

Ideological misfits: A distinctive class of party members

Party Politics

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DOI: 10.1177/1354068810395058

ppq.sagepub.com



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Abstract

In this article, we identify a distinctive type of party member; namely, those who identify themselves as ideologically at odds with their party. Using survey evidence from nine parties in Belgium and Canada, we measure the prevalence of these 'ideological misfits' and explore the characteristics that define them. While there appears to be no systematic cross-party pattern, it is striking that mass parties of the left have disproportionately large numbers of such members. To the extent that those parties pride themselves on intra-party democracy, this raises questions about their capacity to respond to Downsian drives towards the centre and suggests that May's law may be one of left-wing disparity.

Keywords

Belgian political parties, Canadian political parties, ideological coherence, May's law, party members

Paper submitted 18 May 2010; accepted for publication 30 November 2010

Introduction

In an era in which it is possible to conceive of 'parties without partisans' (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000), much thought has been given to the general decline in party membership that is characteristic of most Western democracies (Mair and Van Biezen,

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2001), and has made the question of who joins political organizations one that commands considerable attention (van Haute, 2009).¹ Comparative analysis indicates that the story is complex, and that simple models of the resources possessed by individuals need to recognize the impact of mobilization mechanisms and institutional structures (Morales, 2008). In this article, we focus our attention on those who are already party members and ask about their continuing membership, particularly members who admit that they do not share their party's ideological outlook. We ask who they are and what impact they have on their parties and the wider party system.

There is a considerable amount of literature analysing party members in relation to the intensity with which they hold their opinions (May, 1973) and also to the orientations to action that their beliefs lead them to (Kitschelt, 1989; Norris, 1995), but the common assumption is that members are in a party that corresponds to their personal ideological orientations. Given that parties are far from homogeneous entities, it is inevitable that they will contain members who differ on more than immediate policy prescriptions. Some are bound to find themselves at odds with the party's basic positions, and in that situation individuals have the option of leaving to join another party (or simply leaving active party membership), or of staying either as passive loyalists or vocal activists trying to change their party (Hirschman, 1970).

Those who stay despite recognizing they do not share the perspectives and political orientation of their party might be described as misfits. Misfits can therefore be defined as individual members who recognize a marked distance between their own orientation and that of their party. This category of member is of particular interest in the study of parties, and for several reasons. First, it can provide some insight into the profile of those most susceptible to exit. Surveys of party members cannot provide information on ex-members, but studying the misfits may be a first step in that direction. Second, misfits can provide information on internal ideological variation and incongruence, opening a window on factionalism and intra-party conflict, which are understudied aspects of political parties. Third, misfits may be crucial in our understanding the decision-making dynamics within political parties, which is another understudied topic in party politics. Finally, the concept of party misfits gives us a new tool for testing May's law of curvilinear disparity (1973) if we associate the party's position with its upper-level elites. Identifying the misfits can help us identify and understand who the party radicals are.

The article explores the extent to which parties contain such individuals, i.e. just who they are and how they differ from the wider membership. Drawing on an exploratory comparative analysis allows us to account for variations among misfits across parties and countries. The data we have do not allow us to say as much as we might like about precisely why such individuals maintain their party memberships. However, they do provide clear evidence that parties contain individuals who are ideological misfits and suggest that there is no obvious or common pattern to this form of partisanship because parties appear to vary considerably in the number and character of their misfits.

Data: Parties and members

Evidence of the existence of partisan misfits is drawn from two major sets of comparable surveys of party members conducted in Canada and Belgium. The Canadian data were

collected by Cross and Young in 2000 at a time when the country's party system was in considerable flux. The Progressive Conservative (PC) Party had fragmented and two new regionally based parties – the Canadian Alliance (CA) in the west, the Bloc Québécois (BQ) in Quebec – had emerged with strong grassroots memberships to challenge the existing Progressive Conservative, Liberal and New Democratic Party (NDP) organizations (Carty et al., 2000).² This increased the ideological polarization of party competition and gave members of the traditional brokerage style parties new and clear alternatives if they wished to find a more compatible partisan home.

The Belgian data were collected by van Haute in 2003/06. We have data for four Belgian parties; two from the Flemish side of the system, i.e. the Christian Democrats (CD&V) and the Liberals (VLD), and two from the French-speaking side, namely the Socialists (PS) and the Greens (Ecolo). These parties correspond to the dominant partners of the main party families in the country. Thus, together, we have data on members in nine different national-level parties that cross both the ideological and linguistic spectra of these two bilingual federal states. In total, there are over 6,000 respondents.³

In an effort to avoid arbitrary definitions of where a party stands, and so which members shared that ideological position, we let the members speak for themselves. In each case, party members were asked to locate both their party and themselves on a traditional Left–Right scale, with the two questions asked consecutively in the questionnaires. This allowed members to indicate where they believed their party stood. Not surprisingly, party members are not all of the same opinion, and in not one of the nine cases did a majority of members agree on where their party was located. However, freedom to locate their party provided individual members with the opportunity, if they so desired, to locate themselves at the same point they saw their party occupying. Thus, in instances where they did not indicate the same location, party members quite explicitly indicated that they did not share the ideological position they attributed to their party. These differences provide some insight into the ideological complexity of contemporary party membership.

Perceptions of self and party

If party members are well attuned to the ideological goals of their party we might expect that large numbers would subjectively locate themselves at the same position on a Left–Right spectrum that they placed their party. Table 1 summarizes the extent to which members report a congruent or divergent self-party location in the nine political parties. The first three columns report the proportions of each party's members who locate themselves at the same point on the scale (labelled congruent) and those that locate themselves to the left and right of their party.

One might reasonably expect a more ideologically fragmented party system to produce fewer ideological misfits, such as that in Belgium. With a larger partisan and ideological supply of alternatives, a party system ought to provide better matches with the demands of potential party members. And indeed this proves to be the case. All four Belgian parties have a greater number of members locating themselves and their party at the same point as their Canadian counterparts do, although in only one of them (the centrist Dutch-speaking Christian Democrats) did a (bare) majority of the members see themselves at the same ideological point as their party. The only Canadian parties that

Table 1. Party members: Perceptions of self and party (%)

	Congruent	Self to L	Self to R	L-R asymmetry	Misfits	N
Canada						
CA	44.3	22.2	33.5	1.51	7.5	961
PC	29.7	25.9	44.4	1.71	20.7	784
Lib	32.3	44.5	23.2	1.92	17.4	815
NDP	24.2	58.3	17.6	3.31	25.0	575
BQ	41.7	34.0	24.3	1.40	15.7	362
Belgium						
VLD	45.8	25.0	29.2	1.17	19.3	404
CD&V	52.2	27.1	20.8	1.30	12.5	510
PS	42.8	40.0	17.2	2.33	22.9	783
Ecolo	46.7	33.3	20.1	1.66	12.5	1001
Total	39.8	34.3	26.0		16.5	6195

come close to having similar proportions of congruent members are the two new parties that emerged in sharp protest against the policies of the Progressive Conservative government. This suggests that there is a generally higher level of ideological incoherence in the Canadian parties, but the Belgian data do indicate clearly that even a classically organized mass party, such as the [Belgian](#) socialists, hardly has the support of a phalanx of members marching in ideological lock step with it. System-level explanations cannot account for the great variations in the ideological coherence of the memberships of these parties. Both meso- and micro-level factors must also play an important role in any analysis. In this article, we focus on two key dimensions: the type of party that these members are involved in and the individual level characteristics of the members themselves. These lead us to a reconsideration of May's law of curvilinear disparity.

Table 1 is organized so that each list of the two countries' parties can be read (down) from right to left. It is clear from the data that in the case of the right-wing parties (the CA and PC in Canada and the VLD in Belgium) the members who do not see themselves at the same point as their party are more likely to locate themselves to the right than to the left. The opposite is true for left-wing parties (NDP and BQ in Canada and PS and [Greens](#) in Belgium), whose members are more likely to consider themselves more leftist than their party. This is what May's (1973) law of curvilinear disparity would lead us to expect. It is a pattern suggesting that any influence of ordinary members is likely to work to thwart Downsian party system dynamics (1957) by pulling the parties away from the centre – thus increasing the ideological space in the system – rather than towards it.

A simple measure of the extent of the asymmetrical distribution of members who position themselves at odds with their party is the ratio of the proportions claiming to be leaning to the left or to the right. This is summarized in column 4 of Table 1: a value of 1 indicates equal proportions on either side and higher scores reflect an increasing asymmetry among the non-congruent members. None of the parties is evenly balanced, but it is striking that in each country the party with the largest proportions of members offside are the two left-wing parties, i.e. the Canadian NDP and the [Walloon](#) Socialists. In both cases these are the parties with the most asymmetrical distributions of

non-congruent members with very much larger numbers leaning to the left than to the right. This imbalance may have consequences for the internal dynamics of party organization and decision-making in these parties, i.e. limiting their cohesiveness, but also their capacity to respond in a flexible or pragmatic fashion to competitive opportunities that might require them to find accommodations with more centrist forces.

Individuals who deliberately distance themselves from the position of their party would seem to be admitting some ideological difference between themselves and the party they belong to. Given the somewhat arbitrary imprecision that a question asking a party member on a multi-point scale is likely to engender, perfect congruence between where individuals locate themselves and their party might seem to be an overly exacting standard by which to measure those who fit with their party and those who, genuinely, are ideological misfits. However, individual party members who choose a personal position several places removed from that of their party (in successive questions on a written questionnaire) can be considered to have effectively declared themselves misfits. In empirical terms we identify misfits as those who locate themselves two or more points away from their party's location in Belgium or three or more points in the Canadian case.⁴ The column on the right hand side of Table 1 reports the proportions of misfits in each of the nine parties.

The numbers are considerable: about one in six of all party members would appear to be misfits, but there is no simple pattern to their partisan distribution. The new, right-wing populist Canadian Alliance party had the fewest; the NDP on the Canadian left the most. Both party systems appear to have individual parties in which misfits constituted about 20 percent or more of their memberships, and in each case one of the parties is on the right (the PC in Canada, the VLD in Belgium) and one on the left (the NDP in Canada, the PS in Belgium). The parties with the smallest proportion of misfits in each system (the Canadian CA and Belgian Ecolo) are both new to each system, each created with a clearly definable perspective that their members obviously can still identify with.

It is also striking that the two left-wing parties with the particularly unbalanced memberships are also the parties with the largest numbers of misfits. As mass party organizations with traditionally more clearly defined ideological positions than their cadre-style opponents (Katz and Mair, 1995), we might have expected that they would have the smallest numbers of misfits. Given their organizational commitments (at least in principle) to the sovereignty of their members, both would appear to have a membership base interested and capable of applying internal pressure to move their parties further to the left. What might account for this pattern on both systems' left wing? Two alternative (but not mutually exclusive) explanations suggest themselves. The first is related to a spatial model of party competition: parties to the left of the political spectrum in Canada and Belgium face less competition than on the right side of the spectrum. This would leave the more extreme (leftist) citizens with no viable alternative party to join. While this could be argued for the Canadian case, it is less obvious for Belgium, where the French-speaking Green Party positioned itself clearly to the left, and has been a viable alternative since its breakthrough in 1999. A second possibility points to the importance of party type. Traditional mass parties of the left have gradually transformed themselves into catch-all parties and in so doing may have alienated their traditional, class-conscious members. Again, while this possibility may characterize the experience of some

European social-democratic parties, the Parti socialiste in French-speaking Belgium is hardly the best example of such third-way repositioning. Could it be that May's law is one of left-wing curvilinear disparity?

Who are the misfits

With one in six party members admitting to be ideological misfits, it is important to ask just who these individuals are who choose to remain in a party they cannot easily identify with. The data allow us to consider a range of variables – individual personal characteristics, those associated with the socialization experiences of members, and finally those associated with direct party involvement. We expect the individual characteristics to play, as in the resource model of political participation (Verba and Nie, 1972), with more resources diminishing the respondent's level of ideological incongruence. We also expect the socialization experience of members, and their level of activism, to have an impact on the level of ideological cohesiveness of party members, with the intensity and the nature of the link between the members and their party affecting their perception of ideological congruence. Table 2 reports the bivariate relationships between 10 individual independent variables and the propensity to be a misfit (as opposed to one who fits) for the members across all nine political parties.

Most variables help differentiate the misfits from the other (regular) party members, although none of the differences appear large or strong. The personal, socio-economic variables suggest that misfits are more male, less religious (defined either as a believer or a practitioner), less likely to be among the oldest and more active in the labour market, especially among those self-employed or business owners. However, there does not appear to be any general relationship with education, as might be expected given the cognitive demands made by ideological discourse and thinking.

Misfits are more likely to be union members than those who see themselves as ideologically compatible with their party. This might help explain why there are so many misfits in the two union-based parties (PS and NDP), because it is the union membership that provides the basis for party membership for those individuals rather than a personal preference for the party's position itself.

Individuals who have a long or active personal involvement in the life of the party are less likely to be misfits. Our scale of member-party linkage, which combines measures of length and continuity of membership with exclusive attachment to one party,⁵ is positively related to an individual's sense of identification with their party's position. Misfits have low levels of linkage with their party. Reflecting much the same pattern, misfits exhibit lower levels of party activity.⁶ Inactive party members are more inclined to portray themselves as ideological 'extremists', while longer-term party members portray themselves holding more moderate orientations. These findings go against the usual theoretical interpretation of May's law, where the more committed members are seen as the radicals and the passive members the more moderate.

Our final variable taps part member's indication of the reason they initially joined the party. While the categories are broad – for process, ideological or material incentives (Clark and Wilson, 1961) – and the relationship modest, misfits are more likely to claim

Table 2. Characteristics of party misfits (%)

	Misfit	Fit
Gender***		
Male	69.9	63.6
Female	30.1	36.4
Religion***		
Believer	63.8	72.9
Non-believer	36.2	27.1
Practice**		
Regular	38.8	46.0
Irregular/never	61.2	54.0
Age*		
to 35	11.4	10.5
36–50	25.0	24.8
51–65	36.2	33.3
66 +	27.5	31.4
Education		
Not secondary	13.6	12.6
Secondary	18.7	20.2
College/University	67.7	67.2
Employment***		
Self-empl/owner	16.2	13.1
Private	21.1	21.5
Public	18.9	16.5
Not active	43.9	48.9
Union***		
Yes	44.0	36.0
No	56.0	64.0
Member-party linkage**		
Low	17.0	14.4
Med	41.8	47.8
High	41.2	37.9
Activism***		
Mean	2.25	2.55
Reason to join*		
Process	45.0	47.1
Ideology	50.1	49.8
Material	4.9	3.1

Data weighted; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

material incentives, which would be consistent with their willingness to remain in a party with which they had ideological differences (Whiteley and Seyd, 1996).⁷

The data in Table 2 summarize general patterns across all the political parties in both countries so they may well obscure important differences among them. Table 3 provides a schematic summary of the individual level bivariate relationships for each of the parties, indicating instances where the difference between the fits and misfits is significantly

Table 3. Identifying misfits by party (significant relationship)

	Canada					Belgium			
	CA	PC	Lib	NDP	BQ	VLD	CD&V	PS	Ecolo
Gender				*		*	*	*	
Religious belief			*	*			*		*
Religious practice									
Age							*		
Education		*	*	*					*
Employment		*		*			*		
Union membership				*				*	*
Member-party linkage		*	*	*					*
Activism			*	*		*			*
Incentive to join							*	*	

related to the variable in question. It is clear that there are a number of important differences among the parties, evidence for the existence of very distinctive party cultures and membership bases.

Two political parties (the CA and BQ) stand out as cases in which none of the variables distinguish the parties' misfits. By contrast, the NDP is the party for which the largest number of variables (7 of the 10) help identify misfits. That it is Canadian parties in which misfits are both most and least easily ordered may reflect the somewhat disparate character of the country's party politics. That said, none of the variables significantly identifies misfits in all of the other seven parties – indeed none is significant in more than four cases. It is also striking that in no two parties does the same profile define the misfits. This seems powerful confirmation of the idiosyncratic character of the misfits that populate individual party's memberships.

There are two particular anomalies among the socio-economic personal variables that emerge from a comparison of Tables 2 and 3. The first is religious practice, which identified misfits among the entire pool of party members, but which is not significant in any of the nine individual party memberships. The second is education, which was not significant in the global analysis but is significant in four of the individual parties. Among the individual parties, the impact of the variables appears to be much the same as in the global overview except for education. In the three Canadian parties for which education is significant, the pattern appears to be the reverse of what one would expect because it is the most highly educated members who are more likely to be misfits!

The data also hint at possible distinctive national differences, because two variables work with quite different effects to distinguish the party misfits in the two systems. Gender marks the ideological misfits (typically more male) in the three larger Belgian parties but distinguishes them only in one of the five Canadian parties. By contrast, member-party linkage appears to be an important determinant of ideological congruence for members in the three old major Canadian political parties. Belgians are clearly less affected by their experience in the party because it makes a difference only for those in the new and comparatively small Green party. Whether these are patterns that reflect

wider cultural or organizational differences between the countries' party systems is a question for future research.

One might expect party misfits to be distinguished by the reasons they choose to join a party they see as at odds with their own ideological self-placement. In fact this is true only for two of the nine parties. Not surprisingly, misfit members of both the Belgian (Flemish) Christian Democrats and (Walloon) Socialists are more likely to admit having joined for materialistic reasons. Both those parties have a history of governing and so have deep roots in the distributional networks of the country's welfare system, which provides strong incentives for individuals to join the party irrespective of their political views.

Our analysis of the numbers and unbalanced distribution of misfits noted that the two left-wing parties (NDP and PS) stood out as having large numbers who saw themselves to the left of their party. It may be that in these cases the ideologically more radical party members see themselves as having no realistic alternative and so maintain their membership despite the party being more centrist than they would like. However, that leaves both parties with a substantial proportion of their memberships at odds with what they see as the party's position. As Table 3 indicates, despite being in these nominally similar (socialist mass) parties these two groups of misfits are very different from one another. In the PS, only gender, union membership and interest in material incentives define them, while in the NDP they are apparently differentiated on seven different dimensions.

Party members as misfits

Party members who are not happy with where their party positions itself might be thought to have two options – exit or voice (Hirschman, 1970). Obviously, misfits have not exercised an exit option, but it seems equally apparent that they are not among those using voice to protest, because, to the extent they stand out from fellow partisans, misfits are generally among the least integrated and least active of party members. Their continuing presence may have institutional bases, such as a union connection in the two socialist parties, but it also may simply reflect rather passive organizational loyalty.

What our evidence does indicate is that contemporary political parties have considerable numbers of members who believe that their personal views are incongruent with those of their party. The considerable variation in the numbers of misfits populating membership rolls from party to party, even within common party systems, makes it difficult to generalize about just who they are or what their impact on the parties is. But it is evident that any analysis of the internal dynamics of intra-party life needs to recognize them as a potential force.

This is the case particularly with regard to mass parties on the left that have long defined the membership as the source of legitimate internal decision-making authority. Our evidence indicates that it is these parties that have the most misfits, and as a group they would pull their party further to the left. It is this peculiar distribution of misfits that leads us to suggest that May's law may be one of left-wing curvilinear disparity.

More generally, the presence of misfits in parties all across the systems seems to constitute a counter-balance to any Downsian impulse towards convergence. Recognizing

their presence would seem to be an important first step in understanding the impact of activists in shaping the dynamics of party politics.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Appendix

Notes

1. See also special issue of *Party Politics* (2004/10).
2. The Progressive Conservative and Canadian Alliance parties subsequently merged to form the Conservative Party.
3. The Canadian data rely on a mail-back survey of randomly selected members of the five major Canadian political parties conducted between March and May of 2000. The survey was mailed to a regionally stratified random sample drawn from the membership lists of each political party. A total of 10,928 surveys were mailed to partisans, with 3,872 completed surveys returned, yielding an overall response rate of 36 percent. The Belgian data also rely on a mail-back survey of randomly selected members of the four major Belgian political parties conducted during spring 2003 (PS, Ecolo) and spring 2006 (CD&V, VLD). The survey was mailed to a (regionally stratified – PS & CD&V) random sample drawn from the membership lists of each political party. For each party, 2,500 questionnaires were mailed, for a total of 10,000 questionnaires sent, with 2,920 completed surveys returned, yielding an overall response rate of 29.2 percent. For details of the surveys, see Cross and Young (2002) and van Haute (2009).
4. The Canadian surveys used a 10-point scale, the Belgian an 8-point scale. The country difference we adopt for defining misfits is to accommodate the difference in the lengths of the two scales.
5. The member–party linkage scale is an additive scale that combines three variables: party membership length (recoded 0 = member for 10 years or less; 1 = member for 11 years or more), continuity of party membership (coded 0 = no; 1 = yes) and the exclusiveness of attachment to the party (measured as 0 = belonged to another party; 1 = never belonged to another party). The scale ranges from 0 (low level of member–party linkage) to 2 (high level of member–party linkage).
6. The activism scale is an additive scale that combines two variables: time devoted to party work (ranging from 0 to 6) and number of party meetings attended (ranging from 0 to 3). The scale ranges from 0 (lower level of activism) to 6 (highest level of activism).
7. The three categories are based on a closed question asking the respondents the main reason for joining the party. In both cases (Belgium and Canada), 9 items were submitted to the respondents, 3 items measuring each category (material, process and ideological).

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