The ideological cohesion of parliamentary parties
and its implications for decision-making in modern democracies

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Abstract

Political scientists often treat parties as "unitary actors". In most cases, however, parties represent divergent interests of various members in several regional and organizational units. This project aims at measuring the ideological cohesion of political parties, that is, the general agreement within a party in terms of policy positions. In addition, the project aims at exploring the causes and consequences of ideological cohesion. We explain varying levels of intra-party cohesion taking individual characteristics of MPs and ministers as well as country- and party-specific institutional factors into account. Moreover, the project explores the manifold implications of intra-party cohesion on legislative decision-making, government formation, and policy-making in general. It is argued that intra-party cohesion or its opposite, heterogeneity has consequences for the power and behavior of political actors, for example when forming governments and allocating ministerial portfolios. Furthermore, intra-party cohesion should have wider consequences on political outputs. Focusing on nine Western European countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom), we analyze parliamentary speeches of members of Parliament (MPs) and cabinet members by applying computerized methods of content analysis. Understanding the causes and consequences of intra-party cohesion is important for the performance of political parties, governments, ministers and MPs, and democratic systems as a whole.

Project description

STATE OF THE ART

The concepts of party "unity" and "cohesion" have been used in a sometimes confusing manner in the literature on political parties. To make a clear distinction, unity refers to the behavioral phenomenon of MPs in a party or other group voting together, or as a bloc in parliament. In contrast, programmatic cohesion relates to the "homogeneity of policy preferences", or the general agreement within a group in terms of policy positions (Giannetti and Benoit 2009: 5). This latter concept, that is, ideological cohesion or programmatic homogeneity, is the focus of this research project.

To measure policy preferences of MPs, previous research mainly concentrates on their behavior in parliament. Because voting is the most consequential activity of MPs, roll call votes are extensively used to analyze the cohesion of political parties. Most prominently, these legislatures are the US Congress (Poole and Rosenthal 1997, McCarthy et al. 2006; Krehbiel 2000), the European Parliament (Hix et al. 2006) and the German Bundestag (Saalfeld 1995). However, this type of analysis is associated with some problems. First, in many parliaments and periods the

number of roll-call votes is very small. Second, even when roll-call votes amount to figures that can be meaningfully analyzed statistically, it is not clear that they are representative for acts of parliamentary voting. Rather they may be endogenous to precisely the characteristics of voting behavior – party cohesion – that we want to study (Carruba et al. 2006, 2008). On the one hand party leaders are likely to employ roll-calls as a means to enforce party discipline upon MPs when the agreement among them is low (as roll-call votes can be better observed by party leaders – Saalfeld 1995). On the other hand, parties that are united on an issue may demand roll-call votes to expose the fact that other parties are split. Both would lead to a biased sample, as votes on those issues will be overrepresented where at least one of the parties has a potential for cohesion problems. Thus, MPs may not behave sincerely when their voting decision is known, for example since they are influenced by party discipline, which implies that an analysis of roll call or recorded votes is not likely to reflect the real ideological or policy positions of political actors.

Analyzing parliamentary speeches instead of voting behavior avoids most of the problems mentioned above. First, speeches occur more often than roll call votes thus allowing for statistical analysis. Second, there are more parliamentary speeches than roll call votes thus reducing the selection bias problem. Third, speeches are more fine-grained measures than vote choices. While the votes are not likely to reveal policy differences, parliamentary speeches may do so. In addition, MPs with preferences deviating from the party line are more likely to express those in parliamentary speeches than in deviant voting behavior. Thus, the policy positions derived from speeches should be more accurate than positions derived from roll call analyses. The project will therefore collect and analyze parliamentary speeches to create a new data base for further research. The speeches are analyzed using methods of computerized content analysis.

Some previous studies, focusing on specific countries or cases, have analyzed parliamentary speeches using this type of approach. For example, Giannetti and Laver (2005), who study the impact of Italian ministers' policy positions on the spending in the policy area for which they are responsible, make use of a dataset that covers the policy positions of each minister estimated on the basis of their speeches in parliament. They apply the Wordscores technique developed by Laver, Benoit and Garry (2003) to get information on the policy positions of the cabinet members of the Italian coalition government that formed in 1996. Laver et al. (2006) apply the Wordscores technique to the speeches of French presidential candidates in 2002 and their programs. Laver and Benoit (2002) use computerized content analysis to estimate positions of Irish MPs on the basis of their speeches held during one single debate. The results show that MPs belonging to one party group share similar preferences, but also that differences inside parties and thus policy conflict inside parties exist. Bernauer and Bräuninger (2009) apply the Wordscores technique to the German case and estimate the policy positions of Bundestag MPs 2002–2005. Likewise to Laver and Benoit (2002), the results of the Bernauer and Bräuninger (2009) study show that Wordscores delivers plausible results when estimating the preferences of political actors on the basis of their speeches instead of party programs or election manifestos. Also, studies on members of the European Parliament reveal plausible policy positions derived from parliamentary speeches, regardless of whether estimated by Wordscores or the more recent technique, "Wordfish" (see e.g. Slapin and Proksch 2008).

Several previous studies have tried to identify the factors causing intra-party cohesion or unity. Bernauer and Bräuninger (2009), for instance, show that faction membership has an effect on MPs' policy positioning. The degree of intra-party cohesion may also have

to do with the number of "relevant parties" (Sartori 1976: 123) in the respective party system, which depends on the electoral system or on a country's cleavage structure (Duverger 1959; Cox 1997; Owens 2004). Research also shows that the degree of party organization, which varies across party families, positively affects the chance that internal groups with different programmatic viewpoints can arise (see e.g. Sieberer 2006). Scholars who have focused on the organizational features of parties when explaining party cohesion have highlighted the role of candidate selection procedures (Pennings and Hazan 2001). The hypothesis is that programmatic cohesion is expected to be higher when party leaders control candidate selection. Turning to features of individual actors, the literature on political socialization suggests that the more acquainted MPs get with their parliamentary roles the more they will tend to support established patterns of power (Dawson et al. 1977: 16). This leads to the expectation that MPs with longer parliamentary careers are more likely to vote and speak "in line" with their party.

Heterogeneity or policy conflict within parties has far-reaching consequences for the power and behavior of political actors and political decision-making. The importance of relaxing the unitary-actor-assumption has for example been stressed in the literature on government formation (see e.g. Giannetti and Benoit 2009). Laver and Schofield (1998: 16) draw on the work of Luebbert (1986) and argue that intraparty tensions systematically influence bargaining, more specifically, tensions should negatively affect parties' ability to enter government (see also Bäck 2003; 2008). Laver and Shepsle (1996) theoretically illustrate the importance of intra-party politics for the allocation of ministerial portfolios among the coalition parties. Extending the hypothesis presented by Gamson (1961) that parties should receive portfolio shares in proportion to their seat contribution, Mershon (2001) studies how the size of factions within

the Italian Christian Democrats determines the portfolio allocation within the party. Intra-party conflict is also likely to affect parties' electoral success. Parties not speaking with one voice should suffer at the polls because they do not send clear signals to their electorate. In their study on European integration, Gabel and Scheve (2007) show that intra-party dissent indeed reduces the party's electoral support. In addition to the political consequences, intra-party heterogeneity is likely to influence policy outputs. For example, Giannetti and Laver (2005) show that there is substantial variation in the economic policy positions of ministers of the same party in the 1996 Italian Prodi government, and that the more leftist the policy position of a minister is, the more the share of his department on the state budget has increased over time.

Project goals and data collection

The project aims at narrowing several gaps in the literature regarding the role of ideological cohesion. First, it aims at measuring intra-party cohesion in a comparative way. Second, the project explains the varying levels of intra-party cohesion. Finally, the third goal is to study the implications of intra-party cohesion for individual MPs as well as effects on coalition bargaining and policy outcomes. We analyze the causes and implications of intra-party cohesion in nine Western European democracies (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s. The selected countries vary in their institutional setup (e.g. electoral systems, presidential powers, bicameralism) allowing for testing hypotheses describing how institutional factors impact on intra-party cohesion. Moreover, the sample reflects the diversity of party ideologies and patterns of party competition to be found in West European countries (see Benoit and Laver 2006). The selected countries also allow for combining data on intra-party cohesion with

already existing datasets on party positions (Klingemann et al. 2006), legislative outputs (Bräuninger and Debus 2009, Jenny and Müller 2010), and policy outcomes (e.g. Cusack 1999). Here follows a more detailed description of the project goals.

PROJECT GOAL 1: MEASURING INTRA-PARTY COHESION

When it comes to measuring intra-party cohesion, the project improves on previous research in two ways. First, it establishes a new dataset that covers information on the ideological and policy-area specific positions of parliamentary parties in Western Europe. Up to now, a number of country studies exist analyzing the programmatic party cohesion of British and Canadian parliamentary party groups (Kam 2008), of Swedish political parties (Bäck 2003; 2008), of parties in the US Congress (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; McCarthy et al. 2006), and the Austrian and Swiss parliaments (Müller et al. 2001: Lanfranchi and Lüthi 1999), but these studies do not take a cross-national comparative perspective. The project aims to fill this gap within comparative political research on parties and legislatures.

Second, the research team aims at improving the measurement of policy preferences. Instead of relying on a relatively small and potentially biased sample of roll call votes providing limited information on policy preferences, the project team uses a recently developed computer-aided method of content analysis, "Wordscores", to analyze parliamentary speeches. Previous research has shown that this method provides estimates with high face validity. Furthermore, potential problems (e.g. reliability problems) associated with other methods of content analysis like MRG/CMP-style hand coding (see Volkens 2001) or the "dictionary procedure" (Laver and Garry 2000) do not arise (see, e.g., Benoit, Mikhaylov and Laver 2009). In addition, the estimation is completely based on computer algorithms, which is less time-consuming once one has downloaded all parliamentary debates and separated them by policy areas and by MPs. Of course, speeches are also part of the "behavior" of MPs, which suggest that a study of parliamentary speeches may be plagued by similar problems as a study of roll call votes, for example, parliamentary speeches may also be influenced by factors such as party discipline (see Bäck, Debus and Müller 2010 for a discussion). We still believe that analyzing speeches should fill important gaps that remain after the analysis of voting behavior. And the analysis of speeches should reveal information that is qualitatively different from what can be extracted even under the best circumstances from the analysis of roll-call votes. Analyzing speeches thus brings us closer to understanding party cohesion in terms of preferences rather than behavior.

Computer-aided content analysis has mainly been used in previous research estimating policy positions of political parties (Laver et al. 2003) and individual actors like MPs (Laver and Benoit 2002) and presidents (Laver et al. 2006). For the proposed project, the research team applies the method to parliamentary speeches. Previous research (Laver and Benoit 2002) shows that this is a feasible approach and the research project aims at generalizing these findings for a cross-national sample. To cross-validate the estimated policy positions, available survey material (in some of the countries) measuring MPs' self-reported policy preferences is used. Showing that computer-aided content analysis and survey responses yield the same empirical patterns, the research project proves the feasibility of an easily applicable and reliable method for measuring policy preferences simplifying concept measurement for future research.

PROJECT GOAL 2: INVESTIGATING THE CAUSES OF INTRA-PARTY COHESION

The project also aims at explaining the observed empirical patterns in ideological cohesion. Which MPs are most likely to

represent policies deviating from the party core? And how can differences in party cohesion across and within countries be explained? The research team aims at providing a comprehensive theoretical framework predicting intra-party cohesion. Here we can for example draw on the work by Carey (2007) on voting unity. Carey (2007: 93) distinguishes between three distinct sources of voting unity within legislative parties: cohesiveness, discipline, and agenda control. Thus, one reason why members of parliament belonging to the same party vote as a bloc is that the members have similar preferences. Another reason why MPs of the same party vote together is that party leaders use a "combination of carrots and sticks […] to reward voting loyalty and deter or punish breaches in discipline". Lastly, party leaders may use their ability to steer the agenda, in order to avoid that proposals that would divide the party come to a vote in the legislature. Hence, a highly unified voting record may or may not signal a high level of ideological cohesion within the party. Carey (2007) has presented a number of hypotheses explaining voting unity across parties and systems, drawing on the so called "competing principals theory", based on the more general principal-agent framework. The main idea is that members of parliament can be seen as agents facing several different principals, and since these principals are likely to control resources to influence the voting behavior of MPs, divergence in the demands of "competing" principals is likely to reduce voting unity within parties.

According to Giannetti and Benoit (2009), scholars who have tried to explain cohesion and unity have mainly focused on the variation across different political systems by introducing three main sets of explanatory variables: institutional features, party system features and parties' internal structure. Giannetti and Benoit (2009: 5) mention three main institutional features that have been stressed in the literature as explanations to voting unity: federalism, legislative-executive relations, and electoral rules. For example, Carey (2007) argues that in systems where candidates compete with other MPs within their party for electoral support (e.g. in single member plurality systems), voting unity should be lower since such electoral systems encourage personal vote-seeking. Hence, unity and cohesion can be expected to be higher in proportional systems (especially with closed lists) than in single-member plurality systems.

We should also see variation in the behavior of individual MPs, where some MPs are more likely to stick to the party line, whereas others are more likely to deviate from it. The party-internal hierarchy, as reflected in MPs holding party and parliamentary leadership positions, may for example influence MPs' behavior (e.g. Müller et al. 2001), and one hypothesis is that MPs holding leadership positions are more likely to stick to the party line, when voting or holding speeches in parliament. All else equal, MPs holding leading positions should stick to the party line for the reason that it is likely to represent their own preferences, since they are more likely to be able to influence the party line. Also, the rule of reciprocity (Fenno 1973: 95; Weingast 1987; see also Mayntz and Neidhardt 1989) should work better at higher levels of hierarchy. In contrast to a backbencher, a committee chair, for instance, has his/her own turf to defend. MPs in leadership positions thus may gain more practical use from reciprocity than other MPs. Finally, MPs in leading positions tend to have more to lose from potential punishment as they may be withdrawn from such positions, or their term may not be renewed (Damgaard 1995; Saalfeld 1995).

PROJECT GOAL 3: INVESTIGATING THE CONSEQUENCES OF INTRA-PARTY COHESION

The third goal of the project is to study the consequences of intra-party cohesion. Intra-party heterogeneity is likely to have a direct effect on individual MPs and their career ambitions within the parties. Policy

preferences deviating from the party core may also motivate MPs to collaborate with MPs of other parties. On the macro level, intra-party cohesion affects the bargaining power of political parties, their legislative behavior, and – as a consequence – political decision-making in general. Policy preferences of individual MPs may for example be used to explain patterns of legislative behavior. Party affiliation and the government-opposition divide explain the introduction of law proposals as well as decision-making on bills. However, recent research on the legislative activity shows that a small but significant share of bills exists that have been inserted by the parliamentary opposition and won a majority in parliament. Also, MPs sometimes work together across the government–opposition divide in introducing law proposals (see Bräuninger and Debus 2009). This raises the question whether the individual programmatic position of MPs differ in a way from the party core that produces incentives to work with other parties, regardless of whether the MPs belong to the government or the opposition. As mentioned above, the variety of intra-party preferences may also affect a party's bargaining power and hence government formation processes. In addition, tensions within parties could also affect government stability because coalition governments involving heterogeneous parties suffer from a policy deadlock. As a consequence, governments are less likely to deal with political crises and hence government instability increases. Intra-party cohesion may also affect policy outcomes due to that parties suffering from low intra-party cohesion are likely to lose bargaining power. This in turn may lead to that their impact on legislative output and the implementation stage decreases, and as a result, heterogeneous parties should be less likely to shape policy outcomes.

A concrete example of an important research question that we aim to answer in this project is the question of whether intra-party politics matter when determining how portfolios are allocated. We thus aim to improve our understanding of why specific politicians are appointed to specific ministerial posts (see Bäck et al. 2011). To make this contribution, we draw on the previous literature on ministerial selection and de-selection or turnover (see e.g. Dowding & Dumont 2008). This literature relies heavily on principal-agent theory and takes its starting point in the so called 'parliamentary chain of delegation', which suggests that power-relationships in a parliamentary democracy can be described as a chain, where citizens are in a first step delegating power to representatives, who in turn delegate power to a cabinet and a PM, who delegates power to cabinet line ministers (see e.g. Strøm 2003). The focus here lies on the third step in this chain, where the PM is seen as the principal delegating power to the individual ministers as department heads. One way of minimizing problems of "moral hazard" – that line ministers act in a way that do not coincide with the wishes of the principal – is to try to appoint ministers whose interests do not clash with the principal's interest (Kam et al. 2010: 2). A main hypothesis draws on this idea and says that politicians are more likely to be appointed to ministerial office the closer their own policy position is to that of the principal. What complicates matters is that politicians may have several, competing principals (Carey 2007), and we suggest that who is the "dominant" principal depends on the institutional setting where portfolio allocation takes place. In settings where the PM has strong agenda-setting powers, he or she is likely to be the dominant principal, whereas other actors are likely to take this part in settings where the PM has few competencies. A problem when evaluating the role of intra-party politics for portfolio allocation is that we often do not have access to information on individual politicians' policy positions – this project solves this problem by analyzing the speeches of individual MPs and ministers, thereby giving us such information in a large number of countries,

allowing us to evaluate the importance of various institutional features.

DATA COLLECTION

The main data collection task of the project is to collect parliamentary speeches and prepare the collected text documents for the empirical analysis. Collecting parliamentary speeches and their preparation for data analysis requires large resources. This hinges on the huge amount of data which has to be collected since a large number of speeches are made during one legislative period (the project will focus on the 2–4 most recent periods in each country). Research assistants are instructed to download the speeches from the parliaments' web pages grouping speeches by MPs and parliamentary party groups. The documents are then prepared for the data analysis. To reduce the amount of hand coding, the project will employ a computer scientist programming routines for downloading and pre-filtering parliamentary speeches. The data collected will be made available to other researchers, thereby giving the research community a systematic source for evaluating parties' ideological cohesion in a large sample of Western European countries.

In order to explain the variation in ideological cohesion across countries, parties and individuals, the research team collects data for the various explanatory variables including institutions (e.g. electoral systems, federalism), party-specific data (e.g. organization, size, ideology), and individual characteristics of MPs (e.g. leadership positions, parliamentary career), using various available sources (e.g. for German MPs, we can use the Bundestag data handbook, which includes short biographies of all MPs that name their functions inside the party, the parliamentary party group and inside the government). To evaluate the predictions aimed at investigating the effects of ideological cohesion, the project combines the collected data on intra-party cohesion with already existing datasets on coalition governments (e.g. Constitutional Change and Parliamentary Democracies; see Müller et al. 2000; Strøm et al. 2008), political parties (e.g. the Comparative Manifestos Project; see Budge et al. 2001), legislative behavior (Bräuninger and Debus 2009, Jenny and Müller 2010), and datasets including variables measuring policy outcomes (e.g. Cusack 1999).

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