



## Changing Democracy? Why Inertia is Winning Over Innovation

Lidia Núñez, Caroline Close & Camille Bedock

To cite this article: Lidia Núñez, Caroline Close & Camille Bedock (2016) Changing Democracy? Why Inertia is Winning Over Innovation, *Representation*, 52:4, 341-357, DOI: [10.1080/00344893.2017.1317656](https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2017.1317656)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2017.1317656>



Published online: 26 Apr 2017.




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# CHANGING DEMOCRACY? WHY INERTIA IS WINNING OVER INNOVATION

Lidia Núñez , Caroline Close and Camille Bedock

*There is a widespread belief that in order to cure the so-called crisis of democracy, citizens' involvement in decision-making processes needs to be fostered. However, despite the fact that there is a move towards more inclusive institutions in Europe, changes implementing democratic innovations at the national level remain rare. Why are democratic innovations not implemented more often? In this article, we provide explanations on why inertia seems to win over change through an analysis of party elites' willingness to enact democratic innovations across 15 European democracies, by using the PartiRep Comparative MP Survey. This research concentrates on party-level factors: party age, time in government and party ideology. Findings suggest that institutional inertia is partially rooted on the fact that party elites' support for democratic innovations is heavily related to anti-establishment parties, to left-wing parties and to parties with limited access to power.*

## Introduction

In 2000 Robert Dahl claimed that 'in a disturbing number of the advanced democratic countries citizens' confidence in several major democratic institutions has undergone a significant decline since the 1980s or earlier' (2000: 36). Citizens appear to be increasingly discontent about the way democracy works and they tend to regard political parties and politicians with a growing scepticism and mistrust (Dalton 2004; Norris 1999, 2011; Pharr et al. 2000; Thomassen 2015). Citizens' level of identification with political parties is at record low and party membership is declining in most countries (Van Biezen et al. 2012). Populist alternatives are flourishing in West European democracies (Mudde 2007, 2014), leading the polls in countries such as France or the Netherlands. Parties that used to dominate the electoral arena are now seeing their electoral share radically declining, or even disappearing altogether (Hernández and Kriesi 2016).

In this context, the topic of institutional reforms often emerges onto the political agenda as a solution to citizens' lack of trust in the political system (Newton and Geissel 2012; Smith 2009). More generally, there is a widespread belief that 'the cure for democracy is more democracy' (Cain et al. 2003: 2), and that institutional reforms are the preferred answer to this state of 'democratic malaise' (Newton and Geissel 2012). Democratic innovations, defined as 'institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process' (Smith 2009: 1), would allegedly help to 'recast the relationship between political elites and citizens' (Ryan and Smith 2011: 2). Recent studies have set forth the extent to which citizens support several types of democratic innovations, showing in most of them quite a widespread support for increased citizen participation (Bowler et al. 2007; Font et al. 2015); although certain authors argue that citizens want decisive politics more than increased participation (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

*Representation*, 2016

Vol. 52, No. 4, 341–357, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2017.1317656>

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Looking at the 'supply side' of reforms, propositions for reforming democratic institutions emanate from all kinds of political actors, from associations of the civil society to elected political elites. Politicians seem to be willing to discuss the implementation of democratic innovations at the national and supranational levels (i.e., European Union) (Schmitter and Trechsel 2004; Smith 2005). Yet, in spite of this apparent favourable trend towards opening up the political system, the implementation of democratic innovations at the national level remains rare. Bedock et al. (2012) find out that among European democracies reforms concerning the introduction or the strengthening of direct democracy mechanisms at the national level are very rare, despite the fact that the use of direct democracy is growing around the world (Qvortrup 2014). Even in those cases where national legislations allow for the use of popular petitions (e.g., Spain) political elites tend to ignore them (Cuesta López 2008). Deliberative democracy at the regional or national level remains limited to just a few cases (Reuchamps and Suiter 2016); such as the Irish Constitutional Convention, the Icelandic Constitutional Assembly in Iceland, the Estonian Citizens' Assembly or other devices such as the Belgian G-1000 or the Dutch Burgerforum. Besides, reforms enabling democratic innovations constitute a particularly intriguing case to understand the motivations of reformers, as they question the principles of representative democracy by enhancing the direct role of citizens at the expense of elected representatives.

*Why are democratic innovations so rare?* In this article, we analyse potential reasons for the inertia of political institutions from the perspective of political parties, and specifically, of parliamentarians, who are arguably the central actors of the policy-making process. By drawing in particular on theoretical arguments developed in the field of electoral reform (Benoit 2004; Boix 1999; Bol 2016; Bowler et al. 2006; Pilet and Bol 2011) and in the field of direct democracy reforms (Bowler et al. 2002; Herzog 2016, Lawrence et al. 2009), we put forward party-level factors that can partly account for the reluctance of political parties to reform the democratic system. We focus on the different dynamics between office-holders and opposition parties, the role of ideology and party age. In this way, we offer a solid insight into why democratic institutions seem to be so resistant to change.

In the first part of this article, we hypothesise how a series of party-level factors might impact parties' positions on democratic innovations. We then present the PartiRep Comparative MP Survey data on which the analysis is based, and we measure parties' support for several types of democratic innovations. The fourth section examines the effect of the independent factors from a bivariate and multivariate perspective. The final section concludes.

### **Explaining Inertia Versus Innovation: Hypotheses**

Scholars have for long considered institutions as stable features of the polity, and this inherent stability has constituted a kind of self-explanation of why institutional reforms were so rare. Recently, researches on electoral system change, regime change and policy change have brought new perspectives on the issue of *why* reforms do rarely occur (Bedock 2017; Rahat and Hazan 2011). Scholars have mainly focused on systemic variables, and have relied to a great extent on the concepts of institutional barriers and veto players to explain the inertia of most countries to reform their institutions (Hooghe and Deschouwer 2011; Núñez and Jacobs 2016, Tsebelis 2002). In addition, more sociological approaches have suggested the role of political tradition and social structure in hindering or incentivising institutional reforms (Rahat and Hazan 2011: 481–2). In the field of electoral reform, scholars have investigated party elites' preferences on the need to change the electoral system and on the

specific types or directions of an eventual reform (Benoit 2004; Boix 1999; Bol 2016; Bowler et al. 2006; Pilet and Bol 2011; Rahat 2008). Authors focusing on direct democracy reforms have also provided valuable theoretical insights to understand politicians' preferences for devices such as referendums or citizens' initiatives (Bowler et al. 2002; Herzog 2016; Lawrence et al. 2009).

Instrumental motivations and self-interest seem to be the main determinant of parties' reluctance or support for democratic reforms (Benoit 2004; Boix 1999; Herzog 2016, Pilet and Bol 2011), although values and ideology are also crucial (Bol 2016; Bowler et al. 2002, 2006). The general logic explaining this reluctance is that political outsiders and opposition parties tend to be more favourable to democratic reforms weakening the power of the incumbents, while ideological preferences also explain why certain political families are—for different reasons—more likely to support certain reform alternatives.

This article explores three party-related variables: a first one pertaining to the party's power in the political system—the party's position in government or opposition—a second one pertaining to the degree of institutionalisation of the party organisation—party age—and a third one pertaining to the party's values and principles—party ideology. Hence we grasp both contextual and constitutive elements of political parties, and we develop both instrumental and value-laden explanations.

### *The Role of Power*

Democratic innovations, as other institutional reforms, can entail large changes in the distribution of power in a polity. By shifting the balance of power from elected representatives to citizens, democratic innovations effectively limit the decision-making powers of politicians. Indeed, according to Herzog, 'from a strategic perspective, representatives should be careful to expand citizen participation in the decision-making process since they would undermine their own sphere of influence and an important source of power' (2016: 1). Under this assumption, why would ruling political parties be willing to implement such changes? We argue that political parties' position in the system affects their position towards democratic innovations. Government parties, which seem to benefit from the status quo (Bowler et al. 2002), face a high risk of losing their power if democratic innovations are to be implemented and should therefore show less support for reforms than opposition parties. Using the case of electoral reforms, Pilet and Bol argue that 'there is a psychological inclination to evaluate the existing electoral law positively once in power' (2011: 579). Focusing on direct democracy, other authors have long shown the anti-hegemonic effect of such devices, helping outsiders and opposition parties to gain power in the political system at the expense of government parties (LeDuc 2003; Smith 1975). There is also empirical evidence that opposition parties are much more likely to support direct democratic reforms as a way to weaken the power of the government (Herzog 2016). Thus, presence in government is expected to decrease support for reform.

H1a: Parties in government are less favourable to the introduction of democratic innovations than parties in opposition.

A similar line of reasoning can be followed when time is taken into account. Political parties in opposition might be reluctant to introduce this kind of changes if they have frequently been in government, and have good chances of gaining access to power in the next election. In these cases, the possibility of coming back to government again in a near future might confirm their reluctance to change the status quo. Pilet and Bol (2011) have

shown that time in government reduces significantly support for changing the electoral system. Therefore, we expect that:

H1b: The longer parties have been in government, the less favourable to introducing democratic innovations.

### *The Role of Party Age*

From an instrumental perspective, a party's age might also be determinant for the party's willingness to implement democratic innovations. Demands for the introduction of more participatory modes of democracy are often aggregated by younger parties in reaction to the old established political elites. For instance, Scarrow has shown that the expansion of direct democracy within German political parties has been advocated by newly formed parties in the 1980s, such as the Greens, as a way to appeal to citizens attracted by unconventional means of participation (Scarrow 1999). Besides, older parties are those that have survived along the years within the existing system; thus they should be more supportive of the status quo. It is also true that their survival might in fact result from their capacity to change the rule of the game in their own interest. This idea merges with the literature on party organisational development, and specifically with the 'cartel party' thesis (Katz and Mair 1995). Older parties which have attained this 'cartelisation' stage of development have succeeded in monopolising state resources, and might therefore be less willing to support changes to the detriment of their own power and grip on the political process and institutions.

H2: The older the parties, the less favourable to the introduction of democratic innovations.

### *The Role of Party Ideology*

As underlined by Herzog, 'institutional systems concern overarching principles of the democratic system and thus, are related to fundamental values about the ideal democracy' (2016: 10). Indeed, it has been shown that the instrumental perspective is not sufficient to understand party positions regarding electoral reforms, as normative motivations and ideology prove also crucial to explain party preferences (Bol 2016; Renwick and Pilet 2009).

Similarly, party preferences for direct democracy reforms clearly relate to a more or less critical vision of traditional representative democracy embedded in party ideology (Bowler et al. 2002; Lawrence et al. 2009). Leftist ideology has been shown empirically to increase the support for democratic reforms, whereas conservative parties are more supportive of existing institutions (Bol 2016; Bowler et al. 2002, 2006; Herzog 2016). This can be attributed to several factors.

First, left-wing ideology in general, and far-left ideology in particular, are more supportive of the inclusion of all citizens in the decision-making process. Historically, the labour movement and the parties related with it have developed a participatory vision of democracy, have fought for institutional changes in favour of the inclusion of the masses and have questioned the individualistic principles of liberal representative democracy (Della Porta 2013: 44). Lawrence et al. (2009) have shown for instance the crucial role of the Socialist Party in the introduction of direct democracy in the United States. Secondly, post-materialist values are closely related to support for more inclusive institutions (Bowler et al. 2002, 2006). These values had a stronger impact on the left, and at the same time, played a prominent role in the emergence of some party families, such as the Greens. Finally, parties in the extreme of the

ideological spectrum, such as the Radical Right, are also much more likely to support a more prominent role of the citizen in the decision-making process—e.g., by increasing the use of referendums—as a way to undermine the power of the ‘elites’ (Lawrence et al. 2009; Mudde 2007).

Hence, we build two hypotheses. We first hypothesise that left-wing parties will be more supportive of democratic innovations than right-wing parties (excluding the Radical Right). Second, we hypothesise that Green Radical Right and Radical Left parties will show a greater support for democratic innovations than more traditional centrist parties.

H3a: Left-wing parties are more favourable than right-wing traditional parties to the introduction of democratic innovations.

H3b: Greens, Radical Left and Radical Right parties are more favourable to the introduction of democratic innovations than centrist parties.

## Data and Measurement

### *The PartiRep Comparative MP Survey*

While the existing literature has discussed and examined citizens’ preferences towards different kinds of decision-making process (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Neblo et al. 2010; Webb 2013), few studies have looked at elites’ opinions on these processes (see, for instance, Bowler et al. 2002). In order to grasp these positions, this article uses attitudinal data collected at the individual MP level across parliamentary parties in 15 national assemblies. Individual-level opinions towards democratic innovations are then aggregated at the party-level, allowing cross-party comparisons.

These data were collected through the PartiRep Comparative MP Survey.<sup>1</sup> This database comprises an attitudinal survey carried out among national and regional legislators and other macro-level and meso-level variables (mostly linked to the state structure, electoral system, legislative organisation and activity, party organisation, etc.). In this article, only those MPs from national parliaments are included.<sup>2</sup> MPs were invited to respond either through an online web-survey (46.8%), print questionnaires (33.7%), face-to-face interviews (18.7%) or by phone (0.8%). Data were collected between spring 2009 and winter 2012, with an average response rate of 19.5%, although this rate varies from one parliament to another—below 15% in Italy, France, the United Kingdom and Poland; above 40% in the Netherlands and in Belgium. Despite these varying response rates, the sample remains representative of the population (Deschouwer et al. 2014).

Political parties are considered as the units of analysis (the list of parties is displayed in the appendix). Only parties that include more than five respondents are considered, in order to allow for enough intra-party variation in the responses provided by each party’s MPs.<sup>3</sup> The respondents who sit as ‘independent’ in the parliament were dropped; reducing the number of respondents to 840. The final dataset includes 50 parties across 15 national assemblies.

### *Measuring Parties’ Positions on Democratic Innovations*

In order to measure party elites’ opinion on the desirability of democratic innovations, we use a question asking MPs ‘In recent years, different views on voters’ distrust of politicians

and political parties have inspired widely diverging suggestions for reform. Of each of the following directions that reform could take, could you indicate how desirable you consider them?'. For each of the four items proposed (see Table 1), MPs had to position themselves on a Likert scale ranging from 1 ('not at all desirable') to 4 ('very desirable').

These items are related to different decision-making processes based on participatory and deliberative models of democracy that would give citizens more a say in the political process. Representative democracy is considered as the status quo. Interestingly, the item 'increasing the number of referendums' displays the higher proportion of MPs considering that it is not desirable. This form of innovation might hence be perceived as more disruptive and detrimental for legislative power (Bowler et al. 2002: 733–4).

The party's position for each item is calculated as the average position of the party's MPs (Table 2). As MPs within the same party can disagree over the desirability to increase citizens' involvement in decision-making, we have also examined the degree of heterogeneity of each party on the four items, through the standard deviation. We first observe that heterogeneity is limited: the average standard deviation ranges from 0.65 (item 2) to 0.76 (item 4). Second, heterogeneity on one item is not correlated with heterogeneity on other items: no party appears particularly divided over the desirability to implement democratic innovations. Third, heterogeneity is not correlated with party size.

As Table 2 shows, average levels of support are quite similar for all the statements and range between 2.2 and 2.85. As in the case of citizens' preferences, parties' positions on these items are also correlated (see Bengtsson 2012: 57–8). Bivariate analyses (not displayed) computed at both the individual and party-level indeed show statistically significant correlations between the four items. At the party level, coefficients score between 0.281 (at the .05 significance level, between items 1 and 3) and 0.658 (at the .01 significance level, between items 2 and 4).

Given these relatively high correlation patterns, we make use of factor analysis (principal component) in order to investigate the degree to which parties' positions on the four items could be reduced to fewer latent dimensions. Extraction of the factors is done through principal component analysis and based on eigenvalues (larger than 1). Hence, no limit on the number of factors is imposed. A Varimax (orthogonal) rotation of the factors is applied. The results show that the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of sampling adequacy (0.758) is acceptable. Barlett's test of sphericity is highly significant (Approx. chi-square = 64.149,  $p = .000$ ),

**TABLE 1**  
List of statements on democratic innovations—descriptive statistics at the individual level—valid %

Statements	Not at all desirable	Not very desirable	Fairly desirable	Very desirable	Valid N
1. to increase the number of referendums	26.1	39.5	23.6	10.8	823
2. to create more opportunities for citizens to set the political agenda	4.7	22.5	53.1	19.7	823
3. to involve interest groups in society more often in decision-making	8.5	29.8	52.7	9.0	822
4. to increase the number of deliberative events, where groups of ordinary citizens debate and decide on a particular issue	7.0	24.7	50.3	18.0	823

TABLE 2

List of statements on democratic innovations—descriptive stats at the aggregate level ( $N = 50$ )

Statements	Mean	Standard deviation
1. to increase the number of referendums	2.21	0.69
2. to create more opportunities for citizens to set the political agenda	2.85	0.51
3. to involve interest groups in society more often in decision-making	2.62	0.37
4. to increase the number of deliberative events, where groups of ordinary citizens debate and decide on a particular issue	2.78	0.43

which indicates that factor analysis is appropriate for these data. Table 3 shows that only one factor emerges from the data. It accounts for 62.9% of the variance.

This factor constitutes our dependent variable. Higher scores reflect a more favourable position towards reforms related to participatory democracy: an increase in the number of referendums; the creation of more opportunities for citizens to set the political agenda; a greater involvement of interest groups in decision-making; and an increase in the number of deliberative events. The variable ranges from a minimum of  $-1.98$  (low support for democratic innovations) to a maximum of  $2.27$  (high support for democratic innovations).

### *Operationalising the Independent Variables*

Regarding the coding of the independent variables, some clarifications need to be made. Being in government ( $=0$ ) or in opposition ( $=1$ ) is coded depending on the status of each party by the time of the survey. Time in government has been computed as the proportion of time that parties have been part of governments in the period from 1975—or first election after an authoritarian breakdown—until 2012.<sup>4</sup> In order to calculate party age, we have taken into consideration the last ‘re-foundation’ of parties: some of the parties existed before that re-foundation, but they did so under a different party label. This is the case of a number of parties in the sample, such as the British Liberal Democrats, the Belgian parties, or the Spanish Socialist and Conservative parties (PSOE and PP). We have classified parties in seven ideological families, from the more leftist to the more rightist:<sup>5</sup> the Radical Left, the Social Democrats, the Greens, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats, the Conservatives and the Radical Right. The coding has been based both on the one provided by the PartiRep dataset, and on secondary literature on party families (see for instance Delwit 2002, 2003; Escalona and Vieira 2013).

In the following section, we examine the influence of these party characteristics on parties’ support for democratic innovations, first, through bivariate analyses, and second, through multivariate analyses.

TABLE 3

Component matrix (after Varimax rotation)

	Component
Referendums	0.770
Citizens setting the agenda	0.871
Interest groups	0.663
Deliberative events	0.852



## Why Inertia Is Winning over Innovation: Results

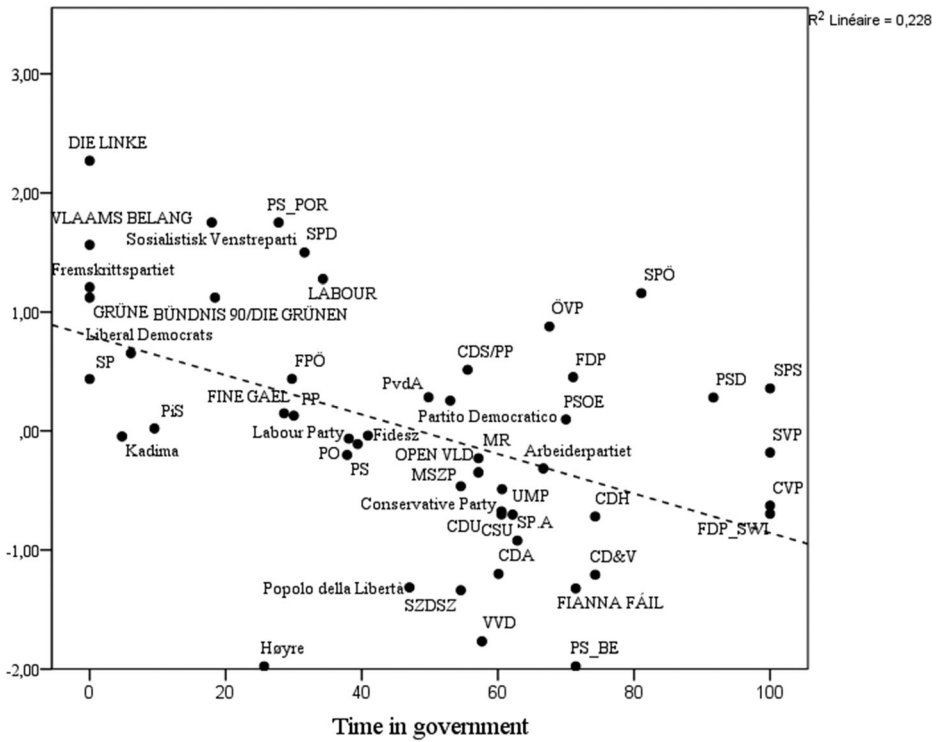
### *Bivariate Analyses*

H1a is firstly tested by computing a comparison of means between parties in government and opposition parties on the democratic innovation support dimension. Findings indicate that parties in government tend to be less in favour of democratic innovations than opposition parties (H1a confirmed). Indeed, parties in government have an average score of  $-0.236$  on the dimension, those in opposition a score of  $0.256$  and this relationship appears to be significant ( $t$ -test is significant at .1 level). There are of course some exceptions. For instance, among the parties in power, the Sosialistisk Venstreparti (Norwegian Radical Left) shows a quite important support for democratic innovations, with a positive score of nearly 2. This is not surprising if we consider that this party is hardly a 'party of government'; indeed, it has been in power only during two legislatures (2005–09 and 2009–13). Among the parties in opposition, some parties score very low on the dimension (around  $-2$ ): the Norwegian Conservatives (Høyre) and the Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). These parties were in the opposition at the time of the survey, but they are regular coalition partners. This result suggests that it is time in government (H1b) rather than position in government that would affect the likelihood to support democratic innovations (Pilet and Bol 2011). This is indeed confirmed (see Figure 1): there is a strong negative and significant correlation between time spent in government and support for democratic innovations (Pearson correlation =  $-0.477$ , sig = .000).

Figure 2 draws the linear relationship between party age and the party's support for democratic innovations. According to H2, the older the party, the weaker the support for democratic innovations. This hypothesis is not confirmed: party age does not significantly reduce the level of support for a greater involvement of citizens in the political system (Pearson correlation =  $-0.076$ , sig = .602). This 'non' result could partly be related to the difficulty to calculate political parties' age. Parties are not fixed organisations, but are rather constantly transforming. Merging, splits and party rebranding are in fact quite common in most party systems, and can make it difficult to track party organisations through time.

Figure 3 displays parties' positions on the desirability of democratic innovations depending on their ideological family. Regarding H3a, right-wing parties (excluding Radical Right) appear less supportive of democratic innovations than Social Democratic parties, which have a more central position. Christian-democratic parties are the ones with a weaker support for democratic innovations and among which lesser variation is found. In line with H3b, Radical Left, Green and Radical Right parties appear more supportive of a greater involvement of citizens in the political system—they have a much higher average support than the rest of the ideologies. Beyond value-laden motivations, their level of support could also be explained by the fact that these three families have in common a limited participation in government (H1b).

Interestingly, it should be noted that variations across party ideologies are greater and more significant than variations across countries: analyses of variance reveal significant differences between ideological families, especially between the Radical Left and the Conservative and Christian-democratic families (Scheffé post-hoc test, .1 sig. level); whereas no significant differences appear between countries. This highlights the relevance of party-level factors in explaining party elites' support for democratic innovations.



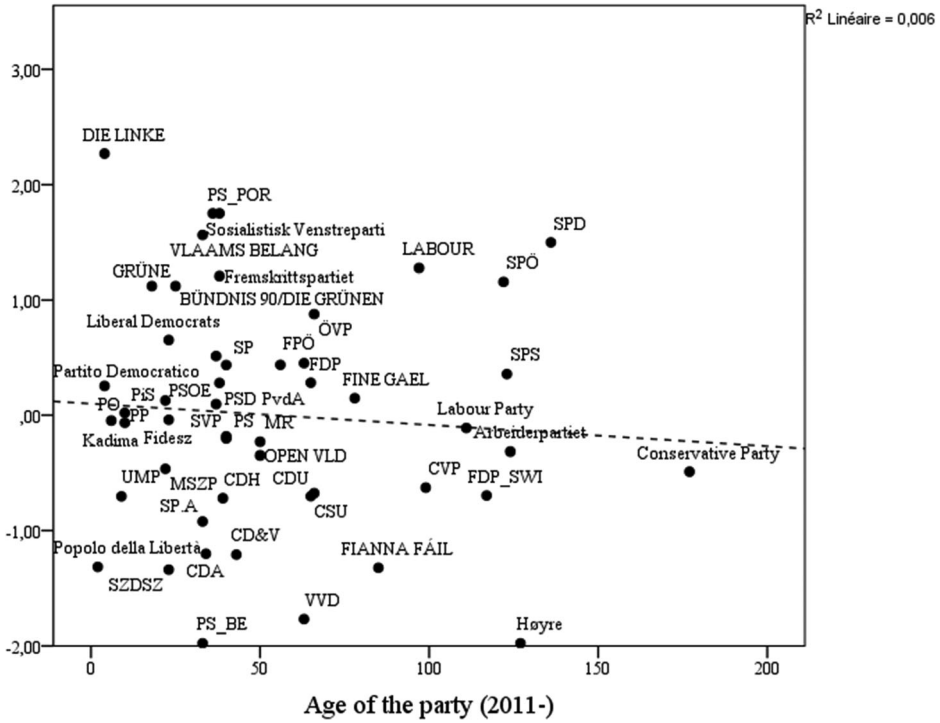
**FIGURE 1**  
Support for democratic innovations and time in government

*Multivariate Analyses*

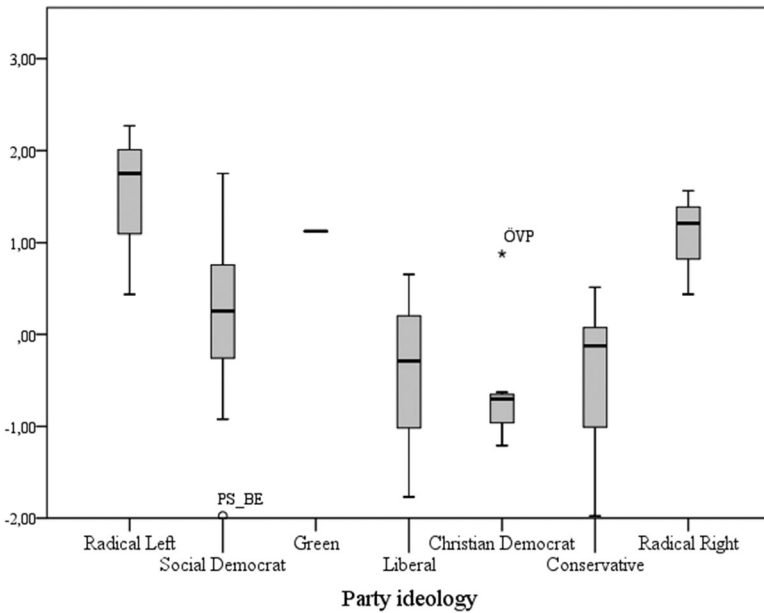
Multivariate analyses provide further statistical support to our findings. Table 4 presents the result of linear regression models testing the effect of party-level variables on parties' positions on support for democratic innovations.<sup>6</sup> The first four models introduce each independent variable separately. The fifth model only includes the variables that had a significant effect in the previous models. Finally, the sixth model drops some of the ideological families that were significantly correlated with time in government. This final model shows the best goodness of fit (according to the adjusted  $r^2$ ). Note that the Social Democrats are considered as the reference category for party ideology, as they constitute the most frequent category and have a relatively central position on the factor.

The negative effect of parties' position in opposition is coherent with H1a, though not statistically significant. Similarly, party age has the expected effect, but it is not significant (H2 not confirmed). The findings however support our hypothesis on the effect of time in government (H1b): longer periods in government are significantly related with a weaker support for democratic innovations.

Party ideology appears as the most determinant factor (higher  $R$ -squared and statistically significant relationships). The positive coefficient found for the Radical Left, Green and Radical Right confirm our expectations (H3b), although the relationships are not statistically significant across the models. In model 3, the non-significant effect of the Radical Right is explained by the fact that its average position on democratic innovation is quite close to that of the reference



**FIGURE 2**  
Support for democratic innovations and party age



**FIGURE 3**  
Support for democratic innovations and party ideology

**TABLE 4**  
The effect of party-level factors on support for democratic innovations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Opposition	0.493					
Time in government (%)		-0.017***			-0.009	-0.013**
Party age			-0.002			
Radical Left				1.279**	0.825	
Green				0.924**	0.489	
Liberal				-0.613	-0.676	-0.838**
Christian Democrats				-0.805**	-0.691**	-0.764**
Conservatives				-0.638*	-0.733**	-0.911***
Radical right				0.872	0.443	
Constant	-0.236	0.799***	0.100	0.197	0.714*	1.103***
Observations	50	50	50	50	50	50
Adjusted <i>R</i> -squared	0.042	0.212	-0.015	0.313	0.339	0.352

Note: Clustered errors by country.

\*\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\* $p < .05$ .

\* $p < .1$ .

category. In the other models, the non-significant effects found for these three ideological families are explained by their correlation with time in government (they have held government office for less than 10% of the time, compared to more than 45% on average for the other ideological families). Compared to the reference category, Christian-Democrats and Conservatives show a significantly weaker support for democratic innovations, and this effect is consistent across the models. When controlling for time in government (models 5 and 6), the coefficient for the Conservatives confirms and refines H3a: this ideological family is the least favourable to the introduction of democratic innovations. The final model also suggests a negative impact of the Liberals, thus also supporting H3a.

The relatively small sample of parties in which this analysis is based impedes more fine-grained analysis of the interactions between variables. However, these results show that time in government (H1b) is together with party ideology (H3a and H3b) the most powerful factor explaining support for democratic innovations. Parties on the left side of the ideological spectrum appear to be more supportive of this type of changes. However, being in power for long periods of time also matters. The Norwegian Arbeiderpartiet is a good example. This Social Democratic party has been in power during 66% of the time since 1975, but it has a level of support for democratic innovations (-0.31) under the average (0.19). A more extreme result appears for the Belgian francophone Socialist Party: it shows a level of support (-1.97) well below the average and has been in government for 71% of the time. Parties are therefore more willing to support this type of reforms when it is coherent with their ideological stances, but this support appears to be very much eroded when they have benefitted from the status quo settings for longer periods of time.

## Conclusion

Decreasing levels of trust and confidence in political institutions have eroded the bonds between citizens and their representatives. In order to restore citizens' confidence in the political system, democratic innovations are presented as a promising remedy. Then why are democratic innovations so rare?

The scarcity of institutional reforms has for long been attributed to the inertia of political institutions themselves. Scholars have recently started to dedicate more attention to the preferences and actions of the main actors involved at the heart of the process of reforms: political elites and parties. This article has tested whether party-level characteristics—party power, age and ideology—could also be responsible for the reluctance of political elites to implement democratic innovations.

In order to do so, we have measured parliamentarians' opinion on the desirability of implementing several types of democratic innovations, across 15 national assemblies. These opinions have been aggregated at the party level to determine the parties' positions. The principal component analysis has detected a latent factor that delineates between positive attitudes towards participative and deliberative democracy on the one hand, and more conservative attitudes towards the classical representative democracy status quo situation. Interestingly, while democratic innovations remain rare events, support for participatory forms of democracy is relatively high among parliamentarians, but this support varies across parties.

The analyses have helped to highlight the influence of party-related factors on the parties' position on the desirability of reforms. This article has shown that party ideology and time in government are the most determinant factors. Social Democratic parties, Radical Left, Green and Radical Right parties appear to be more supportive of democratic innovations. However, results have shown that having spent more time in government—and therefore having benefitted the most from the status quo—significantly reduces this support.

In a representative system, political elites have the power to implement reforms that are supported by citizens who have elected them. This research has shown that some political parties support reforms that would increase citizens' participation in the day-to-day decision-making process, but that these parties are those that are mostly excluded from government. Yet bringing them to government does not guarantee that change will occur. Indeed, research on electoral reform has repeatedly shown that 'opposition parties support reform [...], only to renege on such commitments once in office (and vice versa)' (Flinders 2010: 43). Strategically, political parties might publicly display their readiness to implement reforms in order to regain legitimacy and attract votes. They may also defend participatory forms of democracy because of profound ideological convictions. But, once in power, they may be far less inclined to implement changes that would lessen their capacity of control over the decision-making process. By pursuing such strategy and ignoring citizens' demands for revitalising politics, political elites might well continue widening the democratic deficit, which might even be, in the long term, detrimental to their own interests.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks go to Jean-Benoit Pilet and Sarah Birch for their helpful comments.

#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## FUNDING

This work was supported by two FRS-FNRS (Fonds De La Recherche Scientifique) post-doctoral grants (Chargé de Recherche) and the PartiRep II project, funded by the Belgian Federal Science Policy (Federaal Wetenschapsbeleid) (BELSPO).

## NOTES

1. The PartiRep (Participation and Representation) research project (<http://www.partirep.eu/>) is funded by the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO).
2. We have opted not to take into account the positions of regional MPs on democratic innovations due to the differences in levels of competences on these issues across regions. This could jeopardise the comparability, the robustness and the conclusions that can be drawn.
3. Fewer than five respondents per party entailed the risk of not being able to differentiate between individual-level positions and party positions, hence the choice of using averages only for the larger parties.
4. Due to the important changes occurred in the Italian party system in 1993, time in government of Italian parties is computed for the period 1993–2012. Time in government for the Belgian parties is computed after the split of each of the parties along the linguistic divide (1975), although they emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century.
5. According to the average parties' MPs' placement on a 0–10 points left-right scale: Radical left = 1.48, Social Democrats = 2.68, Greens = 3.66, Liberals = 5.58, Christian Democrats = 5.87, Conservatives = 6.63, Radical right = 6.98.
6. Note that in preliminary analyses, we controlled for the effect of party size (% seats), but it did not alter the results.

## ORCID

Lidia Núñez  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3385-534X>

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**Lidia Núñez** is an FNRS Postdoctoral Researcher at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). Her main research interests are institutional reforms, political parties, and elections. Her recent work has been published in the *European Journal of Political Research*, *West European Politics*, and the *Journal of Legislative Studies* among others.

**Caroline Close** is an FNRS Postdoctoral Researcher at the Centre for the Study of Politics (Cevipol), Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). Her main research interests are party organization, intraparty politics, party ideology, legislative studies, elections as well as intra- and extra-party democratic innovations. Her research has been published in *Acta Politica*, *Party Politics*, the *Journal of Legislative Studies*, and *Political Studies*.

**Camille Bedock** is an FNRS Postdoctoral Researcher at the Centre for the Study of Politics (CEVIPOL) in the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). Her main research interests are democratic reforms and the perceptions of democracy and institutional change by citizens across Western Europe. Her recent work has been published in the *European Political Science Review*, *French Politics*, and the *European Review of Social Sciences* among others, and she will publish a book entitled *Reforming Democracy: Institutional Engineering in Western Europe* with Oxford University Press in the coming months.

## APPENDIX

TABLE A1 List of parties

Country (& year of election)	Parties	Date of birth	Ideological family	Time in government (%)
Austria (2008)	FPÖ	1955	RR	29.7
	Grüne	1986	GRE	0.0
	ÖVP	1945	CHD	67.6
	SPÖ	1889	SD	81.1
Belgium (2007)	CDH	1972	CHD	74.3
	CD&V	1968	CHD	74.3
	MR	1961	LIB	57.1
	Open VLD	1961	LIB	57.1
	PS	1978	SD	71.4
	SP.A	1978	SD	62.9
	Vlaams Belang	1978	RR	0.0
France (2007)	PS	1971	SD	37.8
	UMP	2002	CON	62.2

(Continued)

*(Continued)*

Country (& year of election)	Parties	Date of birth	Ideological family	Time in government (%)
Germany (2009)	CDU	1945	CHD	60.5
	CSU	1946	CHD	60.5
	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	1993	GRE	18.4
	Die Linke	2007	RL	0.0
	FDP	1948	LIB	71.1
	SPD	1875	SD	31.6
Hungary (2006)	Fidesz	1988	CON	40.9
	MSZP	1989	SD	54.6
	SZDSZ	1988	LIB	54.6
Ireland (2007)	Fianna Fáil	1926	CON	71.4
	Fine Gael	1933	CON	28.6
	Labour	1914	SD	34.3
Israel (2009)	Kadima	2005	LIB	4.8
Italy (2008)	Partito Democratico	2007	SD	53.0
	Popolo della Libertà	2009	CON	47.0
The Netherlands (2006)	CDA	1977	CHD	60.1
	PvdA	1946	SD	49.8
	SP	1971	RL	0.0
	VVD	1948	LIB	57.7
Norway (2005)	Arbeiderpartiet	1887	SD	66.7
	Fremskrittpartiet	1973	RR	0.0
	Høyre	1884	CON	25.6
	Socialistisk Venstreparti	1975	RL	18.0
Poland (2007)	PiS	2001	CON	9.5
	PO	2001	CON	38.1
Portugal (2009)	CDS/PP	1974	CON	55.6
	PSD	1974	LIB	91.7
	PS	1973	SD	27.8
Spain (2008)	PP	1989	CON	30.0
	PSOE	1974	SD	70.0
Switzerland (2007)	CVP	1912	CHD	100.0
	FDP	1894	LIB	100.0
	SPS	1888	SD	100.0
	SVP	1971	CON	100.0
United Kingdom (2010)	Conservative Party	1834	CON	60.6
	Labour Party	1900	SD	39.4
	Liberal Democrats	1988	LIB	6.1