

Between Decline and Distress Innovations: The Transformation of the Belgian French-Speaking Christian-democratic Party (cdH)

Political Studies

1–21

© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/00323217241285360

journals.sagepub.com/home/psxThomas Legein¹  and Sacha Rangoni²

Abstract

Political parties are used to adapt in the face of political challenges, but little is known about how party elites actually perceive crises and ultimately opt for certain types of reforms accordingly. To address this gap, we focus on the complete transformation process of the Belgian French-Speaking Christian Democratic Party (cdH) in 2022 as a case study. Interviews with party elites show how challenges shared by many West-European centre-right parties can create a dependence on the party leader to the point of marginalizing other traditional actors from the definition of a response strategy. We reveal the unprecedented strategy employed by the leader, who positioned an advisor as a surrogate, at the cost of creating major internal dissension. We argue that the likely multiplication of mainstream parties slipping into *great distress* in the near future could lead to a shift in managing party change, making it more technocratic than political.

Keywords

party reform, party leader, process-tracing, Belgium, Christian democratic party

Accepted: 2 September 2024

Introduction

The causes behind the decision to rebuild the party are the conviction that the brand is more or less dead, to put it bluntly. (. . .). The party is identified as a governing party (. . .) mostly embodied by personalities rather than built around a coherent project. (. . .). So, it was not necessarily abnormal to be in that situation [of clinical death]. Especially when the party was in

¹Political Psychology Lab, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK²Cevipol, Université libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

Corresponding author:

Thomas Legein, Political Psychology Lab, University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge CB2 3EB, UK.

Email: thomas.legein@vub.be

power for 15 years straight (. . .) in coalitions where it was the partner and not the main party. (. . .). It is very difficult to have an identity as a management party. (. . .). And the cdH is a caricature of it. (High-ranking party official, 2020)

This observation comes from a high-ranking official of the 138-year-old Belgian French-speaking Christian Democratic Party (cdH). In those words, s/he summarized what s/he perceives as the reasons *why* the party embarked on an unprecedented process of transformation in January 2020 in which s/he had a leading role. Two years later, the cdH officially morphed into *Les Engagé.e.s* (LEs) after months of intense internal discussions and deliberative meetings open to all interested citizens. All dimensions of the party's political product were affected.

Throughout its history, the cdH has slowly evolved from a mass party type of organization into an archetypal electoral-professional party with a leader- and elections-driven *ethos* (Panebianco, 1988). It hence closely resembles many of its Belgian competitors in this respect (Legein and van Haute, 2021). But it also resembles many West European Christian-democratic parties (Ennsner, 2012) as well as to what some identify as the family of centre-right parties of government (Taflaga, 2023).

This case study is hence a playbook of what could happen to those parties, starting with its highly threatened Belgian Dutch-speaking sister party CD&V. But it also expands our knowledge of centre-right parties, largely understudied 'particularly at the party organisational level' (Taflaga, 2023: 1). If their trajectory continues to worsen in the future, liberal parties like OpenVLD (BEL), D66 (NL) or conservative ones like the Les Républicains (FRA) or the Conservative party (UK) are all other organizations that could represent interesting cases to investigate as well.

Indeed, the cdH is one of the most recent and striking examples of the decline of that party family in Western Europe. Never has a Belgian mainstream party made such a break with its historical heritage and traditional pillar since the Liberals' realignment on denominational issues in the 1960s. And for good reasons. It perfectly depicts how the challenges shared by many assimilated parties (e.g. organizational efficacy, issue-ownership, changing electorate, etc.; Taflaga, 2023) can create a dependence on the party leader and his or her close advisers, to the point of marginalizing the party-in-public office from the definition of a response strategy. The *distress innovations* (i.e. 'radical measures and random search (for solutions) (. . .) as the (party) finds itself (. . .) in greater need to find a significant performance improvement to save itself'; Knight, 1967: 485) implemented by the party only serves to illustrate it.

Many party shocks are commonly recognized as creating pressuring conditions for such substantial party reforms (i.e. 'an intentionally publicized process of change, with clearly identifiable starting and ending points in time (. . .)'; Legein, 2023): electoral defeats (e.g. Chiru et al., 2015), change in governmental status (e.g. Cross and Blais, 2012; Luypaert and Legein, 2024), membership decline (e.g. Gauja, 2017; Kölln, 2014), change of party leader (e.g. Fernandez-Vazquez, Somer-Topcu, 2019; Pedersen and Schumacher, 2015), political scandals (e.g. Pennings and Hazan, 2001; Pollack et al., 2018), and so on. What remains a blind spot though is how party elites – the central actors of reform processes (Harmel and Janda, 1994; Panebianco, 1988) – react to specific (combinations of) shocks and how they ultimately opt for a certain type of reform accordingly.

Existing research predominantly offers static and rational accounts of party reforms by focusing on the identification of the most salient shocks (Gauja, 2017; Mazzoleni and Heinisch, 2023). Yet, these studies fail to reveal the causal mechanisms linking the drivers of party reforms to the ultimate decision to reform (Legein, 2023). They mask the causal

complexity underlying reform processes, characterized by intense bargaining between party actors interacting with a changing environment (Bale, 2012; Deschouwer, 1992).

This article focuses on the large *bundle of party reforms* (i.e. ‘party reforms relating to one or several components of a party’s political product, belonging to a broader sequence beginning or finishing beyond the moment of adoption and discussion of a given reform’; Legein, 2023: 3) implemented by the cdH between 2019 and 2022. We aim to account for *what happened* during this extreme case of distress innovation by identifying *who* were the main agents involved, and *how* they shape the trajectory of the reform process. In doing so, we open the black box of party politics (Gallagher and Marsh, 1987) by giving voice to the key *agents* of party reforms. We contend that the ideas and beliefs they hold about the context they evolve in can provide crucial information about their decisions (Bell, 2011). Understood as a sequence, the bundle concept sheds light on the engineering political parties constantly perform to adapt to their environment by focusing on party actors. Its diachronic interpretation allows for the analysis of temporal sequences covering a great diversity of reforms while emphasizing their causal complexity.

The case study, the cdH, is a unique opportunity to learn how party elites operate in a context of great distress (Knight, 1967) since the party’s survival was at stake. It investigates how high pressure on a mainstream party can accelerate the decline of one face of the party organization to the point of profoundly altering *how* reform processes are formed as well as *who* is involved (Katz and Mair, 2002).

We contend that the logics revealed by this case study highlight how a major slide into great distress accelerates the (technocratic) leadership domination over the organization, whether or not that organization was initially leader-driven. It is indeed a peculiar political context that enabled the leader to bypass traditional resistance to party reform in the organization. It is less likely that such dynamics would occur in a party not subject to the pressure resulting from a prolonged relationship with power substantially jeopardized by highly destabilizing events, though.

The analysis combines a variety of sources to trace back the process of reform through the implementation of an Explaining-outcome process tracing (EO-PT), intending to ‘craft a minimally sufficient explanation for a particular outcome’ by building conglomerates of (non)systematic causal mechanisms (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 60). Indeed, the analysis of the interactions between the main actors of the process under study leads to identifying the trajectory, or *causal mechanism*, through which the agent or structure (x) produces an effect on another agent or structure (y) (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). EO-PT is particularly effective when applied to intriguing and well-mediatised outcomes with clear start and end dates, but about which there is limited theoretical knowledge (Gerring, 2004). And it perfectly fits the dynamics behind party reform as defined above.

We start by delineating the theory underpinning our approach and highlighting the interesting perspective provided by the political marketing literature. The second part of the article presents the empirical strategy we followed before presenting and discussing the results. We start by identifying who were the main actors involved before unravelling and interpreting the sequence. At last, we delineate the main lessons learned before concluding.

Theory

The Multidimensional Bundles of Party Reforms

A useful heuristic for defining the different types of reforms a party can undertake can be found in political marketing. Political parties can be seen as brands seeking dominance in

the electoral market by selling a political product designed to call on voters to identify with it and to transform this appeal into political commitment (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). The political product has three components: party's ideological and organizational identities and its personnel (i.e. party leader and candidates). Those dimensions cannot be offered separately because only their interplay forms voters' knowledge of the political brand (Luybaert and Legein, 2024). Political parties can implement party reforms on the three components of their product if it allows them to rebrand their image, increase their dominance on the political market and/or survive new challenges (Gauja, 2017; Harmel and Janda, 1994).

The building of the product is based on party cohesion defined either on a logic of negotiated consensus or discipline and loyalty (Close and Gherghina, 2019). Legein (2022) previously advocated for the use of the *bundle of party reforms* analytical tool as an effective way of empirically engaging with the concept of political product. As he develops, party reforms are not rare but irregular events when observed in isolation. Yet, reform processes appear continuous and multidimensional when observed by legislative terms, regardless of their type. In most cases, parties end up reforming more than two components of their political product when they initiate any adaptation process. They must therefore be analysed in more encompassing analyses emphasizing the multidimensional nature of the parties' political product, which is what the bundle concept offers as a possibility.

What he defined as 'two party reforms or more relating to one or several components of the political product, adopted during the same legislative term' (Legein, 2022) enables to gather empirical knowledge going 'beyond the narrow vision of party reforms only defined and empirically studied so far through their type' (p. 14). It also enhances the analysis of their cause(s) by highlighting how an isolated party reform can initiate and nourish a wider sequence of reforms through a *snowball effect* not detectable in more classical analyses like the ones favoured in the literature so far (Legein, 2023). The importance of similar mechanisms, such as the spillover effect, has yet already been recognized in other literature of which the literature on institutional reform is a perfect example (e.g. Bedock, 2017; Sobel and Coyne, 2011).

The bundle analysis requires the identification of a clear sequencing in the adoption, and previous discussions, of each reform forming the bundle under investigation. In other words, it calls for the use of qualitative methods to reveal the timing of the process while highlighting the mechanisms explaining the final trajectory (Bedock, 2017).

The Politics of Distress Innovations

This focus on bundles of reforms is all the more pressing with mainstream political parties increasingly facing challenges that threaten their dominant position in the market, which in turn invites them to rethink the nature and form of their political offer. Some of these parties are facing what Knight (1967) described as a 'great distress' which forces them to implement so-called 'distress innovations', that is, 'radical measures and random search [for solutions designed] (. . .) to find a significant performance improvement to save itself'. (Knight, 1967: 485).

Knight (1967) identified several categories of innovations that private firms can implement to strengthen their performances, closely resembling the components of the political product: the material or service put on the market (i.e. parties' programme), the organization in terms of production process (i.e. decision-making) or structure (i.e. internal rules and norms), or people (i.e. party leader and staff). Organizations facing mild distress will

more likely keep a rational behaviour and favour crisis-management measures often resulting in the removal of the president, the reshuffle of the staff and cost-reduction decisions to become successful again (Knight, 1967). But the ‘great distress’ arising from the failure of these first moves, or from negative spillover effects, can, in turn, call them to operate ‘more radical measures and random search (. . .), seen as being necessary and functional as the company finds itself (. . .) in greater need to find a significant performance improvement to save itself’ (Knight, 1967: 485). Resource scarcity and a sense of urgency are likely to constrain the manoeuvring space of the key actors involved.

Knight (1967) identifies ‘the innovator’ as the key figure in these innovation processes. S/he must have the idea and desire to innovate and the means to successfully bring the organization to change. Interestingly, it fits perfectly with the description of party leaders as central agents in reform processes (Harmel and Janda, 1994; Panebianco, 1988; Wauters, 2014).

According to the theory on party change, they are indeed the usual suspects behind most of the reform processes (Gauja, 2017; Harmel and Janda, 1994; Panebianco, 1988). They are explicitly the ones in charge of the organization’s survival and responding to any external stimuli it may experience (Cross and Pilet, 2015) and hold the most powerful levers to implement any reforms allowing the party to achieve its goals (Poguntke and Webb, 2007; Wauters, 2014). The importance of party leaders in reform processes is so central that some see the emergence of a new leader as both a reform cause and a reform itself (Bale, 2012; Legein, 2023; Panebianco, 1988). Yet they are not the only relevant candidates to be innovators according to the theory.

Critical forces at the heart of party organizations, shadow advisers are understudied in the literature, except regarding their number and characteristics (Moens, 2022; Webb and Keith, 2017; Webb and Kolodny, 2006) or their role in the parties’ day-to-day management (Bale, 2012, 2016; Gauja, 2017). This is surprising, as the cartel party thesis (Katz and Mair, 1994) identifies them as powerful actors potentially weighting heavily on the trajectory taken by their party. Their instrumental role during party reforms has especially not been analysed in-depth even though their position in the organization make them relevant candidates for the position of innovator too.

Next to them, the influence of the parliamentary group(s) is also recognized as key in the literature on party change (Gauja, 2017; Katz and Mair, 2002; Pedersen, 2020). Empirical evidence suggests, however, that this is essentially the case when the party is in power (Cross and Blais, 2012; Wauters, 2014), which corresponds less to a situation of great distress (although the two situations are not strictly speaking mutually exclusive).

If Knight’s (1967) contribution is quite dated, very few studies applied his arguments to the study of party reform even though our knowledge remains very limited as to the constraints these reform actors encounter in situations of great distress. Most importantly, we still lack case studies showing how they appropriate those pressures and how they innovate in the face of a particularly challenging environment. Parties are for example accustomed to regularly implementing minor or cosmetic reforms, only substantially modifying their political product in the face of challenges they perceive as substantial (Gauja, 2017; Harmel and Janda, 1994). We could hence expect that they will implement such larger (bundles of) reforms, or even transform their product, especially in a situation of great distress.

The Role of Party Agency and Context in Party Reform

What Knight’s theory points to is a potential shift in the way agents perceive and react in response to a changing environment during the transition from a situation of mild to great distress.

It strongly echoes the contemporary literature on party reform. This literature now emphasizes more parties' capacity to actively adapt to their environment (i.e. discrete change approach) rather than following a deterministic approach understanding changes as unintended consequences of natural evolutions in parties' life-cycle (i.e. life-cycle approach) or the party system (i.e. system-level trend approach) (Katz and Mair, 1994; Kölln, 2014).

A situation of great distress would then be caused by a combination of endogenous and/or exogenous shocks (e.g. electoral defeats, membership decline, change of party leader or governmental status and scandals) putting the party's dominant coalition in a highly unstable position (Harmel and Janda, 1994; Panebianco, 1988).

Electoral defeats and changes of governmental status are particularly noteworthy in light of the arguments put forward by Knight (1967). These usually confront the party in central office with its failure to achieve two key party goals, namely securing votes and getting into office (Harmel and Janda, 1994). But they can also directly impact the party in public office's legitimacy and influence as the face of the defeat and the primary recipient of the resources associated with the exercise of power.

It is also not uncommon to see the reform agents previously mentioned perceiving factionalism, the safeguarding of prerogatives or party values as important barriers to reform (Bale, 2012; Close and Gherghina, 2019). But while they generally circumvent those using *bargaining* and/or *steering* mechanisms, a situation of great distress may change that by increasing the party's dependence on the innovator or, on the contrary, undermining its authority; both potentially changing the nature of the mechanisms s/he would use.

Another example is that reform agents can also implement more incremental reforms in the form of experiments or trials in an attempt to modernize institutions and related practices. Along those lines, the introduction of primaries or supporter networks can be potentially controversial or less-consensual initiatives running the risk of an outcry (Gauja, 2017). But a situation of great distress could once again lower this barrier to reform for the sake of bringing about change 'no matter what'. In any case, we could expect to find dynamics linked to reform processes that are very different from the norm in such a context.

It can for example be expected that a situation of great distress is conducive to a rebalancing of the party's centre of gravity around the party's last strong personalities, and party technocrats, ready to assume the role (and political consequences) of innovator within the party in the central office at the risk of creating dissension. If evidence of such a pattern emerges, it could illustrate a reversal of the thesis, notably developed by Katz and Mair (2002), of the 'ascendancy of the party in public office' over the other faces of the organization throughout the institutionalization of government parties.

We decided to favour an abductive analytical approach to explore this because no study so far, to our knowledge, has addressed our research questions applied to a party in great distress. It would have been difficult to proceed otherwise given the challenge of deriving strong theoretical expectations from the literature that go beyond the latter.

Methodology

Case Selection and Description

Interestingly, recent events in the cdH precisely depicted a party that stagnated in a situation of mild distress until *something happened* and triggered more radical measures such

as its complete transformation suggests (see Data collection and method section below). The transformation of the party constitutes an extreme case likely to illustrate the transition from a rational search for crisis management solutions to a vital need for a breakthrough rebound.

The cdH has been one of the central protagonists of Belgian politics, participating in all governments between 1958 and 1999 and shaping the Belgian State as we know it today. Its pivotal position on the political spectrum was key in allowing it to take part in various governing coalitions during the twentieth century. The party image was hence intrinsically that of a governing party constantly looking to assert its ideological identity in comparison with its direct competitors.

The party's electoral performances have sharply deteriorated since 1961. It only recorded 10.7% of the vote in the 2019 elections, barely managing to pass the electoral threshold in some constituencies. The cdH is historically rooted in rural areas; it outperforms among older people and underperforms among people under 40 (Pilet and Rangoni, 2021), leading party officials to informally point to the cemetery as 'the party that steals most of our votes today' (I10, I11). As Pilet and Rangoni (2021) summarize, the cdH is 'a party constantly in decline, but almost permanently in power' (p. 13).

Data Collection and Method

The bundle seen as a sequence methodologically advocates for a process-tracing, working backwards from the end point towards strategies and motivations of the reform agents (Bedock, 2017). We consequently triangulated four types of data to provide an accurate account of the observed sequence, following EO-PT guidelines (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 60). Our empirical strategy is to highlight the roles, motives and beliefs mobilized by the key actors involved in the process and to reveal the interplay between structure and agency (Gauja, 2017). The causal mechanisms – key concept used as a tool to open the black box of the process under study (Hedström, 2008) – identified through the analysis of these dynamics allows moving from a descriptive to an analytical and theoretical ambition, introducing a causal analysis of the case study.

We first systematically reviewed the references to the reform process in the main media outlets in French-speaking Belgium: the two main newspapers, *La Libre* and *Le Soir*, and the two main TV channels, RTBF and RTL-TVI (Appendix 1)¹ to trace back the sequence. It provided initial factual information contextualizing the reforms while allowing us to verify some of the information given by interviewees.

Second, we gathered internal party documents to identify the main party structures and actors involved in the process and to get a better sense of the content of the reforms under study.

Third, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with key actors between December 2020 and May 2023 (Table 1). We sampled for range and targeted relevant sub-categories of individuals occupying specific functions in the party (Small, 2009). Saturation was achieved after nine interviews. Each interview lasted on average 1 hour and were conducted in French before being fully transcribed with sonix.ai. We translated relevant quotes while using generic labels when referring to them in the text to minimize any reading bias (e.g. I3 stands for Interviewee 3).

At last, one non-participant observation was conducted during the Statutory Congress formalizing the transformation of the party in March 2022, which supplemented the data.

Table 1. List of Interviews.

Interview number	Position before the last reform	Position during the interview	Date	Location
11	Party leader	Party leader	21/11/2022	Office – Namur
12	Leader's special advisor	Leader's special advisor	30/09/2022	Party HQ – Brussels
13	Political advisor	Political advisor & leader of party's youth movement	22/11/2022	Party HQ – Brussels
14	Private sector	VP	18/10/2022	Party HQ – Brussels
15	Subnational MP	VP and subnational MP	02/12/2022	Party HQ – Brussels
16	Anonymous	Anonymous	17/10/2022	Coffee House – Brussels
17	Member	VP local section	13/10/2022	Party HQ – Brussels
18	MP	MP	09/12/2022	Parliament–Brussels
19	Subnational MP	Subnational MP	15/12/2022	Parliament–Brussels
110	Party official	Party official	01/12/2020	Online
111	Head of the Youth party branch	Member of another party and local councillor	08/05/2023	Online
112	High-ranked official	High-ranked official	24/05/2023	Party HQ – Brussels

The triangulation of the data has minimized any areas of uncertainty stemming from such a temporal spread of interviews. This strategy has also mitigated biases associated with social desirability among interviewees who were still actively involved in the process at the time of the interviews.

After establishing the role played by the interviewees in the sequence under study, the second phase of the discussion was specifically designed to lead them to identify the events they perceived as decisive in the party's transformation. While the 2019 electoral defeat was identified as a turning point by the interviewees, they explicitly pinpointed the last months of the incumbent party leader's presidency, in 2017, as the starting point of the sequence (see Analysis section).

Based on the third part of the interviews, we identified six reforms implemented between 26 January 2019 and 20 June 2022 (Table 2). These were established by a substantial number of interviewees themselves, while those who did not intuitively refer to them confirmed their relevance when questioned about it. Most of them concern the party's organization or political personnel but for the first time in 20 years, the party also renewed in depth its ideological platform, which was publicized through a change of the party's label, logo and colour.

Analysis

For Knight (1967), identifying the key actors of change is about determining who are the innovators as well as the 'people who have skills or knowledge that offer potential solutions to their problem(s)' (p. 488). This step is crucial to our analysis since our aim is to understand who are and how these actors shaped this sequence in the way they did.

Table 2. Sequential Reforms Implemented by the cdH, 2019–2022.

	Reform	Type	Formality	Date of adoption
Reform 1	Election of Maxime Prévot as new party leader	Personnel	Formal	26 January 2019
Reform 2	Downsizing of the party staff and hiring of new staff for communication	Organizational	Formal, but not publicized	May 2019–February 2020
	Relocation of the HQ	Organizational	Formal, but not publicized	
Reform 3	Rise and empowerment of new profiles	Personnel	Informal	May 2019 onwards
Reform 4	New party statutes	Organizational	Formal	Publicized: 12 March 2022 Adopted: 20 May 2022
Reform 5	New ideological platform	Ideological	Formal	Publicized: 12 March 2022 Adopted: 20 May 2022
Reform 6	Election of two new Vice-Presidents	Personnel	Formal	20 June 2022

Identifying the Innovator(s) and Agents of Change

In the cdH, the power is traditionally held by the leader whose time in office is characterized by a high longevity. The leader's role has evolved in the last 20 years towards greater centralisation of the decision-making. A small committee, composed by the party (deputy) leader(s), ministers and head of the party's parliamentary groups, forms a close circle around the leader at the top of the pyramid: the Restricted Bureau. It represents the main executive body of the party. The sovereignty of the party is however held by the Congress bringing together all members and interested citizens, who have only a deliberative vote (Party statutes 2022, Section 4.1). The party structure is consolidated by the Bureau, where the main figures of the party meet weekly. It takes decisions on the cdH's strategy on behalf of the Congress, but these choices need to be endorsed by the Restricted Bureau.

The Party Leader as the Innovator. According to the theory, the usual suspect behind most of the reform processes is the party leader (Gauja, 2017; Harmel and Janda, 1994; Panebianco, 1988). S/he is explicitly the one in charge of the organization's survival and responding to any external stimuli it may experience (Cross and Pilet, 2015) and holds the most powerful levers to implement any reforms allowing the party to achieve its goals (Poguntke and Webb, 2007; Wauters, 2014).

As previously explained, party leaders are so central to reform processes that some see the emergence of a new leader as potentially both a reform cause and a reform itself (Bale, 2012; Legein, 2023; Panebianco, 1988). Interestingly, our case perfectly matches this circularity. The difference between a party leader as the subject and actor of party reforms is reflected in the analogies of the political product and the innovator previously mobilized.

Benoit Lutgen, the incumbent leader until Reform 1, was the key party actor during the pre-phase of the sequence. Like his predecessor(s), he maintained strong control over the party leadership and its staff (Pilet and Rangoni, 2021: I6). His central role was made visible when he decided, unilaterally, to bring down the government coalition of the Walloon Region following the scandals that shrouded its partner (I2, I11), the Socialist Party, as ‘he was convinced that a radical change in the governance of Wallonia was necessary in order to be able to rebound and move forward’. (I1).

But his failure to the 2018 local elections led him to resign from the leadership. It was the latest addition to the particularly complicated circumstances in which the party was evolving back then (I1). The incumbent leader’s departure opened a window of opportunity conducive of the transformation of the party. His willingness to reform the party at the time was nil despite recurrent criticisms. Some would go so far as to describe his presidency as ‘an unwanted interim’ between that of his emblematic predecessor and that of his successor ‘whom he took months to convince to take the job’ (I11). In that, he embodies the personal component of the political product subjected to adaptation at the end of the first phase of the sequence.

The election of Maxime Prévot as new party leader by the party members on 26 January 2019 (La Libre Belgique, 26 January 2019) made a difference as he fitted the status of the *innovator*: a person who has ‘an idea and the desire to introduce it’ and ‘the means with which he can successfully bring about the change’ (Knight, 1967: 486).

He quickly demonstrated his severe diagnosis of the state of the party when he took over (I1, echoed by I2 and I12). He enjoyed back then a fair room to manoeuvre via his status of ‘last person standing’² (Le Soir, 11 December 2020) and was at the time the only consensus candidate in the leadership election (I11, I2). In opposition, the head of the parliamentary party was well-liked by the party members and had made it clear that she was considering running, but she met with strong opposition from the other party MPs who had previously worked with her (I11). The other heavyweights were either considered too polarizing or not ‘synthesising’ sufficiently the various sensibilities within the party.

The legitimacy conferred to Prévot thanks to his election by universal suffrage of the members and the consensus around his person went hand in hand with the formal power to proceed to a reform/transformation of the party product. Interestingly, he appointed a shadow advisor as the main pilot of the reform process in the first months of his presidency.

The Shadow Advisers as Surrogate. Shadow advisers in party organizations are understudied in the literature, except regarding their number and characteristics (Moens, 2022; Webb and Keith, 2017; Webb and Kolodny, 2006) or their role in the parties’ day-to-day management (Bale, 2012, 2016; Gauja, 2017). This is surprising, as the cartel party thesis (Katz and Mair, 1994) identifies them as powerful actors. Especially, their instrumental role during party reforms has not been analysed in-depth.

Our case speaks volumes about the role-played by this influential shadow advisor who managed to impose himself outside of regular internal party election procedures. He never held any formal role in the party although he already assisted the party leader for the previous party transformation in 2002, was head of the party’s study centre (2007–2011), and head of ministerial staff (2016–2019). He regularly participated in the Bureau and other strategic meetings at the invitation of successive leaders (I2, I10).

During the 2002 reform of the party, he developed a relationship with Maxime Prévot, then vice-president of the Walloon Regional Government (I11). This experience gave him legitimacy and support to lead the new reform process between 2020 and 2022 (I1).

Shortly after the 2019 legislative elections, Prévot unilaterally appointed Laurent de Briey as the pilot of the reform process, hereby demonstrating (I1): ‘there was a whole period of reflection with Laurent de Briey as the pilot of the whole refoundation process’ (I7); ‘(. . .) It was his title: pilot of the process. [The leader and the pilot] were, and still are the carriers of the project. The façade too, in a way’ (I3).

Laurent de Briey positioned himself as a steering agent and was given full freedom in managing the process, solely accountable to the party leader (I6). His appointment was not particularly well seen by prominent figures of the party. It created important frictions, especially with influential figures from the parliamentary group:

[it] was entrusted to a single person who was not elected at all, who was a former collaborator who took the transformation process as his personal project. He led it by speaking in the media as if he was the party leader. As if he was expressing a collective project but he did not consult the others. He worked largely in isolation, not giving any draft of the project to anyone, even the most responsible politicians. (I6)

The Marginalized Parliamentary Group(s). In Belgian parties, the parliamentary group(s) can generally influence the party’s decision-making through representation in the party-in-central-office executive bodies (Legein and van Haute, 2021). In the cdH, the Bureau includes every MP, which gives them a central role in the party’s political life (Pilet and Rangoni, 2021).

Yet, the formulation phase of the content of the reforms was formally based on a wide-ranging consultation of citizens using deliberative mini-publics. Most of the party’s MPs and executives were completely marginalized from the process to the point that some of the most influential figures in the party strongly opposed the process (I4, confirmed by I9 and I11): ‘So in this desire to be able to reinvent everything, to dare to go off the track, to want to reach out to the citizen, the cursor was placed 100% on the citizens. The party’s executives were at times sidelined’.

The two carriers of the reform process decided to open it up to the citizens to the risk of unbalancing intra-party relations, which was experienced harshly by some members of the party in public office:

I was a bit surprised that the party elites and in particular MPs were not asked about their views on the state of the party and on the way to help it evolve. (I8); [At some point] there was a realization that we should try to find a better balance between the two. (I4)

In practice, a pilot committee met on average every 3 weeks ‘to be informed rather than consulted’ on the progress made by the pilot and his collaborators (I11). The committee was composed of local representatives, a handful of senior officials, representatives of the youth and senior branches as well as two representatives of the current and former MPs, all ‘selected in a black box. (. . .), each wondering why the others were included in the meeting’ (I11). The very composition of the pilot committee highly irritated the MPs. They only had rare opportunities to discuss with the pilot of the project and his collaborators, who were more interested in ‘coaxing’ them than giving them ‘drafts to discuss, to amend’ (I11, confirmed by I12).

Sequencing and Interpreting the Bundle of Party Reforms

The second step of the analysis requires diving into the black box of the reform process to assess how the key agents we just identified shaped the whole sequence. Such a

strategy follows the tradition of key contributions examining reform processes within a limited number of parties (e.g. Gauja, 2017; Küppers, 2024; Wauters, 2014) and thick-descriptive accounts of party adaptation (e.g. Bale, 2012, 2016)

Reform 1 – The Slide in Great Distress and the Rise of the Innovator. The first phase of the sequence depicts the trigger for the party's slide into a situation of great distress leading to the first reform: the election of a new party leader (Reform 1) mandated for, and ready to assume, the role of innovator. The cumulative actions of the actors involved in this first phase of the sequence mainly reflect a mechanism of *anticipation* in view of a double electoral deadline perceived as crucial for the party.

The start of the sequence can be traced back to 2017 thanks to the interviews. At the time, the incumbent leader Lutgen highly centralized the power in his hands and dictated the party's tempo (Pilet and Rangoni, 2021; confirmed by I11).

It was illustrated on 19 June 2017 when the party brought down the regional government it was involved in partnership with the French-speaking socialist party (PS). The PS was then plagued by a series of repeated scandals forcing the party's leadership to focus on internal crisis management (RTL info, 11 June 2017; II, I3, I11). Some voices were then heard to denounce the 'cdH's loyalty towards the PS' (I1). The incumbent leader perceived it as highly damaging for the brand (I1) and triggered what was depicted as a drastic measure to reaffirm cdH's identity a year before the next local elections. The decision to bring down the regional government in 2017 was officially framed by the party leader as an act to show the public that the party was capable of 'distancing itself' from its historical ally (I1, confirmed by I11) and the affirmation of 'good governance' as a political principle dear to the party (I1, confirmed by I2 and I11). It was also a bet that this positioning would be rewarded at the ballot box in the 2018 local elections. Key figures in the party shared the belief that the strategy was risky but potentially rewarding.

The party went into the local elections campaign quite destabilized by these events, but confident of its local anchorage. However, the party suffered a substantial defeat, losing 167 local councillors compared to the last local election. Its status as a well-established party at the local level was seriously threatened. The party counted only 41 lists with the party label out of the 281 municipalities where candidates from the party competed. The real defeat was hence primarily symbolic: 'it shows that the brand was still suffering. (. . .) that the party's DNA was no longer sufficiently clear or obviously promising' (I4, confirmed by I3). As interviewee 1 summarizes, anticipating the defeat in the 2019 legislative elections: 'One sign of this disaffection with the brand, which was damaged by previous decisions, is the 2018 local elections. (. . .) Symbolically, a very large number of lists no longer used the party label. (. . .). We had a feeling that things were not going to be good in 2019' (I1).

The explicit distancing of many local branches from the brand showed that local representatives perceived and anticipated Lutgen's strategy as damaging the party's image, cementing the brand's unattractiveness: 'Because we rely on an electorate which, if it was indeed scandalised by the affairs affecting the socialists, has always had a very Christian tradition, very attentive to the value of loyalty. And this was seen as an act of betrayal' (I1).

After the defeat, the same concerns quickly spread among national MPs who were running for the 2019 legislative elections. The 2018 local election's outcome was perceived as a sanction by the party leadership, eventually blaming the leader (I9, I11). He was targeted as the one who accelerated the party's slide into what was already anticipated as a situation of great distress in the face of the incoming 2019 elections deemed

crucial for the party's viability (I1, I2, I11). His resignation was unanimously seen as salutary to prevent the marginalization of the party. The leadership was afraid of a break in the trust placed in the party by potential coalition partners:

Benoît [Lutgen] felt (. . .) that he was probably no longer in a position (. . .) to be perceived as a reliable interlocutor by the other party leaders. He told to himself: 'if tomorrow I stay, I might jeopardise the building of governmental majorities because the PS would be bitter and the others would be distrustful. They risk to put us on the sidelines'. (I1, echoed by I2 and I11).

Indeed, Benoit Lutgen announced his resignation on 15 January 2019 as his presidency was not seen as 'very brilliant due to his choice to withdraw from the governmental majority, which was a strategic error that made the party lose' (I6).

The election of Maxime Prévot resembled a lot to a coronation (Aylott and Bolin, 2021). Following the defeat of 2018, no major figure was willing to stick their neck out so close to legislative elections widely anticipated as a failure in the making. The only heavyweight to express her will to be a candidate was met with a firm opposition by the other influential figures not keen to endorse a candidacy deemed destabilizing by potentially leaving the party looking divided so close to a major election (Le Soir, 20 January 2019; I11). In the backstage, the incumbent leader had been preparing to hand over his office by persuading Prévot to candidate as 'the only one capable of synthesising the different political tendencies within the party' (Le Soir, 16 January 2019; I11). On 26 January, Prévot is elected new party leader with 85% of the members' votes at an extraordinary Congress (Reform 1).

The new party leader did not need to use much persuasion to be crowned. The rest of the party leadership shared the belief that he was the only one able to provide stability and limit the damages at the 2019 elections before planning a transition to a new chapter:

'We now have a new man to whom we can't attribute the responsibility for the defeat (. . .). it's easier for him to launch a process of refoundation'. (I2); 'I think he knew that (. . .) if he took over the presidency, it was not because he wanted to throw himself under the bus four months later [during the 2019 elections], but because he planned that he would do something [with the party] afterwards'. (I3).

Reform 2 – The Rational Adaptation Before the Distress Innovation. Reform 1 failed to halt the negative spiral, though. The second phase of the sequence illustrates how a first reform that has not achieved all its goals called the party to immediately react through a mechanism of *adaptation* to its new (material) reality (Reform 2). It relates to what Knight (1967) described as a more erratic search for solutions 'seen as necessary and functional' (p. 485), as the party is now in greater need to improve its performances to save itself. The electoral defeat combined with complicated government negotiations were indeed perceived by the party's dominant coalition as constraining in a context where changing the party to bounce back became the primary focus.

Interestingly, Reform 1 also generated a *snowball effect* mechanism contributing to the implementation of Reform 2. Interviewees pinpointed that the content of the bundle of reforms is inseparable from the personality of the new leader. There is no guarantee that the party would have followed the same trajectory if someone else had been elected, nor if the incumbent stayed: 'That's what was needed. Maxime arrived with the plan. We should have done it five years earlier, clearly'. (I9). Reform 1 alone was probably

not sufficient to explain the sequence of reform that followed, but it was necessary for it to happen.

The results of the 2019 elections were disastrous. Although widely anticipated, they were not well received by party officials as they were the indicator that the party is fighting for its survival. It opened the way for the new party leader to position himself as the innovator dominating the last influential figures in the party.

‘I think that’s a bit of a breaking point. The moment when Maxime says to himself perhaps: ‘we have to do something’’. (I3); ‘We had already counted our losses [in advance] so to speak so, psychologically, we had this feeling that we had (. . .) nothing left to lose and therefore we had to dare. (. . .)’. (I2).

The rest of the leadership was completely dependent on the party leader and happy to pass the buck to the last person daring to put himself in the firing line in case of failure.

Following the electoral defeat, the idea was quickly put forward to erase the damaged brand ‘once and for all’ and to ‘start from scratch’ (I2, echoed by I12). However, planning such a reform process is costly. On 5 June 2019, the Bureau decided to sit in opposition at all levels of power for the next legislature (Le Soir, 6 June 2019) because:

Being in government, it was not possible [to launch such a process]. Each minister was deeply involved in the management of his/her own affairs (. . .). They were not in a position of wondering: ‘How will I implement and embody this new political project?’. The conditions were not there. It was not possible at the time to have it percolating internally, and to make it publicly visible through political action. (I10)

Officially, the decision to sit in opposition is taken given the voters’ sanction. The party leadership collegially expressed in the media its will to ‘stop filling in in coalitions’ in which they would not have enough weight (Le Soir, 05 June 2019). They also point to the opportunity that this ‘opposition cure’ will allow to conduct the party transformation (I2, I3, I2 and I9; Party Congress, 12 March 2022), even though opposition is a risky choice worsening the party’s access to resources and visibility (I11, I12).

By framing the story like that, the party leadership wanted to create the image of a party in control of its destiny. But it also appeared that the game was actually stacked against the cdH in the government negotiations, during which they were not offered realistic partnerships (Le Soir, 05 June 2019; I11). The decision to sit into opposition is hence more the result of a mechanism of adaptation than the acknowledgement of public opinion and a subsequent planification.

The party leader, in collaboration with the party leadership, then decided to adapt the human and material resources to this new reality (I12). In the weeks surrounding that decision, the party terminated the contract of many staff and moved its headquarters to two floors of a discrete building in the centre of Brussels. The following months were used to prepare the next moves (Le Soir, 06 September 2019). The party leader took that time to present the transformation plan to the local sections. The party also hired new staff for its communication unit to work on publicizing the upcoming transformation process (Reform 2).

Reform 3–6 – Between an All-Powerful Surrogate and the Marginalized Parliamentary Face. The third phase of the sequence details the strategy of marginalizing the party in public office by the leader and his shadow advisor to push through a complete overhaul of the personal

(Reform 3), organizational (Reform 4) and programmatic (Reform 5) components of the product of the new party in the making. Reform 6, the re-election of Maxime Prévot as the leader of Les Engagé.e.s, closes the sequence.

While the party has not suffered from any major internal dissension since the first adaptations to its new situation, this phase shows them employing very different mechanisms with sometimes conflicting trajectories. On one hand, the party leader quietly *planned* the conditions necessary to launch the actual transformation process, before having to *reassert his authority* when it came time to implement it. Indeed, his approach, as described below, triggered a *resistance* mechanism on the part of the parliamentary group, which perceived its influence and interests greatly threatened by the new project on the table. Finally, the pilot was in charge of the *practical planning* of the process, although he also had, and failed, to use *persuasion* to try and get the parliamentarians on board.

Indeed, the last phase of the sequence sees a shift in the centre of gravity of the party's internal power structure. On 10 January 2020, the party announced to around 1.000 party members a year of reflection leading to its complete transformation (Le Soir, 12 January 2020; RTBF, 20 May 2021). The party leader quickly appointed a new pilot of the transformation process – Laurent de Briey – in charge of executing the plan. The idea is to gather 'all interested citizens to feed the reflection' about the guiding organizational and ideological principles of the new party (I10; confirmed by I4 and I12) through deliberative mini-publics.

Behind the scenes, influential figures perceived the nomination of the new pilot as exclusion. However, there was not much resistance and the party leader – assisted by the pilot – quickly put forward new faces to personify the new brand in the making (Reform 3). The planned strategy was explicitly to convey the image that the transformation process was external to the party and citizens-oriented. The distancing of the historical figures from the process was seen as necessary to achieve that: 'It was really thought of as a spin-off of the party. Something from the cdH but completely separate, even though we had access to the party's resources' (I12, confirmed by I11 and echoed by I10).

The appointment of a shadow advisor as the front-line operator carrying the whole process can be seen as instrumental for the leader in preventing possible factional tensions or power struggles, and in locking in the trajectory of the reforms. The party leadership may not have been completely unhappy to let the new tandem do the hard work. But by doing so, the party leader also provided himself with a useful shock absorber in the event of the failure of his plan.

The COVID crisis started a few weeks after the launch of the transformation process and brought important material constraints (I1, I2, I10, I12). While this was initially perceived as particularly threatening to undermine the momentum (Le Soir, 11 September 2021; I2, I12), several interviewees also expressed the view that it actually allowed for a deeper reflection than initially planned, giving the party the opportunity to address certain issues in greater depth. The pilot committee had to deviate from the initial plan and quickly reacted by adapting and shifting the deliberative process online, even though interviews pointed to the disinterest of the citizens in the initiative at the time.

The Pilot Committee took most decisions on the content of the reform and only informed the Bureau from time to time (I11, echoed by I12). None of the interviewees could point to proposals directly stemming from, or greatly influenced by the citizens-based initiative. Besides, one of the Committee meetings was the scene of a definitive break in the trust given by the parliamentary party to the pilot of the process and his collaborators. The representative of the MPs stormed out of the room after that a staff

member presented what would eventually become the new party organization. The project relegated the MPs to the same rank as the local representatives in the various decision-making bodies, which was seen as the ultimate offence.

Laurent de Briey made a great effort to ‘win back their trust’ (I11) and persuade them to endorse the project. But these efforts were even more frustrating for the MPs because they were never put in a position to negotiate the content of the reform (I11, confirmed by I4). This frustration was directed at the shadow advisor and not at the party leader, even though he was the one who initiated the reform.

On 12 March 2022, the party convened an extraordinary Congress to present the new statutes and manifesto to the members. After 3 hours filled with testimonies and a detailed presentation of the new party manifesto, Maxime Prévot announced the name and colours of the party born from the ashes of the cdH: *Les Engagés.e.s* (Party Congress, 12 March 2022).

The new statutes and manifesto made public after having been ‘padlocked’ during their elaboration (I5, I12), remained open to amendments for a few more weeks.

A faction composed of MPs and led by the federal parliamentary group leader (informally confirmed by interviewees) frontally opposed the party transformation without their assent. They attempted to soften some of the proposals by submitting part of the 805 amendments registered by the party a few weeks before the Adoption Congress. A specially appointed committee composed of members of the Restricted Bureau and the pilot of the transformation process rejected an overwhelming majority of amendments (Le Soir, 11 May 2022). This episode forced Maxime Prévot to reaffirm his grip on the party leadership by holding to his line at the cost of the departure of some of the most vocal voices as he confirms: ‘I was ready to undertake it. To lose one or two MPs. [. . .] But those departures, if they are electorally and humanly painful, were by contrast the proof that a change has actually been made’. (I1, echoed by I12).

Party members, officials and interested citizens pre-selected by the committee were invited to thematic workshops led by party representatives specialized in the issues addressed to make final proposals to the party leadership a few hours before a Launching Congress held on 14 May 2022 (La Libre, 14 May 2022). On that day, the Congress of the newly formed LEs officially adopted the final version of its statutes and manifesto (Reforms 4 and 5). The leader also asked the party authorities to launch the selection of a new party leader. One week later, Prévot announced his candidacy for re-election (RTBF, 20 May 2022). The ticket led by Prévot was elected without much difficulty (81% of the votes) and completed the bundle of reform by finalizing the conformation of the dominant party coalition (Reform 6).

Discussion and Conclusion

Many West European Christian-democratic parties are facing major challenges to key aspects of their political product like their organizational efficacy, changing electorate, electoral efficiency or ideological identity (Taflaga, 2023). It puts them at risk of finding themselves in what Knight (1967) has called a *distress situation*, and raises the question of their survival.

Although political parties are averse to change, they demonstrate a considerable capacity for adaptation in the face of such situations (Bale, 2012; Gauja, 2017; Legein, 2023). While the literature has already extensively explored the links between these challenges and party reforms (Bale, 2016; Gauja, 2017; Wauters, 2014), it still ignores the complex

causality underlying these strategic decisions. More importantly, existing works rarely focus on the central actors of reform processes and on the causal mechanisms by which they shape these reforms.

In this article, we took the opportunity presented by the transformation of the French-speaking Belgian Christian-democratic party (cdH) into Les Engagé.e.s (LEs) to explore these avenues. We applied an Explaining Outcome process-tracing (Beach and Pedersen, 2013) to the sequence of reforms that the party implemented between 2019 and 2022. We accounted for the complex dynamics associated with it sliding into a situation of great distress. The triangulation of a variety of sources enabled us to identify *who* the main actors were, *how* they interacted with each other and with their changing environment, and the mechanisms *by which* they shaped the sequence.

Three main contributions can be drawn from this case study. First, the analysis confirms that party leaders are the main initiators and carriers of reform projects (Gauja, 2017; Panebianco, 1988; Wauters, 2014). They set up the conditions for their successful implementation through a variety of causal mechanisms bound to how they perceive their environment. However, the party's plunge into great distress considerably altered its internal power structure, resulting in an unconventional occurrence of the causal mechanisms usually mobilized by party leaders as innovators (Gauja, 2017; Legein, 2023; Wauters, 2014).

The parliamentary party, traditionally influential and potentially a source of resistance to change within Belgian governing parties, was marginalized during the sequence although some resistance still came from what MPs perceived as a threat to their interests within the organization once the process was fully underway. The party leader gained dominance over them because of the successive electoral defeats these long-serving personalities have suffered over time. The leader was highly *adaptable* and able to *plan* the conditions for transforming the party in the face of highly resource-constrained conditions.

But the major element highlighted by this study is the empowerment of a shadow advisor who held no formal position within the party before the sequence, and who ended up acting as a surrogate to the party leader during the reform. The organizational evolution of parties makes these actors central (Katz and Mair, 1994, 2009) but evidence about the mechanisms they use in a reform sequence remains very limited.

Interestingly, the party's dependence on the innovator throughout the sequence meant that the latter was able to free himself from the constraints of *persuasion* and *bargaining* usually associated with reform processes (Bale, 2016; Gauja, 2017; Wauters, 2014) in favour of quietly *planning* the process before handing over to the process pilot under his close supervision. He had at most to *reaffirm* his *grip* on the party by restoring discipline in the very last moment of the sequence in front of the parliamentary face weakened and excluded from the process. All the pilot of the process had to do was *plan* the process practicalities and (*re*)*plan* after the COVID-19 crisis and a failed attempt to *persuade* the MPs to get on board.

Second, this case study adds to our understanding of the dynamics linked to the personnel component of political parties' products. The election of the new party leader appeared to be necessary to the unfolding of the rest of the sequence but was first and foremost a reform on its own. The failure of the strategy applied by the former leader was instrumental in the emergence of an innovator who opened a window of opportunity for change. This result supports the '*snowball effect*' argument linked to the election of a new leader, that is, the latter can considerably shape a reform bundle either by generating so much friction that he becomes the target of a reform (Hayton, 2022; Panebianco, 1988),

or by being the driving force behind reforms of other types (Harmel and Janda, 1994), or both (Legein, 2023).

Third, our results also show that it is important and feasible to study multidimensional reform processes within a bundle framework to understand the evolution of mainstream parties. Our analytical approach focusing on complex causality enabled us to understand how resistance to change can form and degenerate within the same sequence. Our results have also shown the actions implemented by the innovator and agents of change to circumvent resistance, as well as the evolution of their role over time. Focusing on party elites' perception was also effective in defining what a situation of great distress is and what it means to party elites, although future works could attempt to propose a more solid conceptual definition of it when applied to the study of party dynamics.

Our results can be *transferable* to other cases. We do not contend that our empirical findings are generalizable to other settings *as such* (Small, 2009). But we argue that the type of theoretical mechanisms we unfolded can be found in any party subject to similar substantial contextual pressures. It is indeed because the party has slipped into a situation of great distress that the leader – and his shadow advisor – has been able to more easily circumvent traditional resistance to change. Contrary to what Katz and Mair (2002) had envisaged by anticipating the domination of the party in public office over the other faces of the party organization, this case shows a rebalancing of the party's centre of gravity around a *last person standing* and party technocrats ready to take on the role of (and face the political consequences of being) the innovator within the party in central office, at the risk of creating dissension.

In view of the challenges faced by West European mainstream governing parties, similar cases could multiply in the future (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020; Taflaga, 2023). If previous research has established the trend of the hyper-presidentialisation of internal party dynamics (Poguntke and Webb, 2007), we could for instance speculate that the rising risk of falling into great distress, along with the intricate nature of handling the political product, will amplify this phenomenon. This could lead to a shift in managing party change, making it more technocratic than political.

The near future of the cdH, newly labelled LEs, will tell us whether this strategy pays off. In the meantime, this case of a Christian-democratic party in crisis offers an ideal point of comparison for studies wishing to delve deeper into the questions of *how* and *which actors* (can) try to make their party escape a trajectory that seems – until now – inescapable.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to first and foremost thank the interviewees who agreed to take part in the sometimes risky game of interviews. They would also like to thank their colleagues who helped them bring this article to life with their thoughtful feedback, either behind closed office doors or during the annual conferences of the Belgian and Dutch political science associations. Finally, they would like to thank the Cevipol and Wiener-Anspach Foundation for providing them with the resources they needed to carry out this research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Wiener-Anspach Foundation under a postdoctoral grant.

ORCID iD

Thomas Legein  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5365-2166>

Supplemental Material

Additional Supplementary Information may be found with the online version of this article.

Contents

Appendix 1. List of Media Items.

Notes

1. The appendix can be found online on the journal website.
2. The last person standing is 'the single person who performed electorally well in parliamentary elections with a general declining trend for the party', see. Luybaert et al. (2022).

References

- Aylott N and Bolin N (2021) Conflicts and Coronations: Analysing Leader Selection in European Political Parties. In: Aylott N and Bolin N (eds) *Managing Leader Selection in European Political Parties*. London: Springer, pp.1–28.
- Bale T (2012) *The Conservatives since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bale T (2016) *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron*, 2nd edn. London: Polity.
- Beach D and Pedersen RB (2013) *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Bedock C (2017) *Reforming Democracy: Institutional Engineering in Western Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bell S (2011) Do We Really Need a New 'Constructivist Institutionalism' to Explain Institutional Change? *British Journal of Political Science* 41 (4): 883–906.
- Chiru M, Gauja A, Gherghina S, et al. (2015) Explaining Change in Party Leadership Selection Rules. In Cross W and Pilet JB (eds) *The Politics of Party Leadership. A Cross-National Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.31–49.
- Close C and Gherghina S (2019) Rethinking Intra-Party Cohesion: Towards a Conceptual and Analytical Framework. *Party Politics* 25 (5): 652–663.
- Cross W and Blais A (2012) Who Selects the Party Leader? *Party Politics* 18 (2): 127–150.
- Cross W and Pilet JB (2015) *The Politics of Party Leadership. A Cross-National Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Vries C and Hobolt S (2020) *Political Entrepreneurs. the Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Deschouwer K (1992) The Survival of the Fittest: Measuring and Explaining Adaptations and Change of Political Parties. In: *Workshop on 'Democracies and the Organization of Political Parties', Limerick, Ireland*, 1–2 January.
- Ennser L (2012) The Homogeneity of West European Party Families: The Radical Right in Comparative Perspective. *Party Politics* 18 (2): 151–171.
- Fernandez-Vazquez P and Somer-Topcu Z (2019) The Informational Role of Party Leader Changes on Voter Perceptions of Party Positions. *British Journal of Political Science* 49 (3): 977–996.
- Gallagher M and Marsh M (1987) *Candidate Selection in Comparative Perspective*. London: Sage.
- Gauja A (2017) *Party Reform: The Causes, Challenges, and Consequences of Organizational Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gerring J (2004) What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good for. *American Political Science Review* 98: 341–354.
- Harmel R and Janda K (1994) An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change. *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 6: 259–287.
- Hayton R (2022) Brexit and Party Change: The Conservatives and Labour at Westminster. *International Political Science Review* 43 (3): 345–358.
- Hedström P (2008) Studying Mechanisms to Strengthen Causal Inferences in Quantitative Research. In: Box-Steffensmeier JM, Brady HE and Collier D (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.319–335.

- Katz R and Mair P (1994) *How Parties Organize: Change and Adaptation in Party Organizations in Western Democracies*. London: Sage.
- Katz R and Mair P (2002) The Ascendancy of the Party in Public Office: Party Organizational Change in Twentieth-Century Democracies. In: Gunther R, Montero JR and Linz JJ (eds) *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.113–136.
- Katz R and Mair P (2009) The Cartel Party Thesis: A Restatement. *Perspectives on Politics* 7: 753–766.
- Knight KE (1967) A Descriptive Model of the Intra-Firm Innovation Process. *The Journal of Business* 40: 478–496.
- Kölln AK (2014) *Party Decline and Response: The Effects of Membership Decline on Party Organisations in Western Europe, 1960-2010*. PhD Thesis, University of Twente, Enschede.
- Küppers A (2024) The Occasional Democratisation of Party Leadership Selection: A Mechanism-Centred Approach. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 65: 49–70.
- Legein T (2022) *Explaining Intra-Party Reforms: Party Engineering in Mainstream Parties in Belgium (1987-2022)*. PhD Thesis, Université libre de Bruxelles/Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Brussels.
- Legein T (2023) Understanding How Bundles of Party Reforms Are Shaped: A Snowballing Sequence in the French-Speaking Belgian Liberal Party (MR). *Party Politics* 0 (0): 1–14.
- Legein T and van Haute E (2021) Les partis politiques au prisme de l'organisation. In: Delwit P, Pilet JB and van Haute E (eds) *Les partis politiques en Belgique*. Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université libre de Bruxelles, pp.43–66.
- Luybaert J and Legein T (2024) When Do Parties Reform? Causes of Programmatic-, Organizational-And Personnel Party Reforms in the Belgian Mainstream Parties. *Acta Politica* 59: 42–76.
- Luybaert J, Lingier L, Bouteica N, et al. (2022) How Many Captains for a Ship on Electoral Drift? Limiting the Number of Leadership Candidates in the Flemish Christian-Democratic Party (CD&V). *Frontiers in Political Science* 4: 1068207.
- Mazzoleni O and Heinisch R (2023) Party Change Beyond the 'Classical Models?' The Role of Agency, Context, and Democracy. In: Carter N, Keith D and Vasilopoulou S, et al. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Political Parties*. London: Routledge, pp.9–19.
- Moens P (2022) Knowledge Is Power: The Staffing Advantage of Parliamentary and Ministerial Offices. *Government and Opposition* 58: 765–788.
- Panbianco A (1988) *Political Parties: Organization and Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pedersen HH (2020) Differences and Changes in Danish Party Organisations: Central Party Organisation versus Parliamentary Party Group Power. In: Norton P (ed.) *The Impact of Legislatures. A Quarter-Century of The Journal of Legislative Studies*. London: Routledge, pp.1–18.
- Pedersen HH and Schumacher G (2015) Do Leadership Changes Improve Electoral Performance? In: Cross W and Pilet JB (eds) *The Politics of Party Leadership. A Cross-National Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.149–164.
- Pennings P and Hazan RY (2001) Democratizing Candidate Selection. Causes and Consequences. *Party Politics* 7 (3): 267–275.
- Pilet JB and Rangoni S (2021) Le Centre démocrate humaniste (cdH). In: Delwit P and van Haute E (eds) *Les partis politiques en Belgique*. Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, pp. 169–194.
- Poguntke T and Webb P (2007) *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pollack E, Allern S, Kantola A, et al. (2018) The New Normal: Scandals as a Standard Feature of Political Life in Nordic Countries. *International Journal of Communication* 12: 3087–3108.
- Small ML (2009) 'How Many Cases Do I Need?' On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research. *Ethnography* 10 (1): 5–38.
- Sobel RS and Coyne CJ (2011) Cointegrating Institutions: The Time-Series Properties of Country Institutional Measures. *The Journal of Law and Economics* 54 (1): 111–134.
- Taflaga M (2023) The Centre-Right. Christian Democrats, Conservatives and Liberals. In: Carter N, Keith D and Vasilopoulou S, et al. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Political Parties*. London: Routledge, pp. 137–148
- Wauters B (2014) Democratizing Party Leadership Selection in Belgium: Motivations and Decision Makers. *Political Studies* 62 (Suppl. 1): 61–80.
- Webb P and Keith D (2017) Assessing the Strength of Party Organizational Resources: A Survey of the Evidence from the Political Party Database. In: Scarrow S, Webb P and Poguntke T (eds) *Organizing Political Parties: Representation, Participation, and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.31–61.

Webb P and Kolodny R (2006) Professional Staff in Political Parties. In: Katz R and Crotty WJ (eds) *Handbook of Party Politics*. London: SAGE, pp.337–347.

Author Biographies

Thomas Legein is a postdoctoral researcher working at the Political Psychology Lab of the University of Cambridge. His main research interest lies in the study of party politics with a special focus on party reform and how psychological traits and moral foundations shape attitudes towards political change. He also works on representation, emotions and democratic innovations.

Sacha Rangoni is a PhD student working at the Cevipol, at the Université libre de Bruxelles. His dissertation focuses on political elites, democratic innovations and citizen participation.