and the Flemish Liberals Democrats (Open VLD). Thanks to this approach, we could not only control for potential preexisting differences between winners and losers, it also allowed us to monitor potential changes in attitudes and behavior amongst the two groups.

Our results show no significant differences between winners' and losers' support for the electoral process, nor for satisfaction with their membership nor for their activity within the party. However, losers had a significantly harder time to accept the election result than winners (decision acceptance). Overall we can conclude that not so much the party per se or the electoral process suffers from losers' reactions, but that only the acceptance of the actual decision is affected. Decision acceptance is an attitude formation (and not an attitudinal or behavioral change) which facilitates the presence of differences between winners and losers, as we have argued above.

Thus, opposed to the findings of Cross and Pruyers (2017), our data indicate that the costs of intra-party elections are limited. This difference can be explained by the three aspects in which our study differs from the study of Cross and Pruyers. First, the electoral system of Canada, a single-member plurality electoral system, contributes to the personification of intra-party elections which could make them more divisive than intra-party elections in Proportional Representation (PR) List systems such as Belgium. When intra-party relations are highly personalized, people might join the party only to support their favorite politician, which could have negative consequences when that politician suffers a defeat inside the party. Second, candidate selection procedures might be more divisive than leadership contests as the personal bond between a

member and a candidate is arguably stronger. Third, Cross and Pruyers use cross-sectional survey data and were not able to investigate the change caused by winning or losing. It might be that supporters of losing candidates were already beforehand less satisfied with their membership and/or less active in the party than winners.

In sum, our results show that party leadership elections do not make things worse by creating or highlighting conflict. Thus, opposite to what we expected, political parties do not undermine their organizational base by introducing leadership elections and the costs of intra-party elections are limited. This is reassuring for Western parties, of whom many have opened up their leadership processes in recent years.

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Appendix A

Table A.1: Predicting CD&V and VLD party members' post-electoral attitudes and behaviour

	Support for the electoral process	Satisfaction with membership	Activity within the party
Losing (ref. winning)	-0.031	-0.105	-0.903
	(0.065)	(0.104)	(0.821)
Support for the electoral process pre-leadership election	0.240***		
	(0.033)		
Satisfaction with membership pre-leadership election		0.418***	
		(0.030)	
Activity within the party pre-leadership election			0.251***
			(0.072)
Dissatisfaction of dealing with corona	-0.002	0.123*	-0.102
	(0.033)	(0.062)	(0.332)
Satisfaction with government participation	0.036	0.597***	0.224
	(0.030)	(0.060)	(0.314)
Female	-0.130	0.029	-1.117
	(0.079)	(0.130)	(0.976)
Tertiary education (ref. primary and secondary education)	0.026	-0.302**	-1.070
	(0.070)	(0.109)	(0.974)
Length of party membership	0.000	0.009**	0.015
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.017)
Holding or held public office	-0.013	0.286	8.037***
	(0.108)	(0.157)	(2.221)
Salience of the elections	0.202***	0.198	0.395*
	(0.029)	(0.030)	(0.175)
VLD (ref. CD&V)	0.223**	-0.461**	0.695
	(0.083)	(0.144)	(0.738)
Intercept	4.766	0.594	-0.170
	(0.395)	(0.373)	(2.352)
N	1,328	1,334	1,240

Note. Regression coefficients shown with robust standard errors in parentheses. The predicted variable is support for the electoral process, satisfaction with membership and party activity measured in wave 2 (after the election). Sign.:*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.