

THROUGH THICK AND THIN. HOW DO PARTY MEMBERS REACT TO WINNING OR LOSING INTRA-PARTY DECISIONS AND WHICH FACTORS MODERATE THEIR REACTION?

PHD PLAN

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Abstract

Although the winner-loser gap, i.e. the gap in various indicators of political support between winners and losers of electoral competitions, has been extensively documented in literature and losers' consent is widely considered crucial for the stability and functioning of a political system, studies focusing on the winner-loser gap in the context of intra-party democracy are almost non-existent. These internal decision-making processes could however foster critical appraisals and create a gap between winners and losers by pitting members of the same party against each other. Hence, the question of how political parties can take internal decisions without losing the support of their party members is vital. In my PhD dissertation, I aim to investigate the attitudinal and behavioral differences between members who win or lose on internal decisions. Moreover, I study whether strategic communication (framing and negative campaigning) by political parties can moderate members' attitudes and behavior.

Keywords: intra-party democracy, winner-loser gap, framing, negative campaigning

INTRODUCTION

Party members are (still) crucial actors for both political parties and the political system as they boost the party's perceived authenticity, create a sense of democratic legitimacy, and function as party ambassadors or vote multipliers (Gauja, 2015; Scarrow, 1994; Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010). As a result of party membership decline, political parties strongly developed and extended intra-party democratic procedures as a strategy to improve their image and to attract and retain party members (Cross & Blais, 2012; Poguntke, Scarrow, & Webb, 2016; Shomer, Put, & Gedalya-Lavy, 2018). The opportunity for members to participate in these internal-democratic processes occurred by opening the selection process of candidates and leaders to party members (Rahat & Hazan, 2006; Sandri & Amjahad, 2015) and, more rarely, by allowing members' intervention in some specific issues or policies (Ignazi, 2020).

However, the value of intra-party democracy is contested. On the one hand, scholars believe that intra-party democracy is important for the wellbeing of political parties as it emphasizes the linkage between political parties and the electoral process. Moreover, intra-party democracy could contribute to state-level democracy as supplement to general elections to make policy agenda-setting (more) accountable to the public (Ignazi, 2020; Rahat & Shapira, 2017; Shomer, Put, & Gedalya-Lavy, 2017; Teorell, 1999). On the other hand, these internal democratic processes do not always yield the expected positive effects in terms of increased trustworthiness, vote share, or the number of party members (Pedersen & Schumacher, 2015b; Wauters & Kern, 2020). Even worse, by pitting candidates of the same party against each other or by emphasizing divergent political goals, intra-party democracy might undermine party cohesion, erode stability, and weaken the organizational base (W. Cross & Pruyssers, 2017). As a consequence, a winner-loser gap, i.e. a gap in various indicators of political support between winners and losers of electoral competition, might arise.

The winner-loser gap has been extensively documented in the literature, and losers' consent is widely considered crucial for the stability and functioning of a political system (Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, & Listhaug, 2005). It seems hence surprising that only little attention has been paid to this topic in the context of intra-party democracy, particularly when considering (W. P. Cross & Katz, 2013) the important roles party members still play for both the political system and political parties and knowing that the organization of internal democratic processes is on the rise precisely because parties want to attract and retain members to keep their party successful (Pilet & Cross, 2014). This research project aims at scrutinizing whether the concept of the winner-loser gap can also be applied to internal democratic processes. These processes refer to three crucial intra-party decisions where party members have the final word. First, the question of who will become the next party leader is one of the most important intra-party decisions as a party leader has a considerable impact on the party's image and policy. Second, a gap between winners and losers can arise as a result of the decision whether or not to participate in a certain government as this always involves compromises and changes or slight adjustments in positions. Third, new issues that arise on the political agenda or topical issues on which the party has not yet formed a clear opinion that are voted on at party

congresses form the last important type of intra-party decisions since they could lead to internal disputes when the party has to subsume them into their initial party goals.

The first part of this paper focuses on how winning or losing these intra-party decisions affects members' attitudes (satisfaction with the party, satisfaction with party membership, support for the decision-making process, decision acceptance) and behavior (future membership, activity rate, and casting a deviant vote). Hence, the first research question is stated as followed: (RQ1) Do losers of intra-party decisions have different attitudes and behavior than winners of these decisions? Another important aspect is to investigate, is how political parties can take intra-party decisions without losing the support of their party members. More specifically, the moderating effect of strategic communication will be scrutinized by focusing on the effects of framing and negative campaigning. This leads to the second and third research questions: (RQ2) Does framing moderate the impact of winning or losing intra-party decisions on members' attitudes and behavior? and (RQ3) Does negative campaigning moderate the impact of winning or losing intra-party decisions on members' attitudes and behavior?

This paper represents a PhD project plan and presents the theoretical and methodological approach of this research project and is structured as follows. First, I discuss the theoretical and empirical insights of respectively intra-party democracy and the winner-loser gap. Then, the research design will be discussed and the moderating effect of strategic communication will be presented. Next, I will discuss the methodological approach of this research project by outlining the longitudinal survey design and the survey experiments which will be used to answer the research questions.

1. RATIONALE AND POSITIONING WITH REGARD TO THE STATE-OF-THE-ART

1.1. Intra-party democracy

Although membership levels in terms of absolute numbers at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century have been nearly halved since 1980 (Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012), party members still have an important role in the chain of representation as linkage mechanisms for political parties (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2014). They can boost the party's perceived authenticity by showing their support in society and by revealing that the party is not just an organization by and for party elites. Hence, party members play an important role in creating a sense of democratic legitimacy as they perform parties' old brokerage function of bridging citizens and the state (Gauja, 2015; Römmele, Farrell, & Ignazi, 2005; Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010). Moreover, party members can multiply votes for a party by everyday contacts, are loyal voters themselves, can still provide essential funds, and provide voluntary work, valuable ideas or innovations. They can also function as potential candidates and the number of members is also important for parties because these

statistics are carefully scrutinized by both scholarly and journalistic (Gauja, 2015; Scarrow, 1994; Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010). Hence, political parties still have sufficient reasons to value their members.

To cope with the long-term decline in activism and grassroots party membership, and to attract and retain party members to keep the party successful, intra-party democracy has gained popularity (Poguntke et al., 2016; Sandri & Amjahad, 2015; Whiteley, 2010). While party members used to only get a chance to express their opinion at party congresses, today members can participate in various decision-making procedures. We refer to the opening up of candidate or leadership selection procedures and to opportunities for party members to influence internal decisions, such as membership ballots (Wolkenstein, 2018).

The idea to reverse the decline in party membership by more intra-party democracy is based on the argument of procedural fairness. It has commonly been assumed that people care strongly about the way decisions are made (De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2002; de Fine Licht, 2014; Tyler, 2013; Vidmar, 1990). In this context, procedural fairness scholars focus on three generic qualities: voice, consistency, and dignity. Voice refers to the opportunity for individuals to present their opinions or ideas in the decision-making process, consistency points to the absence of a systematic bias by the decision-making authorities, and dignity implies that authorities recognize individuals as respected members of society (Esaiasson, Persson, Gilljam, & Lindholm, 2016). When decision-making procedures meet these conditions and are hence perceived as fair, they can strengthen support for the political system and trust in authority. Other scholars have also shown that the perceived way in which a decision is made strongly impacts people's willingness to accept it (Carman, 2010; Esaiasson, 2010; Grimes, 2006; Magalhães, 2016).

Inspired by the procedural fairness argument, it can be theorized that internal decisions made by party members are perceived as fair when party members can present their opinions, when party elites do not influence the decision-making process, and when party members are recognized and respected during the entire process. This should lead to higher levels of trustworthiness and attractiveness of political parties and higher levels of decision acceptance. However, this logic is challenged by the theory of the winner-loser gap, i.e. a gap in various indicators of political support between winners and losers of electoral contests, as discussed in the next section. Outcome favorability seems to be a more dominant determinant of decision acceptance than perceived fairness (Esaiasson & Öhberg, 2019; Schmidt, 2012). In addition, outcome favorability also seems to be the dominant determinant of perceived legitimacy of an electoral process and attitudes about (the functioning of) a political system (Anderson et al., 2005; Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Beaudonnet, Blais, Bol, & Foucault, 2014). In sum, the suggestion that fair procedures can strengthen outcome acceptance and support for and trust in political parties is by no means self-evident. This in turn raises questions about the advantages of procedural fairness in the context of intra-party democracy.

Moreover, the value of intra-party democracy in general is contested. First, scholars who believe intra-party democracy is important for the wellbeing of political parties claim that democratically organized decision-making emphasizes the linkage between political parties and the electoral process, and generates more trust in political parties (Shomer et al., 2017). It also has the potential to increase the attractiveness of parties (Pedersen & Schumacher, 2015a) among voters and potential party members since both groups

support a more direct form of intra-party decision-making processes (Bernardi, Sandri, & Seddone, 2017; Close, Kelbel, & van Haute, 2017). Moreover, intra-party democracy represents a reliable channel for participation and can even increase members' and voters' participation in (other) partisan activities (Heidar & Saglie, 2003). However, the use of intra-party democracy did not stop the decline in grassroots party membership. Wauters and Kern (2020) show that organizing an inclusive leadership contest does not pay off in terms of higher attractiveness to potential members, perceived trustworthiness, or higher vote shares. Furthermore, Pedersen and Schumacher (2015a) and Cozza and Somer-Topcu (2021) conclude that in the long run, parties do not benefit from a more inclusive selectorate in electoral terms. 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. Hence, the idea that granting rights to vote would be enough to regain support from party members and voters failed (Ignazi, 2020).

Second, it is also argued that intra-party democracy contributes to the state level democracy and that these internal democratic processes 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. Intra-party democracy also promotes a democratic political culture and, as such, can enhance citizens' satisfaction with democracy and contribute to the stability and legitimacy of democracy (Ignazi, 2020; Rahat & Shapira, 2017; Shomer et al., 2017; Teorell, 1999). However, these internal reforms do not affect the core elements of political parties which are still controlled by elites via oligarchy as Michels (1915) argued in one of the earliest and most well-known examples of work on the causes and consequences of party organizational change (Gauja, 2015; Schumacher & Giger, 2017; Van Haute & Pilet, 2007). Party elites are often able to control the decision-making process by limiting the competitiveness of these contests and ensuring that members' choices are constrained and limited to alternatives acceptable to the party elite. As a consequence, many internal-democratic processes have already been decided before they reach the selectorate and the magnitude of change and transformation by party members is not that large (Aylott & Bolin, 2017; Ignazi, 2020; Pilet & Wauters, 2014). Moreover, critical voices also say that the reform 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 (Borz & Janda, 2020; Rahat & Hazan, 2006; Van Haute & Pilet, 2007; Wauters, 2014).

It might not only be that intra-party democracy does not only fall short in producing the expected advantages, but it could also make things worse by fostering critical appraisals (Ramiro, 2016; Sanches, Lisi, Razzuoli, & do Espírito Santo, 2017). By pitting candidates of the same party against each other or by emphasizing divergent political goals, intra-party democracy might undermine party cohesion, erode stability, and weaken the organizational base. Moreover, intra-party democracy can favor internal conflict which is no longer limited to party elites, but now also involves all grassroots party members, and it is not contained behind closed doors but open for everyone to see (W. Cross & Pruyssers, 2017). By using internal democratic processes, political parties become more dependent on non-party mediators, primarily mass media and campaign professionals, donors, and special (non-party) interests. Certain candidates or groups inside the

party might even have the ambition to draw as much media coverage as possible. This in turn can result in negative media coverage and damage the party's public image, its legitimacy, and the legitimacy of the democratic process (Rahat & Shapira, 2017).

It is not clear what happens when the competition takes place inside the party itself. A possible consequence is a gap in both attitudes and behavior between winners and losers of intra-party democratic decisions. I will explain these concepts and apply them in an intra-party context in the next two sections.

1.2. Winner-loser gap

Electoral processes are commonly considered as game-like competitions where citizens either root for the winning or losing team. As a consequence, electoral processes, like most other competitions, unavoidably produce unequal outcomes by ensuring that some citizens will be in the majority, while others will be in the minority. The consequences of this minority-majority effect or home-team effect are generally referred to as the winner-loser gap. Since citizens prefer being in the majority over being in the minority, winning or losing an electoral process is likely to have consequences for citizens' political attitudes (Davis & Hitt, 2017) and behavior. Subsequently, winning or losing does not only affect citizens but also matters for the stability and functioning of a political system (Anderson et al., 2005).

The winner-loser gap has attracted much scholarly attention and has been studied in the context of both elections and referendums. Winners are thereby classically defined as those who voted in elections for the parties or candidates who made it into government or, in the case of referendums, citizens whose preferences in terms of policy content were followed. Losers, on the other hand, are those who voted for parties or candidates that ended up in the opposition, or whose policy preferences were not followed (Stiers, Daoust, & Blais, 2018).

The most studied effect of winning or losing an electoral competition is on attitudes about the (functioning of the) political system. Opposed to the above-discussed argument of procedural fairness and its positive effect on attitudes about the political system, research has shown that outcome favorability – and not procedural fairness – affects voters' attitudes about the political system. Hence, 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; Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Anderson & Tverdova, 2001; Beaudonnet et al., 2014; Han & Chang, 2016; Howell & Justwan, 2013; Singh, Karakoç, & Blais, 2012). The same effect has also been demonstrated in the context of referendums (Marien & Kern, 2017; Sack, 2017). Studies of the winner-loser gap in the context of both elections (Anderson et al., 2005; Dahlberg & Linde, 2015; Loveless, 2020) and referendums (Schaffner, 2020; van der Eijk & Rose, 2020) have also indicated that this gap in attitudes about the political system persists over long periods.

Having voted for a winning or losing outcome also impacts the perceived legitimacy of an electoral process which is also referred to as the legitimacy gap. The term 'perceived' is used to refer to citizens' assessments of whether elections function as intended, and not to the general functioning of an electoral process (Anderson et al., 2005; Daniller, 2016). It is here not about the legitimacy of a political system as a

whole, but more specifically about the process that is used. Several authors have demonstrated that winning or losing is a stronger determinant of perceived legitimacy of an electoral process than procedural fairness. Losers are more inclined to report that elections or referendums were fraudulent, whereas winners are more likely to judge them as free and fair (Arnesen, Broderstad, Johannesson, & Linde, 2019; Brummel, 2020; Esaiasson et al., 2016; Moehler, 2009). A consequence of this declining support of an electoral process after losing it is the fact that the general belief of the electoral contest resolving legitimately is far from a universal phenomenon (Craig, Martinez, Gainous, & Kane, 2006; Nadeau & Blais, 1993). It also stresses the importance of losers' consent as it is important for both winners and losers to perceive electoral processes as fair in order for democracies to survive.

The winner-loser status can also affect citizens' decision acceptance i.e. the willingness to accept an unfavorable decision in and of itself (Esaiasson, 2010). Decision acceptance is both directly and indirectly affected by the decision's outcome, and outcome favorability - and not procedural fairness - is the dominant determinant of decision acceptance. Hence, not only the system and the process itself are affected by outcome favorability, but winning or losing also directly affects decision acceptance. This indicates that democratic governments cannot always generate citizens' acceptance of difficult decisions by the procedural means at their disposal (Esaiasson et al., 2016; Grimes, 2006). It also once more stresses the importance of losers' consent, since winners, as well as losers, must accept electoral outcomes and comply with them in order for democracies to survive and to govern effectively.

Since much of the prior literature focuses almost exclusively on winners' and losers' attitudes, there has been relatively little attention paid to the impact of winning or losing an electoral process on behavior. Based on the theory of Hirschman (1970), citizens who lost an electoral process will either voice (attempt to repair or improve the relationship through the communication of the complaint, grievances, or proposal for changes) their dissatisfaction by working for change of the political system or choose to exit (withdraw from the relationship) by for example giving up participation in politics. In addition to exit and voice, there is also the loyalty option. Loyal citizens would be less likely to exit or voice when discontented, as they would rather wait for the situation to evolve in a more positive way (Anderson et al., 2005; Van Haute, 2011).

Anderson and Mendes (2006) focused in their research on citizens who 'voice' their dissatisfaction. They 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 impact of the winner-loser gap on political participation and their results show 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. Both studies thus indicate that citizens try to voice their dissatisfaction after losing an election by protesting or any other form of political participation. As indicated above, citizens cannot only voice their dissatisfaction by participating more, they can also choose to exit. According to Hirschman (1970), exit can be seen as a reaction of last resort because once you have exited, you lose the opportunity to use voice. By contrast, when you voice, you can afterward still chose to exit. Anderson et al. (2005) focused on this strategy

by investigating whether losers are less willing to cast a vote. They tested this by asking if losers who live in an electoral district in which they do not expect to win, were less keen on voting and concluded that this was indeed the case. Unlike voice, when citizens chose to exit, losers assume that they cannot change anything, or in other words, that they cannot become winners. Therefore, they have no interest in casting their vote and thus chose to exit.

1.3. The winner-loser gap in an intra-party context

As discussed above, the winner-loser gap has been extensively documented in the literature, and losers' consent is widely considered crucial for the stability and functioning of a political system, but only in a context of general elections and referenda. Surprisingly, only little attention has been paid to the winner-loser gap in the context of intra-party democracy, especially considering the quasi indispensability of political parties in contemporary democracies (Dalton, Farrell, & McAllister, 2011) and knowing that political parties have recently opened their chain of decision-making for party members (Pilet & Cross, 2014). Hence, I offer a new angle to the scholarly debate by scrutinizing a potential winner-loser gap in the context of intra-party decisions. More precisely, I examine the consequences of winning or losing in intra-party decisions for party members' attitudes and behavior. In addition to the winner-loser gap in the context of intra-party democracy, I will also scrutinize how political parties can narrow the gap between winners and losers of intra-party decisions. More specifically, the (moderating) effects of strategic communication (framing and negative campaigning) will be examined as it can be seen as a strategy with minimal costs and potential sizeable benefits on both attitudes and behaviors.

When transposing the winner-loser gap to an intra-party context, attention should be drawn to the differences between voters and members. On the one hand, the effect of winning or losing intra-party decisions might be larger than winning or losing an electoral process, since members are more involved in a political party than voters in a political system. This reasoning is supported by research that shows that party likeability and identification reinforce the winner-loser gap in general elections. According to Singh (2014), the largest increases in satisfaction with democracy come about when voters win and have chosen parties that closely reflect their preferences. Anderson et al. (2005) also conclude that when partisanship at the individual level is high, it amplifies the impact of winning or losing. Moreover, Daniller (2016) also finds that citizens who spend the most time campaigning for a preferred candidate are the ones who lost the most trust in the process after they lose an electoral process. 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. Hence, I expect that findings and theories on voters cannot simply be transferred to party members.

Important to emphasize are not only the differences between party members and voters but also the different types of winning and losing in an intra-party context. More precisely, I distinguish winners from losers in three different types of internal decision-making procedures where each member has one vote. First, the

question of who will become the next party leader is one of the most important intra-party decisions I choose to focus on leadership elections since as the head of the party, the party leader personifies the party organization and is in practice also the one who exerts the greatest influence on most important decisions in the party. Hence, winning or losing a leadership contest can have a considerable impact on the party's policy and image. Moreover, in a leadership contest, it is clear that members are the ones who decide and affect the outcome. As a consequence, I expect a stronger reaction of party members after winning or losing leadership elections than candidate selection procedures which makes a leadership contest an excellent case to test members' attitudinal and behavioral differences after winning or losing a crucial internal decision. Second, a gap between winners and losers can arise as a result of the decision of whether or not to participate in a certain government. In addition to the selections of a new party leader, this is a crucial question since the consequences of government participation or the joining of a particular coalition are far-reaching as it always involves compromise and changes or slight adjustments in positions. Third, new issues that arise on the political agenda or topical issues on which the party has not yet formed a clear opinion that are voted on at party congresses form the last important type of intra-party decisions. These decisions could lead to internal disputes because the party has to subsume these new items into their primary party goals and take a united stance. Since not all members will agree with this stance, it might divide the party into both winners and losers.

To my knowledge, only one study has investigated a potential winner-loser gap in the scope of an intra-party context so far. Cross and Pruysers (2017) asked whether those members whose preferred candidate lost a candidate selection procedure in Canadian parties continue to support the party at the same rate as other party members. More precisely, they have looked at winners' and losers' satisfaction with their membership, their activity in the general election, and their loyalty which refers to their vote choice and their future membership. For satisfaction with party membership, they found, in line with the literature of the winner-loser gap (Anderson et al., 2005; Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Howell & Justwan, 2013), that members whose preferred candidate lost the local nomination consistently report significantly lower levels of satisfaction than both winners and those whose local nomination resulted in an acclamation, i.e. without a formal vote (their control group). While they found no difference in participation in either online or low-intensity offline activities, they did find a significant difference between winners' and losers' participation in high-intensity activities. Hence, W. Cross and Pruysers (2017) show that losing members are less active in party life since they would be volunteering their time, money, and effort to a candidate they did not prefer. This lower activity rate can be linked to the earlier discussed study of Anderson et al. (2005) where it was found that losers of elections are less keen on voting in general elections. As for the loyalty, the authors did not find a difference in vote choice between winners and losers, however, they do show that losers are significantly less likely to report that they will retain their membership in the next three years compared to those whose local nomination was uncontested. To put it with Hirschman's (1970) words: losers 'exit' at higher rates by withdrawing from intensive forms of activism and when it comes to renewing their membership. While the study of Cross and Pruysers provides valuable insights on the winner-loser gap within political parties, it

derived its conclusions from cross-sectional survey data which does not allow to investigate the differences in attitudes and behaviors before and after an intra-party decision. It seems plausible that winners' and losers' attitudes and behaviors could already differ before an intra-party decision is taken. I test this argument by relying on data that was collected before and after leadership elections, as discussed in the methodological section. Moreover, I also expect a stronger reaction of party members after winning or losing leadership elections than candidate selection procedures as seeing your favorite candidate win or lose a leadership election has more substantial consequences for the party than seeing your favorite candidate being selected since the party leader has a considerable impact on the party's image and policy as discussed above.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1. The consequences of winning or losing intra-party decisions

Based on the literature on the winner-loser gap in the context of elections and referendums and the study of W. Cross and Pruysers (2017), I expect a winner-loser gap to arise after intra-party decisions. I define the winner-loser gap as the difference in both attitudes and behavior between the winners and losers of an electoral contest, or in this case, an internal democratic process. Winners are thereby defined as members whose preferred outcomes are followed, whereas losers are members whose preferences are not followed by their political party.

Since there arises a difference between winners' and losers' satisfaction with democracy after elections and referendums (e.g. Anderson et al, 2005), I also expect a difference in members' satisfaction with their political party and, as W. Cross and Pruysers (2017) showed, in satisfaction with their membership. Moreover, as the literature on the winner-loser gap suggests (e.g. Daniller, 2016), I also think that winners of these intra-party decisions will be more supportive of the decision-making process than losers. Third, I expect winners to be more likely to accept the outcome of them whereas losers will be less likely to accept the intra-party decision (Esaiasson et al., 2016; Grimes, 2006). As attitudes are not always translated into concrete behavior, it is necessary to analyze both attitudes and behavior to create a complete picture. Although less attention has been paid to the impact of winning or losing an electoral process on behavioral variables, I do expect a difference between winners' and losers' engagement in the party. I rely on Hirschman's (1970) earlier discussed distinction between exit, voice, and loyalty and will mainly focus on different shades of 'exit' and 'loyalty' (including leaving the party, lowering activity rate, and casting a deviant vote). Hence, research question 1 is stated as followed: Do losers of intra-party decisions have different attitudes and behavior than winners of these decisions?

2.2. Strategic communication as a moderating variable

Having discussed how the winner-loser gap can impact members' attitudes and behaviors, I will now consider factors that affect the magnitude of that effect. More specifically, I focus on the moderating effect of strategic communication by political parties as a strategy to narrow the gap between winners and losers of intra-party decisions. I will scrutinize two types of strategic communication namely framing and negative campaigning. Before focusing on framing and negative campaigning in an intra-party context, I will describe the concepts in an inter-party context.

Framing in an inter-party context

Although framing does not have a single definition that is agreed upon and used by most scholars (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019) it can, for this research project, be defined as the active process of strategically emphasizing or deemphasizing certain characteristics or facets of an issue through language and rhetoric (Druckman, 2001; Gruszczynski & Michaels, 2012; Iyengar, 2005; Matthes, 2012). The premises of framing are the different perspectives and constructions of an issue that impact multiple values or considerations (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Frames, in contrast, are the result of this framing process and affect attitudes and behaviors of their audiences by promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation for the issue described (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Matthes, 2012).

In the field of political science, framing refers to strategic framing or to how elites communicate and devote the effects of their communication to achieve a specific goal (Benford & Snow, 2000; Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019). This strategic way of communicating is not only used during electoral campaigns but also in more objective political communication such as policy disputes or news media coverage by both political elites and news media (Matthes, 2012; Nelson & Oxley, 1999). Most research has focused on the changes in attitudes of those who receive the frames message which amongst others include attitudes about immigration, climate change, or other policy preferences (Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, & De Vreese, 2015; Lecheler, Bos, & Vliegenthart, 2015; Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019; Nisbet, Hart, Myers, & Ellithorpe, 2013). Hence, the framing literature mainly focuses on attitudes towards policy positions. Although fewer studies focus on the behavioral effects of framing, the concept has been linked to both a mobilizing effect and turnout. According to Schuck, Vliegenthart, and De Vreese (2016), the exposure to conflict framing in campaigns mobilized voters in the 2009 European Parliamentary elections. However, frames can also decrease voter turnout when they emphasize political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

Although political parties are amongst the most frequent and visible actors of issue frames in policy debates, they have been absent in most studies of framing effects (Slothuus, 2010). However, framing can be seen as a strategy with minimal costs and potential sizeable benefits to achieve specific goals (Jacoby, 2000). When political parties apply framing to general policy problems, they focus on issue framing and try to emphasize why the issues they stress deserve greater weight than the perspectives of other parties (Nelson, 2004; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). Nelson (2004) constructed three different strategies to do just that: goal ranking, policy categorization, and institutional role assignment. These frames can be applied

to specific issues (issue-specific frames) and are used to influence policy positions. First, goal ranking can be defined as claiming a special status for one preferred goal while trivializing other goals. Nelson (2004) applied this strategy in a laboratory experiment by asking respondents' attitudes toward a proposal to open adoption records to adopted children, rather than leaving them sealed to protect the identities of the biological parents. The arguments used to defend the different perspectives of the policy problem were either the rights of birth parents to protect their identity or the rights of the children to discover vital information about themselves. Second, issue categorization refers to the process of linking an issue to a familiar category where the goal priorities are indisputable. This might require directly refuting the applicability of an alternative category. This strategy was tested by tapping the controversy of taxpayer-financed school vouchers for poor families. Opponents point to the church-state separation to argue against this policy proposal because, according to them, the taxes will directly go to religious schools. Proponents, on the other hand, define the issue as one of school equality because it will make access to the school more equal. Lastly, institutional role assignment refers to the claim of priority for a value because it is an institution's imperative. This can be illustrated by the framing of affirmative action and whether the role of for example universities is to redress racial inequality or to provide opportunities to the best and most deserving.

Framing in an intra-party context

Since opinions on contentious political issues are shaped by elite constructions or definitions of social problems and policy solutions, I expect frames to affect members' goal priorities and points of view towards intra-party decisions. Hence, political parties can use framing as a strategy to reduce the differences in attitudes and behavior as a consequence of winning or losing an internal democratic process. Although the framing literature mainly focuses on attitudes towards policy positions, I expect framing to also moderate members' satisfaction with the party, satisfaction with party membership, support for the decision-making process, and decision acceptance. Moreover, and based on the framing literature, I also expect a moderating influence on members' choice to either exit or stay loyal to their party.

Applied to the different types of intra-party decisions, I suggest that political parties will focus on both goal ranking and issue categorization in order to minimize the attitudinal and behavioral differences between winners and losers of internal democratic processes. Since both goal ranking and issue categorization are more suited to apply to the intra-party decisions I will investigate, I decide to not focus on the effect of institutional role assignment. Although these goal ranking and issue categorization are closely connected and can be used together to defend a certain decision, I decided to treat them as strictly different types of framing to be able to apply them as well as possible in an experimental design as discussed in the methodological part of this paper.

I expect political parties to mainly focus on the goal ranking strategy of issue framing when they have to defend whether or not they participate in a certain government. On the one hand, I expect them to either emphasize common viewpoints with their coalition partners while trivializing ideological differences if they enter a government. On the other hand, I expect them to highlight the differences in ideology and minimize

common goals when they do not participate in a certain coalition. When political parties and their members have to decide over a united stance when a new topic arises on the political agenda or a topical issue on which the party has not yet formed a clear opinion, issue categorization can be seen as the most suited type of framing by political parties. In this case, parties will deliberately try to subsume this issue into their primary party goals for which a party is perceived to be competent by its voters (or in this case, its members) instead of selectively emphasizing certain issues over others. This can be illustrated by framing strategies used by political parties to justify their position on European integration. Communist parties, for example, framed European integration into their initial party goals by looking at it as an endanger for labor and social security standards whereas populist radical right parties focused on nationalistic values to justify their opposition (Elias, Szöcsik, & Zuber, 2015). Building on the logic of both goal ranking and issue categorization, I forecast that the gap in both attitudes and behaviors will narrow when political parties use both types of framing when they defend intra-party decisions. Hence, research question 2 is formulated as followed: 2: Does framing moderate the impact of winning or losing intra-party decisions on members' attitudes and behavior?

Negative campaigning in an inter-party context

As a consequence of, amongst others, permanent campaigning, or the blurring lines between time spent on the campaign trail and in the governing office (Larsson, 2014), negative campaigning has become a popular concept in both politics and political science. In literature, two different types of negative campaigning can be distinguished. First, there is an evaluative form of negative campaigning which refers to illegitimate campaigning or crossing a moral boundary (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). This type of negative campaigning is also referred to as 'unfair campaigning' or 'dirty politics' (Jamieson, 1993) since it often contains lying or, more generously, stretching the truth (Richard R Lau & Pomper, 2001). The other type of negative campaigning is the directional definition and includes all forms of attacks on the opponent such as talking about the opponent's program, accomplishments, qualifications, associates, issue positions, or experiences (Djupe & Peterson, 2002; Lau & Pomper, 2001; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). This definition of negative campaigning is the opposite of the definition of positive campaigning which refers to talking about own accomplishments, qualifications, or programs (Lau & Pomper, 2001). Therefore, it is not necessary to cross a moral boundary to speak of negative campaigning. In this dissertation, the directional definition of negative campaigning will be used.

In general, negative campaigning can be used by both political parties and candidates when they negatively refer to another party or candidate (Dassonneville, 2010). The logic behind the use of this type of communication is that negative messages weigh heavier in information processing than positive ones (Dolezal, Ennser-Jedenastik, & Muller, 2016). As a consequence, negative campaigning might undermine the support for one's opponent, because voters may be more likely to remember negative information as compared to positive information. Moreover, it can also be seen as leverage over campaign agendas. In this context, negative campaigning can be seen as a zero-sum game as the attacker tries to drive the opponent closer to zero in order to win. There is however no guarantee that negative campaigning will increase

attacker's support because, by the use of it, candidates do not offer voters direct reasons to support them (Damore, 2002). Moreover, negative campaigning can be seen as a risky endeavor that could have a boomerang effect since people do not like politicians who attack each other negatively (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Pattie, Denver, Johns, & Mitchell, 2011).

Negative campaigning in an intra-party context

Although there is no consensus on the exact impact of negative campaigning, I expect that political parties or candidates can use it as a type of strategic communication to shine the best possible light on their policies. Negative campaigning in an intra-party context can be used in two ways namely inside or outside the political party. When negative campaigning is used inside the political party, it refers to all forms of attacks on other candidates or points of view of fellow partisans. This can be seen as a strategy to win a decision-making process, but not to narrow the gap between winners and losers of intra-party decisions. Moreover, there is little room for negative campaigning inside a political party as it could hurt the party's overall vote share. Hence, I focus on the use of negative campaigning in an intra-party context by referring to other parties. While losing intra-party decisions might negatively affect the evaluation of the own party, negative references to other parties might safeguard the relative appreciation of the own party (compared to others) and might even offset negative effects. The argument is that even if the own party is making bad decisions, this party is still much better than other competing parties. In an era of 'excessive partisanship' and even 'party tribalism' (Brennan, 2017; Cuddy, 2018), I argue that this reasoning should hold in particular for party members.

Since negative campaigning can add excitement and interest to the internal decision-making process and the political party in general, it might affect members' activity in party life just as it affects turnout (Brooks, 2006). Moreover, I also expect a positive influence of negative campaigning on members' attitudes because members are closer to their party than voters which possibly reduces the boomerang effect. This leads to research question 3: Does negative campaigning moderate the impact of winning or losing intra-party decisions on members' attitudes and behavior?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As outlined in the theoretical framework above, this research project aims to examine whether a winner-loser gap arises after intra-party decisions and whether strategic communication can moderate the effect of the winner-loser gap on members' attitudes and behaviors. The methodology of this study can be subdivided according to the different types of intra-party decisions. This logic is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Research methodology

	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Leadership contest	Panel data		
Government participation		Experiment 1	Experiment 2
New topic or topical issue		Experiment 3	Experiment 4

3.1. LEADERSHIP CONTESTS

First, I examine whether winning or losing a leadership contest affects members' attitudes and behavior (RQ1). 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. Hence, seeing your favorite candidate win or lose a leadership election has more substantial consequences for the party than seeing your favorite candidate being selected. Hence, I expect a more far-reaching effect of winning or losing leadership contests than candidate selection procedures which is why I focus on the first.

Since surveys in the context of another study were already administered before the leadership contests of two major Belgian parties took place, the opportunity arose to test the effect of winning or losing a leadership contest in real life with a pre-and post-test. By means of a second survey, administered one year after the leadership contests, unique panel data are used to measure the impact of winning or losing a leadership contest. Hence, a self-administered survey, i.e. a survey where no interviewer is required and the items of a survey are visually displayed to the respondents who have to read the material, was administered both before and after the leadership elections of the Flemish Christian-democratic party (CD&V) and the Flemish Liberals (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).

This real-life method has the disadvantage that the moderating impact of strategic communication cannot be tested for a leadership election as it is impossible to manipulate the information participants receive in real life. However, I believe that the opportunity of testing the impact of winning or losing a leadership contest in real life by the use of panel data is a unique opportunity that outweighs this disadvantage. First, the panel data present data of real-life situations and provide better insights into the detailed attitudes and behavior of members (Zainal, 2007). Second, in contrast to the earlier discussed study of W. Cross and Pruyers (2017), it allows the possibility of observing the before- and after-effects on individuals as well as the possibility of isolating the effects of treatment from other factors affecting the outcome (Hsiao, 2007). Third, the measuring of both before- and after-effects and the use of self-administered surveys also helps to reduce the impact of social desirability (Paulhus & Reid, 1991). Fourth, as far as I know, no study has ever investigated party members using a longitudinal design.

The survey questions focus on members' satisfaction, their support for the decision-making process, their decision acceptance, and their activity within the party. Moreover, in order to control for what kind of party members this effect is stronger than for others, variables that have come forward as relevant in previous analyses (W. Cross & Pruysers, 2017; Van Haute, 2011) are included. These involve socio-demographic variables (such as gender, age, and level of education), socialization variables (such as years of party membership and reasons to join the party), and ideological self-placement on a left-right scale. We anticipate nonresponse by sending reminders to the selected respondents and by shortening the second questionnaire to make it as respondent-friendly as possible (Dillman, Sinclair, & Clark, 1993).

3.2. GOVERNMENT PARTICIPATION AND TOPICAL OR NEW ISSUES

In addition to the panel data, I will set up two survey experiments to examine the effects of winning or losing the questions of both government participation and new or topical issues (RQ1) and the moderating effect of both framing (RQ2) and negative campaigning (RQ3) on these intra-party decisions. For the purpose of this study, an experimental approach is most appropriate because, as indicated above, real-life data are less suited to understand moderating effects or the conditions under which a treatment affects a certain outcome (Druckman, Green, Kuklinski, & Lupia, 2011a). Hence, experiments are well suited to answer the second and third research question as it allows to manipulate the information participants receive (either no moderating variables, framing, or negative campaigning) whilst controlling for extraneous factors (in this case individual factors) (Druckman, Green, Kuklinski, & Lupia, 2006). It also allows me to make more strongly a causal link than is possible in survey methods (Campbell & Cowley, 2014). Another argument for the use of experiments is the fact that its use represents a novel and innovative method in the field of party politics.

I will use a survey experiment that involves an intervention in the course of a self-administered questionnaire (Druckman, Green, Kuklinski, & Lupia, 2011b). Respondents will be sent an electronic invitation to fill in an online-based survey. This is an accessible and affordable way of data collection that limits a potential social desirability bias. Respondents will be randomly selected from the membership registers of four Belgian parties (CD&V, Groen, N-VA, Vooruit). Belgium is an excellent case to study the impact of intra-party decisions because, in the last decades, elites have opened the intraparty chain of decision-making for party members. Moreover, party membership figures are still rather high since Belgium has a bigger pool of party members and faces a slower downward trend than other European countries (van Haute, Amjahad, Borriello, Close, & Sandri, 2012).

In the first and second experiments, all respondents will be exposed to different cases of government participation. First, they will have to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the possible coalition partner. In the next step, I manipulate winning or losing by showing them whether other members agreed (winners) or disagreed (losers) with their point of view. In the last step, I manipulate whether the political party uses goal ranking (experiment 1) or negative campaigning (experiment 2) to defend why they decided to (not) work together with the proposed coalition partner or no defense of their position is displayed (control group). The third and fourth experiments will use the same design as the first and second ones. However,

instead of different cases of government participation, respondents will be exposed to new issues or topical issues on which the party has not yet formed a clear opinion and they have to indicate whether or not they agree or disagree with that topic. The third experiment will also use issue categorization as a framing strategy instead of goal ranking. The fourth experiment will use negative campaigning as a strategy to defend the party's point of view on a new or topical issue. For ethical reasons and to ensure the parties' collaboration, no references to other Belgian parties are made in the manipulation of framing and negative campaigning. Instead, I use international examples and general ideological terms to defend the intra-party decisions and examine the moderating effect of strategic communication.

The creation of clearly distinguishable experimental treatments enhances the internal validity (i.e. the determination of whether the relationships within the particular data-set are causal relationships) of the measurement of winning and losing and the moderating effects of both framing and negative campaigning. The fact that the respondents of the experiment are the actors who are normally confronted with the stimuli, and the stimuli themselves are tested in a pilot study helps to maximize the external validity or the question of generalizability. Moreover, the generalizability of the sample to the population is improved by selecting both a relatively new party with rising membership figures and a long-established party with declining membership figures for each experiment. In addition to the rising or declining membership figures, the parties selected for both experiments will also represent each side of the left-right scale. This is especially important for the moderating impact of strategic communication as research has shown that leftist voters are more willing to accept negative information about their party and act on it than rightist voters. Since the explanation of this effect lies in the relative openness of leftist voters which makes them more likely to reconsider their political preferences than relatively closed right-wing voters, the same logic might also apply to the impact of framing on both leftist and rightist voters (Jung & Tavits, 2021).

After the manipulation, respondents will be asked to fill in a self-administered questionnaire where they will be asked questions about their attitudes and behaviors. The absence of an interviewer again reduces the chance of socially desirable answers (Druckman et al., 2006). The survey questions focus on members' satisfaction with the political party and their membership, members' support for the decision-making process, members' decision acceptance and their activity, vote choice, and future membership. Socio-demographic variables (such as gender, age, and level of education), socialization variables (such as years of party membership and reasons to join the party), and ideological self-placement on a left-right scale are used as control variables. Since the respondents are randomly assigned to one of the experimental groups, the treatment effect of both framing and negative campaigning is estimated by comparing winners to losers and the control groups to the treatment groups as random assignment provides a basis for assuming that the control group behaves as the treatment group would have behaved had it not received the treatment (Druckman, Green, Kuklinski, & Lupia, 2011c).

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