New Parties in Government: Party Organisation and the Costs of Public Office

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Previous studies suggest, and common wisdom holds, that government participation is detrimental for new parties. This paper argues that the opposite is true. Drawing on a large-N analysis (111 parties in 16 countries) in combination with two case studies, it demonstrates that new parties generally benefit organisationally from supporting or entering a government coalition. Compared to established parties, new parties have the advantage that their leadership is more able to allocate effectively the spoils of office, and can change still malleable rudimentary party structures so as to respond to intra-organisational demands, as well as the functional demands of holding office. The authors conclude by setting their finding in wider perspective and elaborate on its implications for contemporary West European politics.

Introduction and Research Question

In recent decades, many new parties have entered the political scene in established democracies (Mair 1999). Some of these have joined, or supported, a government coalition (Deschouwer 2008). The spectacular downfall of new parties taking over government responsibility in Austria (e.g. Bale 2003; Heinisch 2003; Luther 2003), the Netherlands (e.g. Bale 2003; Holsteyn and Irwin 2003; Lucardie and Ghillebaert 2008) and Sweden (e.g. Aylott 1995; Gardberg 1993; Rydgren 2002) is often used as an illustration of the destructive pressures these parties are exposed to in public office. Is this image correct? What is the effect of joining or supporting a government coalition on the organisation of new parties?

Looking at the scholarly debate more closely, the effect of incumbency on new parties as organisational actors has remained an open question. At first glance, incumbency seems detrimental to new parties in organisational
terms. As Bale (2003: 85) points out, new Austrian and Dutch parties ‘appear to have fallen victim to ... unceremonious cannibalisation of a junior partner swiftly seen to have outlived its usefulness’. There are several reasons why incumbency can be expected to have a disastrous impact on these parties. First, the populist approach of some new parties is a liability when in government (Heinisch 2003: 123). Second, new parties in general are expected to suffer due to ‘inexperience in policy making’, which ‘may cause particular difficulties’ (Heinisch 2003: 101). Third, new parties have to tone down their rhetoric when in government, which might alienate considerable parts of their followers. And finally, the lack of qualified personnel can undermine support (Heinisch 2003: 101–2).

However, there is also evidence to the contrary. Some new parties – such as the Norwegian Progress Party (FrP) (Kestilä and Söderlund 2007), and Forza Italia (FI) in Italy (Grasmück 2005; Ruzza and Fella 2009; Seisselberg 1996) – seem not to have suffered organisationally while supporting a government coalition, or being in government. To some extent, the conclusions drawn depend on the particular cases studied. Furthermore, evidence regarding the destructive effect of government on new parties seems less clear-cut than is often claimed. One of the three main cases of incumbent organisational collapse mentioned above, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), is not an organisationally new party – notwithstanding its ideological transformation under Haider. It was represented in the national parliament for decades, and had been in government before. It can therefore hardly be seen as lacking ‘experience in policy making’.

In this paper, we assess whether new parties organisationally decline, improve or remain unaffected after participating in or supporting a government coalition, a question that has become increasingly important in the face of recent electoral victories by new parties. We do so in two ways. In a first step, a cross-case comparison will be drawn on the basis of the characteristics of 111 parties from 16 West European countries between 2000 and 2004, to address the question of whether new parties are organisationally weakened or strengthened by governing. The preliminary picture derived from the large-N analysis will be substantiated by in-depth analysis of the organisational development of two new parties: the Italian Northern League (LN) and the Danish People’s Party (DF). These two case studies show how the elites of these two very different organisationally new parties use similar strategies to cope with the demands of government participation. Finally, we will embed our findings in the wider debate on new parties in government and lay out avenues for future research. In the following, we conceptualise the likely impact of government participation on new parties.

**An Organisational Perspective on New Parties in Government**

Over the last decade an organisational perspective on new parties has become more prominent in the extant literature. Yet comparative studies
still tend to focus on either the new left (see Burchell 2001; Kitschelt 1989; Pogunkte 2002) or the new right (see Art 2011; Carter 2005; Heinisch 2003). More generally, existing research tends to conceptualise new parties in terms of the issues they represent rather than their organisational structure. In this paper we deliberately move up the ladder of abstraction (Sartori 1970) and look at the demands of public office and their impact on new parties defined as organisationally new actors.

The strengthening of a party infrastructure can be described as a party’s increasing institutionalisation, a process by which a party develops stable survival interests and organisational loyalties (Panebianco 1988: 18–20, 53–5). This concept can be translated into two measurable dimensions: routinisation and value infusion (Levitsky 1998). Routinisation takes place when processes within the party become more rule-guided, regularised and less dominated by the idiosyncratic choices of leaders (Panebianco 1988: 49, 53). Interaction patterns between the various party units (local and national; inside and outside public office) become less ad hoc and more predictable. Value infusion shows when party members – through their socialisation into an organisation – start caring about the survival of the party as such, rather than seeing it as a mere instrument to achieve a set of goals, and are more willing to prioritise the organisational interest even when in conflict with their individual preferences (Levitsky 1998: 79). These developments can be theoretically expected to stabilise the party in its internal functioning as well as its societal support, which makes it more able to cope with external pressures (Panebianco 1988: 49), pressures such as those imposed on a new party that takes over government responsibility.

New parties tend to be organisationally weaker than established parties. That is, they almost necessarily have lower levels of institutionalisation. This vulnerability is likely to push them towards internal reform to cope with government entry to a larger extent than mainstream parties. The infrastructures of mainstream parties are internally complex and already consolidated and are thereby able to constrain party leaders (Panebianco 1988). Simultaneously, a relatively low level of institutionalisation implies that the organisational structures of new parties are less consolidated and more rudimentary, which makes them easier to change. The relative organisational ‘fluidity’ of new parties has major implications: if a new party’s leadership fails to create an infrastructure able to cope with the pressures generated by government, the party easily falls into disarray, as Bale (2003) or Lucardie and Ghillebaert (2008) show. If the leadership, by contrast, is able and willing to address the demands of government, it has more leeway to do so than elites operating in already consolidated parties, an advantage that is often overlooked. This is particularly the case after the power of party elites (e.g. through the capacity to provide policy benefits) and their status vis-à-vis both voters and followers have been strengthened through the assumption of government responsibility, an event that has fewer repercussions in established parties that have entered government.
numerous times. The leadership of a new party is therefore more likely to gain the legitimacy to enforce an outright organisational overhaul and to considerably alter internal power relations. Depending on whether party elites are interested in the survival and repeated success of their party, new parties may either suffer or benefit in organisational terms from entering government (a process specified in the following section).  

Government resources can support party building and reform processes that help the party to cope with the pressures government itself intensifies. Most organisations maintain support through a mix of (material and non-material) selective and collective incentives (Wilson 1973). Government posts not only imply prestige for those taking over, but often provide access to important resources in terms of policy-making and lower-level posts that can help to satisfy a wider range of followers (i.e. selective incentives). More particularly, the capacity to distribute selective incentives can be important when contested decisions (such as organisational reforms) have to be implemented that are undesirable to core groups in the organisation.

The party literature proposes various measurements for party strength that are, however, mostly tailored to the study of consolidated parties and do not directly operationalise party institutionalisation as specified by Panebianco (e.g. Gibson et al. 1983; Janda 1983). To develop empirical indicators for routinisation and value infusion (Panebianco 1988) in the context of a new party’s take-over of government responsibility more particularly, we need to systematise the pressures that public office imposes on new parties: demands of public office (both legislative and executive) can refer predominantly to the party organisation (i.e. intra-organisational demands) or to the party in public office (i.e. functional demands on the party in its role as legislator and governor) (Bolleyer 2008). Substantially, these demands relate to two basic types of challenges: intra-party coordination between different party units inside and outside public office supported by the routinisation of internal processes; and the challenge of recruitment that, if effective, reinforces value infusion and thereby strengthens and stabilises the loyalty of party officials, members and followers.

What are the empirical mechanisms that party elites can use to meet these two types of demands and thereby foster institutionalisation? Coordination demands clearly grow when a party starts operating in functionally different areas such as parliament and government. With these activities grow sources of conflict. While the top-down expulsion of MPs might be an effective mechanism to silence dissent in the parliamentary group, it imposes heavy costs, particularly on new (usually smaller) parties. Furthermore, it makes infighting public, raising doubts regarding the functioning and reliability of the party. In the course of institutionalisation, such drastic mechanisms should be complemented by mechanisms able either to respond to conflict in a less confrontational and visible manner or to reduce it ex ante. More generally, we should observe an increasing formalisation and rule-guidedness of processes.
In short, routinisation becomes operationally visible in mechanisms that help to cope with intensified coordination demands related to government. We examine first whether a new party sets up effective and cost-efficient procedures to assure communication, coordination and conflict resolution between party subunits inside and outside office and how party statutes stabilise the functional differentiation of tasks in the organisation.

A party further needs to build the capacity to recruit and select loyal and capable candidates for legislative and executive office, which is closely tied to the need for expertise that intensifies when parties take over government responsibility. It is also relevant to the internal working of the party organisation: when a party grows and starts operating in various arenas (i.e. the electoral, parliamentary and government arenas), core party offices need to be taken over by skilled people. A membership organisation can be an important instrument to support initial screening and selective recruitment, while generating party support by socialising members into the organisation and reinforcing shared ideological attachments, which reduces the level of internal conflict that the leadership has to deal with (Panebianco 1988). As far as central elites establish effective linkage mechanisms across organisational layers (i.e. vertical integration), local and regional branches generate a bigger recruitment pool of followers than the personal network of an individual leader could encompass, which gets important once the party is pressed to fill a wider range of posts in public office, and which is likely to contribute to a party’s performance in office. If members have to work for the organisation in low-key party offices before being considered as candidates, the organisation provides a screening mechanism that discourages mere careerism.

New Parties in Government

In short, to capture mechanisms supporting value infusion operationally that help to cope with intensified recruitment demands related to government, we look at the nature of extra-parliamentary party building: first, whether elites actively set up local and regional branches; second, whether they establish vertical linkages between central and lower-level elites; third, whether they establish selective screening and recruitment mechanisms; and finally, whether the party provides for training for activists, candidates and incumbents.

New Parties in 16 Western Democracies: A Quantitative Assessment

In line with our theoretical elaborations, we define new parties as ‘organisationally new’. We follow Mair’s (1999: 209–10) conception that defines any party which has not contested elections before 1965 as new. Given our interest in new party performance in public office, we consider only new parties that actually entered parliament. Starting from these basic criteria, we consider, as Mair (1999: 210) does, three types of new parties that face the challenge of building up a working infrastructure – newly born parties, splits and mergers. ‘Newly born’ parties that are built from scratch form the core group of analysis. Parties are considered as newly born if they
contested elections for the first time during or after 1965. We further consider minor splinter parties and those mergers that still had to set up a functioning party structure (rather than one party swallowing another).\footnote{6}

In order to test the hypothesis that government participation\footnote{7} is more likely to lead to the organisational strengthening rather than decline of new parties, we need to refer to expert surveys, the only existing data on party organisation that is comparable across time and political contexts (Lubbers 2001; van Spanje et al. 2006). In 2000, Lubbers asked experts in several countries to give all the relevant parties in the country’s party system an overall mark between 1 and 10 for its level of organisation.\footnote{8} Van Spanje et al. replicated this question four years later for the same countries and – where possible – the same parties. The response rates of both surveys were comparable to that of similar surveys (e.g. Huber and Inglehart 1995).\footnote{9} The particular question that was asked is relatively vague, leaving it up to the experts to decide what the concept of ‘party organisation’ actually encompasses. This does not seem to present a great problem, however, as the agreement among experts was relatively high. For example, in 2000 the reliability varied from 0.79 in Sweden to 0.97 in Germany and the Netherlands (Lubbers 2001: 38).\footnote{10} In view of the available data, our study is necessarily limited to 16 West European countries\footnote{11} during the period 2000–2004 and includes 111 parties.\footnote{12} Fourteen of these parties were in opposition in January 2000 and joined, or started to support, a government coalition during the period under study (2000–2004). Six out of these 14 cases concern a new party taking over government responsibility, whereas the other eight were ‘old’ parties. See Table 1 for a list of the 14 parties mentioned above and the change in party organisation scores pertaining to these parties.

All six new parties benefited from government entry, whereas only three out of eight ‘old’ parties did. This corresponds to our expectation. The contrast between the Danish People’s Party (+3.0), founded in 1995, and the Freedom Party of Austria (–3.9), founded 40 years earlier, is the largest of all possible combinations in our entire data set. This quick overview bodes well for our hypothesis. In the next section, we will examine these data in a more rigorous way by including all the parties in the 16 countries and adding control variables.

In order to assess the hypothesis, we perform regression analysis on the party organisation scores for 2004 as the dependent variable. In order to take the country dependency in the data into account, we will estimate multilevel regression models. This way, we take into account the fact that the parties are nested within countries.

A dichotomous variable distinguishing new parties from other parties will be added as an independent variable, as well as a dummy indicating whether or not the party entered a government coalition in the period under study (or started to support such a coalition). Since we aim to measure change in the organisational level of the parties, we add a lagged dependent variable to the analysis – the level of party organisation in 2000. Our model explaining
| Country  | Prime minister and starting year of governing period | Party | New party or not | Party organisation score in 2000 | Party organisation score in 2004 | Change party organisation score |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------------|-------|------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------
| Austria | Schüssel (2000)                                     | FPÖ   | N                | 6.4                              | 2.5                              | −3.9                            |
| Denmark | Rasmussen (2001)                                    | DF    | Y                | 5.5                              | 8.5                              | +3.0                            |
| Denmark | Rasmussen (2001)                                    | KF    | N                | 6.8                              | 8.1                              | +1.3                            |
| Denmark | Rasmussen (2001)                                    | V     | N                | 7.8                              | 8.6                              | +0.8                            |
| Finland | Jääätteenmäki (2003)                                | KESK  | N                | 9.1                              | 8.0                              | −1.1                            |
| Italy   | Berlusconi (2001)                                   | AN    | N                | 7.6                              | 7.4                              | −0.2                            |
| Italy   | Berlusconi (2001)                                   | CCD-CDU (now UDC) | Y | 5.1                              | 5.5                              | +0.4                            |
| Italy   | Berlusconi (2001)                                   | FI    | Y                | 5.8                              | 6.1                              | +0.3                            |
| Italy   | Berlusconi (2001)                                   | LN    | Y                | 5.5                              | 6.2                              | +0.7                            |
| Netherlands | Balkenende (2002)                                 | CDA   | Y                | 6.9                              | 8.1                              | +1.2                            |
| Norway  | Bondevik (2001)                                     | FrP   | Y                | 5.3                              | 7.4                              | +2.1                            |
| Norway  | Bondevik (2001)                                     | H     | N                | 7.1                              | 7.6                              | +0.5                            |
| Norway  | Bondevik (2001)                                     | KrF   | N                | 6.6                              | 6.4                              | −0.2                            |
| Norway  | Bondevik (2001)                                     | V     | N                | 5.0                              | 4.7                              | −0.3                            |

Sources: Mair (1999: 222–4); Keesings online; Lubbers (2001); Van Spanje et al. (2006).
party organisation in 2004 thus consists of a lagged dependent variable, two main effects, and one interaction variable. If the interaction of new party and entering government is negative, this would confirm common wisdom and previous studies, arguing that government participation is disastrous for new parties. Should that interaction variable yield a positive effect, this would mean that new parties which have entered or have started to support a government coalition experience a strengthening of their organisational infrastructure. Table 2 sums up the results.

Model 1 in Table 2 is an empty model, containing no independent variables. The party organisation measure in 2004 equals 6.50 on average. The intra-class correlation is 0.08, which is statistically different from zero, which means that multilevel modelling is appropriate. Thus, parties can be considered nested within countries. Model 2 shows that, not surprisingly, party organisation in 2000 is a very good predictor of party organisation four years later. In addition, new parties did marginally better than other parties in organisational terms between 2000 and 2004 (0.44 on a 1–10 party organisation scale, \( p < 0.05 \), two-tailed). The government access identifier does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. When adding an interaction of government access and newness of the party (in Model 3), we find an effect. This indicates that, on average, the incumbency of new parties has led to an organisational strengthening. The interaction effect is positive and significant at the \( p < 0.05 \) level (two-tailed). Furthermore, the effect is strong, as the model predicts that new parties which took up government responsibility improved their party organisation score by more than a full point (1.24) on a 1–10 scale.\(^{13}\) Hence, the common claim that executive office (be it as coalition partner or support party) weakens party organisation is not confirmed. Instead, the findings suggest that

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<tr>
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<th>Model 1 b (SE)</th>
<th>Model 2 b (SE)</th>
<th>Model 3 b (SE)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>6.50***</td>
<td>1.12*</td>
<td>1.19*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>(0.49)</td>
<td>(0.48)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party organisation in 2000</td>
<td>0.83***</td>
<td>0.83***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Entered government coalition between 2000 and 2004</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>–0.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.29)</td>
<td>(0.37)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>New party</td>
<td>0.44*</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
<td>(0.23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of ‘Entered government coalition between 2000 and 2004’ and ‘New party’</td>
<td>1.24*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.55)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>–206.64</td>
<td>–156.37</td>
<td>–153.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>419.28</td>
<td>324.74</td>
<td>321.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC</td>
<td>427.41</td>
<td>341.00</td>
<td>340.84</td>
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\(^* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001 \) (two-tailed).
organisation is strengthened. That said, the statistical significance of this effect is not beyond doubt, as the model fit does not substantially improve with the inclusion of this interaction term, as can be seen from the model fit measures (log likelihood, AIC and BIC) between model 2 and 3.

Inevitably, this quantitative analysis can only be the starting point for more in-depth assessments. This is because the number of relevant cases is fairly small (although the analysis includes almost the entire West European population of new parties in parliament) and because the quite blunt party organisation indicator only very roughly captures the level of organisational adaptation, and does not measure party institutionalisation as specified earlier. However, the findings allow us to systematically select two cases from the population to assess whether public office in general (both legislative and executive) and government responsibility in particular triggers a process of increasing party institutionalisation, specifying the mechanisms underlying its two constitutive dimensions: routinisation and value infusion. As recommended in standard mixed-method research, we single out two cases that are ‘on the regression line’ – in this case, parties that both entered a government coalition and improved their party organisation – and establish that the correlation found is based on a causal link (Lieberman 2005). The cases under investigation are the Danish People’s Party and the Northern League in Italy.

The Danish People’s Party and Northern League in Government

We identified six new parties that were outside government in 2000 and in government midway through 2004. All of them gained organisational strength during this period. The 39 new parties that were only in parliament did not experience comparable strengthening. Consequently, the effect cannot be explained in terms of the increasing organisational maturity of new parties over time. The eight old parties which entered government in the period under examination did not undergo comparable changes. Nor did the 58 other established parties in the 16 countries under study.

All the parties that entered government coalitions in the countries and period under study were right-wing, which makes the examination particularly insightful. Examples usually referred to in order to substantiate the thesis on ‘new party decline in government’ are located on the right side of the ideological spectrum, rather than on the left where Green parties (as the group of newcomers that so far has entered government most often) have generally been able to adapt to national government. Although they may have suffered considerable infighting, they institutionalised and consolidated their structures in the medium and long term (e.g. Burchell 2001; Poguntke 2002).

Scholarly findings highlight the tendency of new (populist) parties on the right to be organisationally weak and dominated by a powerful leader, often disinclined to strengthen the organisation to avoid the creation of
alternative power-bases (Ignazi 2003). New parties on the right are (at least implicitly) portrayed as ‘least likely cases’ for party institutionalisation – whether they are in government or not. If a range of these parties – despite this image – nonetheless institutionalises, especially when in government, then this view needs to be amended. Such an outcome would suggest that new right parties are not organisationally weak or particularly vulnerable to decline in government but – depending on their elites’ party-building strategies – can adapt as Green parties have done.

In order to arrive at a sound judgement on whether government might help the new right to consolidate as it did in the case of new Green parties (which initially were clearly anti-establishment, anti-elite and weakly organised), we need to go beyond the spectacular failure cases of List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) and New Democracy (ND). Both were entrepreneurial parties founded by political outsiders that either had no interest (ND) or no time (LPF) to build a sustainable party structure, and lacked societal roots that could have kept supporters loyal during times of weak or absent leadership. Systematically comparing institutionalisation processes in two new right parties with very different origins, as done in the following, not only substantiates tendencies identified in our large-\( N \) study, but provides a broader picture than existing findings.

Case Selection and Methods

The Danish People’s Party and the Lega Nord are both ‘on the regression line’ and saw an increase in party organisational strength from 2000 to 2004. Both parties started out with the same mean score of 5.5 on a 10-point scale. The organisational strengthening which (Danish) country experts attributed to DF has been considerable, rising to a score of 8.5, while LN increased to a score of 6.2 in the eyes of (Italian) country experts (see Appendix). The two parties share the features of organisational ‘newness’ and ‘government entry’ at an early stage of their development. They joined governments as minor partners, which new parties usually do, a status that makes them particularly vulnerable. Compared to their bigger partners, small parties generally find it more difficult to maintain their profiles and realise their policy agenda (Bolleyer 2007). Ideologically, they both adopt tough stances in the socio-cultural domain, especially on immigration and the integration of ethnic minorities (Art 2011: 19). Indeed, they are both anti-immigrant parties that have pushed this agenda in government, where they adopt (reflecting their anti-establishment credentials) a semi-loyal attitude to coalition partners.

Yet while both parties are ideologically similar, only the LN represents an ‘outsider party’ as defined by McDonnell and Newell (2011: 447, 449): a party that went through a period of ‘not being coalitional’, initially opposing any collaboration with the established elites that subsequently came in ‘from the cold’ to join government. The DF, an internal splinter
formed by national MPs, was created with the main goal of overcoming the outside status of its mother party – the Progress Party. It stressed its governing aspirations and desire to be accepted as a cooperation partner right from the start (Pedersen and Ringsmose 2004). Thus, the two parties’ attitudes toward government participation were initially very different. Furthermore, the LN joined national government as a formal partner, while the DF became the formal support party. While internal coordination demands were less pronounced for the DF, with one functional unit (i.e. government ministers) less to handle, the pressure to assure internal discipline in parliament was similarly high, as was the need to develop policy expertise. The latter pressure might have been even higher for the DF since, unlike the LN, it lacked access to the ministerial bureaucracy. As far as extra-parliamentary structures are concerned, the LN is a regionalist party created through the unification of pre-existing regional leagues, while the DF is a national party that was formed top-down by MPs aspiring to establish a nationwide presence. Unlike the LN, the DF is an ‘entrepreneurial party’ without established societal roots, with its founding elites building a party from within parliament, which makes it more similar to the LPF and ND. If, despite these differences, we still find parallels in the LN and DF’s institutionalisation strategies that allowed them to profit from government responsibility, our argument gains further leverage.

The following analyses are based on a detailed assessment of primary documents such as party statutes and internal regulations, existing case study literature, complemented, in the case of the Danish People’s Party, by five semi-structured interviews with party representatives (including MPs, members of the national executive and local activists).

The Organisational Evolution of the Danish People’s Party

The DF was founded in October 1995 as a splinter from the Progress Party by four parliamentarians – one of them former party leader Pia Kjærsgaard. Six years after its foundation, the DF became the support party of a Conservative–Liberal minority government. It remained in this position until the 2011 elections.

As argued earlier, mechanisms to ensure routinisation are particularly relevant for a new party in government, as coordination demands are intensified by the latter. From the start, Kjærsgaard’s leadership has been top-down and strictly sanctioned any public critique by followers. Procedurally, a two-thirds majority of the national leadership is sufficient to expel individuals, groups and local branches without any formal need for justification and without those being expelled having any right to appeal (Art. 8, 2006 Constitution). According to a Danish newspaper, between 1996 and 2006 the DF expelled 30–40 members who spoke out against the party line. Between 1998 and 2000, three MPs opposed the ‘top down decision making’ of the leadership and defected (Art 2011: 155).
While top-down sanctions were effective in enforcing discipline, once the party achieved support status in 2001, the need to develop less drastic, costly and public ways to accommodate internal differences intensified. To maintain morale in the parliamentary group, Kjærgaard met up with individual MPs periodically (independent of particular issues or events) to maintain a direct link between leadership and backbenchers. Furthermore, younger members of the group were assigned more senior and experienced contact persons, who could be consulted in cases of conflict. These mechanisms assure communication and consultation, helping to anticipate problems before they escalate. To assign incoming MPs more senior ‘contact people’ helps them to socialise into the group and familiarises them with parliamentary processes, as well as expectations towards them as professional politicians. While contributing to newcomers’ professionalisation, the parliamentary group becomes more predictable and, with it, internal coordination easier. While the leadership still maintains a hierarchical style, since 2001 only one MP split from the party, despite the parliamentary group’s considerable growth (Art 2011: 155), indicating an increasing routinisation. In a similar vein, internal processes started to be increasingly regulated by formal procedures. While in practice the leadership actively controlled candidate selection from the start (violating its own statutes that assigned this task to lower levels) (Pedersen 2006), in 2003 the basic oversight of the party leadership was formally acknowledged in the party statutes.18

Moving on to mechanisms of value infusion that help to cope with pressures of recruitment intensified by government, the party elite actively invested in the creation of an extra-parliamentary infrastructure supporting the recruitment of members and qualified personnel, a need that became particularly intense after 2001. Soon after its foundation, the DF stressed its goal of having a local organisation with substantial membership in each of the 275 municipalities (Pedersen 2006). In 1997, the DF had about 1,500 members, in 1998 over 2,500. It reached 5,000 in 2000, and in 2009 the party membership was reported at about 10,000 (Meret 2010: 12).

After taking over support status, members were confronted with the sight of the party dealing more and more with established elites. To prevent the alienation of followers, the party arranged social events and made MPs attend an annual seminar with local activists, which assured the vertical integration of party subunits and a corresponding flow of communication. This was complemented by the provision of training targeting the different groups. The national executive runs three to four seminars per year that MPs have to attend. Even before the 1998 elections, the party provided political education for its candidates before elections (a strategy that paid off given it more than tripled in size) and organisational education after elections (Pedersen 2006).

The need to increase the party’s capacity to recruit both loyal and capable candidates for public office was another major incentive for investing in a
membership organisation, especially since DF (as is often the case with new parties) experienced a shortage of candidates in 1998. Despite this, the party pursued a selective recruitment strategy. Every potential candidate for national elections has to apply to the national leadership and undergoes a strict screening process. While initially dominated by the national leadership (violating the statues in place at the time), nowadays the lists are put together by leaders of local branches and one member of the national party executive, indicating a systematic involvement of local actors which assures the vertical integration of local and central elites.

The leadership directly controls the inflow of members to assure internal homogeneity and established – in 1999 – a national membership record of all fee-paying members (Zalewski 2005). In 2003, after the party concluded its first parliamentary coalition, the time required to gain suffrage and eligibility as a party member was extended from two to four months (Pedersen and Ringsmose 2004), increasing the screening capacity of the party. Similarly, the party keeps its societal recruitment base restrictive. In 1999, it distanced itself from the right-wing Dansk Forum, a student union that was perceived as too extreme to provide a pool of potential DF activists and representatives (Karpantschof 2002: 32–3). In 2006, the national leadership expelled eight local branch chairmen and one local council member for violating the party line to keep extremists out: they revealed to an undercover journalist that a right-wing extremist past would not prevent him from joining the party, as long as he stayed quiet about it (Art 2011: 155). Instead it was the Danish Association, a right-wing intellectual movement, that provided human capital to the party. Several of the movement’s leading figures are now MPs. In 2005, of 86 candidates for national elections, 39 had a university degree (Art 2006: 23–4, 28), an indication of its focus on well-educated personnel. To assure the loyalty of office-holders, aspirants have to enter low-key party positions before gaining access to more prestigious posts, discouraging careerism, which could weaken party cohesion, while the leadership can test aspirants’ political skills. As with national MPs, council members (themselves a pool of potential parliamentary candidates) are usually well trained and defections at the local level are rare (Art 2011: 155). The party encourages members to engage actively in local politics. Accordingly, Pedersen (2006) found that DF members are more inclined to stand for office than members of most of their mainstream competitors, while the party deliberately runs social events along with more traditional party activities in order to motivate followers to contribute actively.

The Organisational Evolution of the Northern League

The Northern League was founded in 1989 as a political movement campaigning against the inefficiency and corruption of the Italian political class, focusing on the wasteful use of taxpayers’ money to support clientelist networks of redistribution in southern Italy (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001;
Gold 2003). The Italian party system crisis in the 1990s provided a political opening that allowed the LN to capitalise on growing anti-party sentiment. The LN has won parliamentary seats in every general election since 1992, and frequently determines the governing majority at national level (Gold 2003). The party has nevertheless maintained an ambivalent attitude to coalitional politics, participating in all three coalition governments led by Silvio Berlusconi (1994–1995; 2001–2006; 2008–2011), while retaining a critical position vis-à-vis its governing partners (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005, 2010). The LN justifies its coalitional choices as short-term alliances necessary to serve longer-term policy objectives: greater regional autonomy within a federal state; protection for northern businesses and workers; employment and housing that privileges locals; and a more restrictive policy against immigrants (Biorcio 1997). These policy objectives remain largely unchanged and were reflected in portfolio allocation for the third Berlusconi government (2008–2011), where the LN obtained posts of particular concern to its electorate (Interior Ministry, Agriculture, Federal Reform, Legislative Simplification), and eschewed economic or social portfolios that could make the party unpopular during an economic crisis. This reflected a process of coalitional learning. The LN had taken on more demanding portfolios in the second Berlusconi government (2001–2006), which did not benefit the party in electoral terms (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2010). The decision in 2011 to replace the fourth Berlusconi government by a technocratic government led by Mario Monti was opposed by LN.

Umberto Bossi founded the LN in 1989 by ‘federating’ a series of regional leagues under his leadership, creating a new organisation that, while still reflecting the federalist nature of the movement, helped ensure his personal control and was directed towards ‘guarante[ing] organisational and ideological cohesion’ (Betz 1998: 49–50). The party consists of 12 sections, covering all regions of Northern Italy, and by 1994 it had set up about 950 local sections, averaging about 40 registered members (Betz 1998: 50), indicating the priority that the leadership accorded to creating a solid support base on the ground. Party statutes underpin the power of the leadership and make it extraordinarily difficult to challenge it through formal channels (Biorcio 1997; Gomez-Reina 2002); a four-fifths vote of the federal congress is needed to dissolve the federation as a whole – one of many rules designed to prevent credible leadership challenges. Another is the privileged position of Bossi’s Lombard League within the LN organisation, where it accounts for twice as many seats in the Federal Council as any other regional league (Gomez-Reina 2002; Tambini 2001).

Moving to mechanisms of coordination and conflict resolution inside the parliamentary group, Bossi has consistently purged politicians who disagreed with his strategic choices (Ruzza and Fella 2009), either forcing their expulsion or prompting their defection. The largest wave of expulsions and defections occurred soon after Bossi brought down the first Berlusconi government in 1994, terminating the party’s first experience in national government. His decision was contested by many LN politicians, including
leaders of the regional leagues in Veneto and Piedmont, who questioned the wisdom of abandoning public office after only nine months. A third of the LN parliamentary contingent (over 50 MPs) left to join Berlusconi’s movement, putting the LN at risk of organisational collapse (Gomez-Reino 2002). Rather than seek conciliation with his internal opponents, Bossi sought to reinforce core support within the party by expelling politicians who continued to criticise his decision to break with the centre-right coalition, and embarked on a secessionist campaign that radicalised the movement further while strengthening his own leadership position (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001). Bossi was not entirely inflexible as he forgave some dissenters who contested his strategic choices but continued to support his leadership. This included Roberto Maroni, a close collaborator who eventually replaced Bossi as party leader after the federal congress of June 2012. Tight internal control is still justified within the LN as necessary to prevent the movement from losing cohesion and being undermined by wreckers and infiltrators from other parties, reflecting an ‘outsider’ mentality shared by LN politicians and activists (Biorcio 1997), nurtured by a difficult process of institutionalisation.

Bossi’s full control over the party organisation was not merely achieved by suppression of internal dissent, but also through an evident ability to project a strong leadership and clear narrative for his political movement. The founder-leader became a source of inspiration and moral authority among party members, and began to personify the party organisation through a series of symbolic actions, designed to reinforce ties with the party base (Biorcio 1997). These ties institutionalised internal relations through mechanisms of value infusion, complementing Bossi’s organisational approach, which transcended the usual strategies associated with charismatic leadership. Although LN has now largely abandoned the aim of secessionism, the party still holds annual rallies at Pontedera that reaffirm the founding principles of the movement and the centrality of leader and party activists to realising its cherished goals. In terms of routinisation, mechanisms of close coordination and integration between the parliamentary group and extra-parliamentary party have proved vital in dissipating party tensions in government. LN parliamentarians conduct an active process of communicating results in government to local activists, which also helps to coordinate the party line across territorial levels (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005, 2010). Through these two types of institutionalisation mechanisms, government participation has not greatly undermined the loyalty of LN activists, who remain confident about realising the long-term objectives of the movement and attribute rather less weight to the difficult short-term compromises they frequently have to stomach (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2010).

At the same time, LN remains the most centralised organisation in Italian politics. The lines of top-down communication it created for internal control and coordination have also proved useful in increasing the party’s recruitment capacity, underpinned by a strategy of supporting a process of value infusion. Although regional leagues have no real influence over national decision-making, they are important for controlling the activities of
local sections and proposing loyal candidates for public office (Tambini 2001), which reinforces the strong vertical integration of the party. LN party membership is internally differentiated between ordinary militants and supporters. Supporters can become militants only after 12 months’ active service (subject to approval from their local section), and can be demoted for insufficient service to the cause. Similar requirements are absent in other Italian parties, which place less emphasis on institutionalisation through value infusion. Ordinary militants can be expelled and cannot easily change territorial sections, but are nevertheless considered the backbone of the movement, forming the entirety of LN candidates selected for public office. The party is more concerned about the loyalty of its members than their overall number (Gomez-Reino 2002), so party membership has increased only gradually and intermittently, with a relative increase in ordinary militants and a relative decrease in mere supporters over time (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2010). There are presently estimated to be around 150,000 members. Appointment of local, provincial and regional leaders is done by their immediate superiors, a system of control which ‘does not allow the grassroots to delegate leaders, but gives the grassroots centrally selected officers and the political line to follow’ (Tambini 2001: 93). Similar top-down mechanisms exist for candidate selection, reflecting a clear preference for organisational cohesion rather than democratic inclusion. This tendency was greatly reinforced after the parliamentary defections in 1994–1995, which prompted the leadership to invest more effort in scrutinising potential recruits, barring all candidates who did not have a sustained record of active militancy. The outcome of this organisational strategy has been a loyal parliamentary contingent in subsequent legislatures, with very few defections to other centre-right parties, and even fewer defections to centre-left parties. Departing activists have had no enduring success in forming alternative regionalist movements that could challenge the hegemony of the LN in northern Italy, despite intra-party tensions over the decision to enter into successive governing coalitions with.

Which recruitment strategy did the LN choose? What exactly does the party require or expect from its political recruits? The leadership prizes manual labour and organisational skills rather than intellectual effort, which is deemed to be largely unnecessary as the political line is set by the centre and replicated throughout the territory. Beyond belief in the cause, the main attraction for active militants is the opportunity to aspire to elected positions at an early stage of their careers (Biorcio 1997). The period of active militancy required for public office, which varies between one and five years depending on the post, encourages a high level of loyalty and discourages defectors from other parties. Since promotion requires support from territorial section leaders rather than party members or supporters, this also prevents the consolidation of local powerbrokers and facilitates a high level of socialisation and value infusion among party activists. Roberto Biorcio’s (1997) analysis of party militants and cadres at the 1997 party
congress suggests a third of party activists were entrepreneurs, executives, managers or liberal professionals (rising to more than a half of party cadres), while almost a fifth of party activists were merchants or artisans. The LN elite is therefore fairly cohesive in social terms and drawn primarily from the private sector in northern Italy. This contrasts with most other Italian parties, whose elites are more likely to have a university education and a formative experience in the public sector (Ruzza and Fella 2009). The entrepreneurial background and relative youth of many LN politicians means they often lack a thorough grounding in the Italian political system. LN made attempts to remedy this by creating training schools for party officials (Gomez-Reino 2002), designed to better indoctrinate new recruits and prepare them to serve the party cause in public office. Different regions have now established their own training schools, managed by the regional leagues under national supervision.

A strategy that actively favoured the institutionalisation of this highly centralised party organisation outlined above has allowed the LN to cope well with the demands (and contain the costs) of holding public office both in terms of coordination and recruitment. As Marco Tarchi (1998: 78) puts it: the choice of a flexible organisational model, characterised by simple and centralised decision-making mechanisms, with a hierarchical pyramidal structure and by dedication to the leader, guaranteed the movement a cohesion continually threatened by personality clashes and demands for internal autonomy. Furthermore, it has served as an effective channel of communication. Horizontally it has allowed central leadership to control, influence and direct both the single leagues and their elected officials in Parliament and in the regional and local councils.

While this organisational model has seen the party through more than two decades of fractious Italian politics, it remains to be seen whether the LN can thrive without its founder-leader, who resigned as party secretary in April 2012 after a corruption scandal linked to his two sons (and after many years of ill health). The new leader, Roberto Maroni, is likely to face increased demands for a readjustment of internal power away from the Lombard founders of the movement, potentially sharpening territorial tensions within the party organisation. Yet Maroni will be operating as a new party leader within the same highly centralised structure as his predecessor, suggesting continued vitality in a form of organisation that grants party leaders an exceptional level of internal control.

**Conclusion**

In examining the link between incumbency and party organisational development, our findings question the claim that new parties necessarily
suffer from government participation and challenge the image projected by spectacular cases such as the List Pim Fortuyn. More particularly, they show how new parties – through active party building – can effectively respond to and profit from government participation and eventually strengthen their organisation in the process. Despite their various differences, both LN and DF party elites have anticipated and as organisations responded to the demands of holding government responsibility effectively. They did so through a range of strategies that strengthened routinisation and value infusion, the two core dimensions of party institutionalisation (Panebianco 1988), each of which helped them cope with core challenges of government, namely intensified coordination as well as recruitment demands. While, for instance, top-down sanctions still form part of their leaders’ repertoire for handling internal conflict, the set-up of recruitment structures directed towards loyal and competent followers and candidates for office – combined with training and education provided to actual activists and office-holders – lowered the number of defections and decreased the need to apply heavy sanctions.

It is important to recognise that, in order to respond to the urgent need for qualified personnel, both parties – despite targeting different types of members – chose selective recruitment strategies; this was in spite of having experienced candidate shortages in the past. Government responsibility increases the pressure to assure expertise, not least because the party in public office receives most media attention and profoundly shapes a party’s public image. Furthermore, both parties deliberately built up a ‘safety net’ of loyal followers motivated by non-material incentives and actively discouraged careerism. While members were only allowed to participate in internal decisions after a probation phase, aspirants to national office needed to earn their candidacy by showing their commitment and their skills in low-key party positions first. This strategy enabled the two parties to respond to the costs of government – i.e. to maintain a support base despite the often inevitable disappointments and the risk of alienation related to party elites’ collaboration with mainstream parties.

We can conclude with three broader implications for Western European politics that need to be examined further in future research. First, we need to revise our image of party organisation of new right-wing parties as structurally weak and of new parties as ‘genuinely new or different’. More generally, extra-parliamentary party building is not necessarily an outdated strategy in times of modern communication technology. Both DF and the LN used organisational strategies reminiscent of mass parties, traditionally adopted by parties of the left, with the LN explicitly viewing the Italian Communist Party as its organisational template.25 Similar observations have been made in studies of the French National Front, the Vlaams Belang in Flanders and the Norwegian Progress Party (Art 2011; Mayer 1998). Unlike Green parties, ‘new right’ parties could implement their party-building strategy relatively easily, wherever their preferred organisational template
came from. While they might have suffered defections on the way, they did not have the problem Green party elites often had, namely that the organisational reforms triggered by legislative and government office meant a fundamental reorientation away from organisational ideals held by many activists (e.g. Burchell 2001; Poguntke 2002). This does not mean that some party leaders might not deliberately oppose extra-parliamentary party building, as in the case of the Lega dei Ticinesi (Mazzoleni 2010). Nor does it mean that a leadership vacuum, as in the case of LPF, does not sometimes trigger disintegration, especially when a party has to function in parliament, government and the extra-parliamentary arena immediately after its foundation (de Lange and Art 2011; Lucardie and Ghillebaert 2008). Our study, however, implies that if party elites in these hierarchical parties are long-term oriented and recognise organisation building as an effective tool for pursuing their goals, they can use government in their favour, and might be able to do so at least as effectively as their Green counterparts.26

Second, while some new parties suffered severely from government participation, this does not mean that newness as such is necessarily disadvantageous. New parties have an advantage compared to established parties when it comes to government participation, if their leadership is able to exploit it. Their leaders have, in principle, more leeway to effectively allocate the spoils of office and change the still malleable, rudimentary organisational party structures so as to respond to intra-organisational demands, as well as to the functional demands of holding office. If government support from new parties is likely to further strengthen these parties’ organisations, mainstream parties may not be very eager to accommodate new parties, as they see initial hopes of destroying their new partners’ organisational structures by inviting them to join a government coalition diminish with every case of successful new party incumbency. They may fall back on other options to deal with their challengers instead, such as systematically boycotting them – most feasible in the case of radical-right parties (van Spanje and van der Brug 2007).

Finally, while incumbency is still likely to be electorally costly for many new parties, this risk does not only apply to right-wing parties, as the case of the Irish Greens demonstrated recently. After having been in government for the first time, they lost all their seats at the 2011 general election, a crushing outcome for a party that been consistently re-elected to the Dáil for more than 25 years. Conversely, being able to cope with government organisationally is by no means a prerogative of new Green parties either, which highlights our most general conclusion: in order to pin down the conditions that allow new parties to profit from government or prevent them from doing so, future research needs to go beyond the study of individual party families. To approach new parties from an organisational perspective, as proposed in this article, might be one strategy that can help to bridge existing divides.
Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. We refer to the Austrian FPÖ, the Dutch List Pim Fortuyn and New Democracy in Sweden. While the first two parties were formal coalition partners, New Democracy had a pivotal position in parliament and functioned as support party for the minority government in office.

2. This line of argument obviously presupposes that party leaders do not behave in a completely myopic, short-term manner. We consider this short-term focus unlikely. Even if the leadership of a party sees the organisation primarily as vehicle for boosting their individual careers, this usually implies a time horizon that requires the party to perform reasonably well for at least a few years. An acceptable performance in public office – the party unit that receives most media attention and is most visible to the electorate – is an important part of this.

3. Janda (1983: 326–8) proposes four concepts and a range of indicators to capture each to describe a party’s ‘internal organisation’. These concepts (e.g. degree of organisation or coherence) cannot easily be assigned to the two dimensions – routinisation and value infusion – we intend to capture in the two in-depth analyses. Nor can their indicators, which are linked to a focus on the comparative assessment of established parties, and their purpose to compile databases allow for medium- and large-N studies. Similar issues arise with the indicators developed by Gibson et al. (1983) for the analysis of party strength in the US.

4. See for a similar perspective Harmel and Svåsand (1993), who specify the demands towards the party leadership of new parties in different phases of party institutionalisation.

5. ‘Promoter parties’, whose major objective is to bring attention to a particular issue but which do not succeed electorally, are omitted (Harmel and Robertson 1985: 517).

6. The Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) is considered a new party, as it was a merger of three parties that had not developed organisational ties among themselves until only a few years before the merger in 1977 (Kroeger and Stam 1998; Napel 1992; van Kersbergen 1993). It could thus not build on a working organisational infrastructure.

7. We consider both formal participation in government coalitions (i.e. involving the taking over of ministries) and entering a support agreement as a form of government participation. While the pressure imposed on a newcomer is lower when ‘only’ functioning as support party (since the latter is not in charge of any ministries), the pressure to function as a parliamentary group to deliver support, to show expertise in the law-making process and to actively cooperate with mainstream parties in government is directly comparable. Clearly, this involves a move beyond mere protest status and the party will be evaluated in terms of its capacity to use its governmental access to realise its goals.

8. Note that the wording of the question (see Appendix) is too vague to measure party institutionalisation as a concept, let alone capture its different components, which is why we use the quantitative analysis only to provide a first overview.
9. See the Appendix for the relevant results of both surveys.

10. For several reasons, the results from expert surveys for the measurement of the level of party organisation are advantageous. Alternative ways to measure the relevant party characteristics include secondary reading, mass surveys and elite studies. Yet expert survey data have at least four advantages over data derived from these sources (see Mair 2001: 17, 24, for a discussion of the pros and cons of using experts’ judgements as opposed to using other ways of collecting data).

11. The definition of ‘new party’ leads us to code all parties in Greece, Portugal and Spain as new, because their party systems date back to later than 1965. Leaving these three countries out of the analysis reduces the number of cases to 96 but does not substantially change our conclusions. Results are available upon request from the authors.

12. In accordance with the relevant literature (e.g. De Winter and Swyngedauw 1999), we treat Belgium as consisting of two different political systems, as Flanders and Wallonia have party systems that are completely separate. The 16 countries thus add up to 17 political systems.

13. Among the six new parties that entered or supported government between 2000 and 2004, the CCD-CDU in Italy and the Dutch CDA can be classified as ‘alliances’ (Mair 1999). As mentioned above, the CDA is actually a merger of three ‘old’ parties. Excluding the CDA, the CCD-CDU or both cases from the analysis does not alter our finding in any substantial way, however. Indeed, when both parties are left out, the coefficient of the interaction of government access and new party becomes larger ($b = 1.42, p < 0.05$, two-tailed).


15. These interviews were conducted face-to-face in 2009, lasted on average 30 minutes and were taped. Given the sensitivity of intra-party matters, the anonymity of interviewees had to be guaranteed.

16. Since winning 22 seats in 2001, the DF has repeatedly functioned as a support party and did so successfully: in the 2005 and 2007 general elections the party increased its electoral support to 24 and 25 seats respectively.

17. This contrasts with the Liberals with 3–4 expulsions, the Conservatives with 3–4, the Social Democrats with 2–3 and the Unity List with 2. See http://www.dr.dk/Nyheder/Politik/2006/10/06/0941.33.htm

18. This was further specified in the 2006 constitution.

19. Still, in 2000 the party had 6100 members, as many as the Socialist People’s Party and the Christian People’s Party (Pedersen 2006).

20. Internal documentation provided by the DF leadership group in 2009.

21. Of the 16 candidates born after 1970, 12 had a degree, implying that the education level of DF candidates is likely to increase (Art 2006: 23–4, 28).

22. Even Morten Messerschmidt, who became a DF MP at the age of 24, worked for the party for eight years before his election. He became a member in 1997 and built up a youth organisation in his home constituency before running for office and was elected in 2005 (Art 2011).

23. Courses organised by the party cover practical skills like making a budget, constructing a website, public speaking and forming a relationship with the local media (Art 2011: 155).

24. In contrast, more than three-quarters of LN voters were blue-collar or ordinary office workers, housewives or pensioners. Subsequent studies have shown that the LN electorate is the least educated of all Italian parties, with almost half failing to complete middle school (Ruzza and Fella 2009).

25. Corriere della Sera, 24 June 2010, Interview with Interior Minister Roberto Maroni.

26. See for a cross-national study of the long-term evolution of organisationally new parties in advanced democracies looking at the full range of ‘new party families’ (Bolleyer 2013).
References


APPENDIX

The replication question concerning party organisation was the following: ‘Please consider the political parties again and indicate a mark for each political party concerning how well it was organised at the national level by June, 2004. This scale ranges from 0 (very badly organised) to 10 (very well organised).’ Apart from the time frame mentioned, this question is identical to the one asked by Lubbers in 2000. Lubbers used a 1–10 scale, however. In order to render the results comparable, they were therefore all recoded to a 1–10 scale.

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